

# Hnæf's game

An interpretation of *hnefatafl*, the “Viking board game”

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# 1 Introduction

The board game that historians and historical reenactors know as *hnefatafl*<sup>1</sup> was popular in mediaeval Scandinavia<sup>2</sup> and is mentioned in several of the Icelandic sagas. *Hnefi* in Old Norse means “fist” or “a fistful”,<sup>3</sup> and *tafl* is “table”, so this would literally be the “fist board game”. The central game piece was called *hnefi* but it is not clear why; the name may refer to the *hnefi* “punching” its way through the surrounding enemies as it escapes from the centre of the board, or perhaps it compares the starting cluster of pieces in the centre of the board to a closed fist, but neither suggestion is compelling.

I suggest instead that *hnefi* is a name, and that the speakers of Old Norse knew the game as “*Hnefi*’s game”, just as children in twentieth century England spoke of “Kim’s game”.<sup>4 5</sup>

In this article I will test basic assumptions about the game against archaeological and literary evidence, and consider whether *hnefi* in the board game may have a meaning beyond “fist”.

My sources are limited to those freely available on the internet - which includes a rich trove of saga transcriptions - but there may be evidence for, or against, my theory of which I’m unaware. If you know more, please get in touch!

## 2 The game of *hnefatafl*

The exact rules of *hnefatafl* are unknown and modern reconstructions are based on the *Saami* game *tablut*<sup>6</sup> or *Swedes and Muscovites* which Carl Linnaeus documented on his travels in 1732.<sup>78</sup> *Tablut* is played on a 9x9 grid, with the central space being the fortress where the king piece begins the game. He is supported by eight other pieces, the Swedes, and this player’s aim is for the Swedish king to reach the board’s edge. The other player has sixteen pieces, the Muscovites, and no king; their goal is to capture the Swedish king.

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1 There are various spellings; this is the modern spelling with which I am most familiar.

2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tafl\\_games#Hnefatafl](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tafl_games#Hnefatafl)

3 <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hnefi>

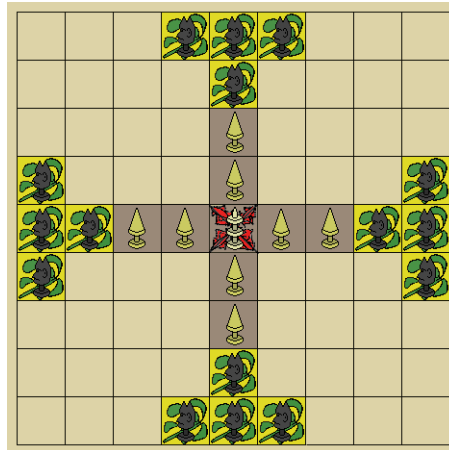
4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim%27s\\_Game](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim%27s_Game)

5 Peter Bone originally suggested the possibility that the game is named after *Hnæf* from the siege at Finnsburg (personal communication).

6 Like “tafl”, “tablut” simply means “table” or “board”, so is probably the generic Saami term for a board game, rather than the name of this particular game.

7 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tafl\\_games#Tablut](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tafl_games#Tablut)

8 [http://aagenielsen.dk/tablut\\_translations.html](http://aagenielsen.dk/tablut_translations.html)



*Figure 1: Tablut starting position:  
 "Swedes" start in centre;  
 "Muscovites" start at the board's  
 edges. Based on Linnaeus'  
 sketches reproduced in Smith  
 (1811).*

Gaming pieces found at sites including the Viking-age trading town of Birka in Sweden support the idea that the Old Norse played a game of this type. There are several collections of gaming pieces with one differentiated “king” piece, and two unequal sets of “ordinary” pieces.<sup>9,10</sup> In at least two of these sets<sup>11</sup> the “king” clearly represents a human figure. We do not see the same degree of anthropomorphism in lower-status sets but it seems likely that the role of the piece was consistent.

9 <https://sites.google.com/site/lookingfortheevidencedarkages/home/viking-games-pieces?pli=1>

10 [https://vikingar.historiska.se/object\\_details.php?object=107786\\_HST&e=no&l=en](https://vikingar.historiska.se/object_details.php?object=107786_HST&e=no&l=en)

11 Birka graves Bj750 [https://vikingar.historiska.se/object\\_details.php?object=107786\\_HST&e=no&l=en](https://vikingar.historiska.se/object_details.php?object=107786_HST&e=no&l=en) and Bj523 [https://vikingar.historiska.se/object\\_details.php?object=106813\\_HST&e=no&l=en](https://vikingar.historiska.se/object_details.php?object=106813_HST&e=no&l=en)



Figure 2: Green glass gaming piece from Birka grave Bj750

[https://vikingar.historiska.se/object\\_details.php?object=107786\\_HST&e=no&l=en](https://vikingar.historiska.se/object_details.php?object=107786_HST&e=no&l=en)



Figure 3: Set of glass gaming pieces from grave Bj750, Birka

[https://vikingar.historiska.se/object\\_details.php?object=107786\\_HST&e=no&l=en](https://vikingar.historiska.se/object_details.php?object=107786_HST&e=no&l=en)

Gaming boards with an odd number of squares on a side such as those found at Trondheim (11x11)<sup>12</sup> and Balinderry (7x7)<sup>13</sup> also suggest this type of game. The odd number provides the central fortress, without which the game cannot be played - unlike draughts<sup>14</sup>, *tablut* cannot be easily played on a chessboard.<sup>15</sup> Boards from sites including Dun Chonallaich<sup>16</sup> have an even number of squares but a central marking suggests the pieces may have been placed on the intersections, as in the Japanese game of Go, giving an odd number of spaces per side.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 4: Gaming board from Dun Conallaigh, Argyle, Scotland

Overall there is strong archaeological evidence that prior to the widespread adoption of chess, people in North-West Europe played a two-player battle strategy game in which a war leader with a small force of retainers attempts to escape a besieged fortress represented by the central space on the board.

### 3 Literary evidence for *hnefatafl* and *hnefi*

Literary evidence supports the playing of a *tablut*-like game, and will give us Old Norse names for both the game and the central piece.

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12 <https://sites.google.com/site/lookingfortheevidencedarkages/home/viking-games-pieces?pli=1>

13 [https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Collections-Research/Irish-Antiquities-Division-Collections/Collections-List-\(1\)/Viking/The-Balinderry-gaming-board](https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Collections-Research/Irish-Antiquities-Division-Collections/Collections-List-(1)/Viking/The-Balinderry-gaming-board)

14 Checkers in American English.

15 A chessboard has eight squares per side. This knowledge is now almost lost in Britain. I kid you not. You try asking visitors at a show how many squares a chessboard has. Even those who say they play chess seldom know.

16 <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22772/dun-chonallaich>

17 Whether playing on the squares or the intersections, it is important that the central space be clearly identified.

### 3.1 About the sources

Our main text sources are the Icelandic sagas, which were written in mediaeval times but are thought to re-tell older tales. Old Icelandic is regarded as being a dialect of Old West Norse<sup>18</sup> and close to the languages used in Iceland and Norway in the early mediaeval period.

Most available translations of the sagas focus on telling the story to a contemporary audience and cannot be relied on for terminology; game names are arbitrarily recast, for example to “chess”<sup>19</sup> or “chequer-board”.<sup>20</sup>

Ideally I would have referred to the actual manuscripts, digitised images of many of these being now available online, but reading them is beyond my skill (Figure 5) and I have relied on transcriptions. Most of these transcriptions date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and vary in spelling. The most usable transcriptions are in modernised Icelandic orthography which can be roughly translated by Google Translate, with some corrections made using Old Norse dictionaries available online. Although inelegant, these translations give us a more direct understanding of the text.

A list of sources is provided in Appendix 1: sources.

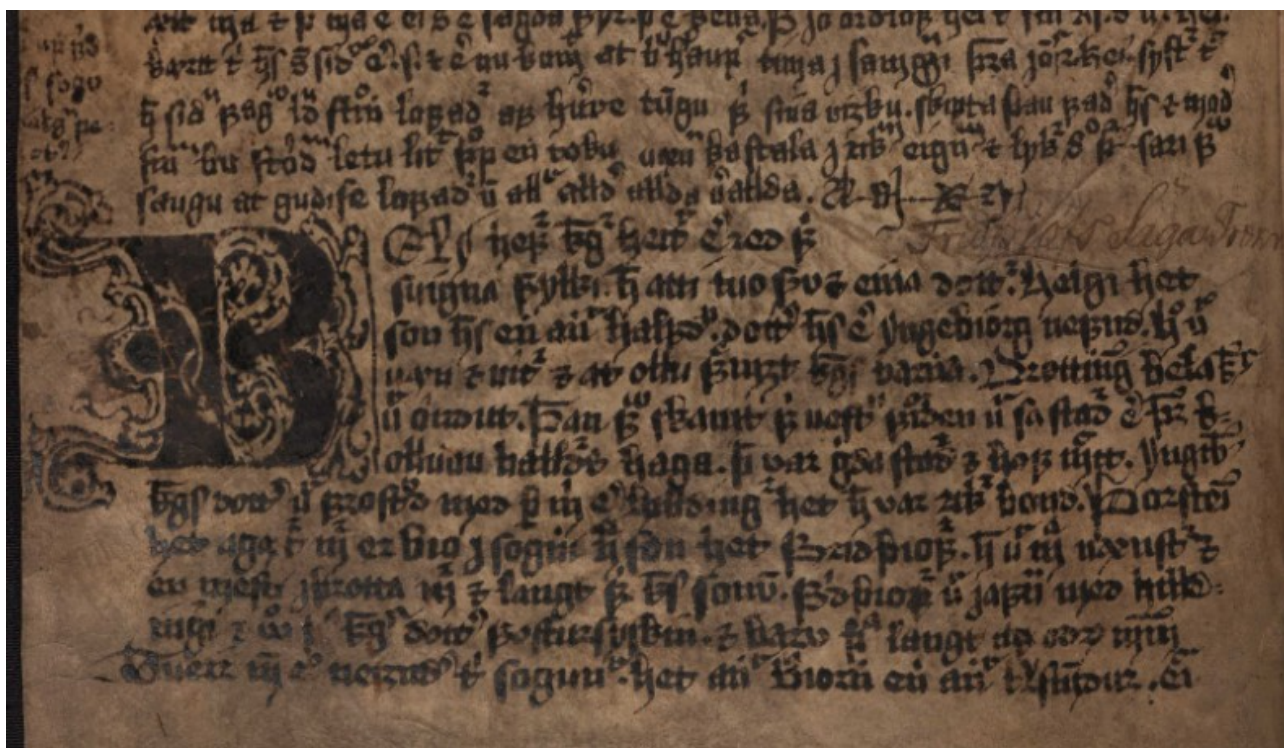


Figure 5: A section of the manuscript of *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna* / *The Saga of Fridthjof the Bold*.

AM 510 Sögubók ; Ísland, 1540-1560

<https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/is/AM04-0510/185?iabr=on#page/91v/mode/2up>

18 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old\\_Norse#Old\\_West\\_Norse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Norse#Old_West_Norse)

19 “hnefatafli” in Upton, George, *the Saga of Fridthof the Bold*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59689/59689-h/59689-h.htm>

20 “tafli”, in Jones, Gwyn. *Gunnlaug Wormtongue, in Erik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, p178. Oxford University Press, 1961.

## 3.2 Tafl games in literature

The following selection of texts provide several different names for board games:

- *tafl*
- *hnefatafl* (with variants)
- *hnettafl*
- *halatafl*

*Tafl* means “board” and is a generic word for board games.

*hnefatafl* as previously discussed means “knight board game”.

*hnettafl* may be a contraction of *hnefatafl* but such a contraction seems more likely to occur in speech, and not in a written source especially when, as we will see, the “king” piece is explicitly identified as *hnefi*; also I’d expect a written contraction to be something like *hne’tafl*, with a single ‘t’. Furthermore, *hnettafl* is meaningful in itself; *hnet* is the Old Icelandic word for “knot”, from the Old Norse “*hnot*”,<sup>21</sup> and if *hnettafl* is a game related to *tablut*, the “knot” may refer to the central fortress where the “king” starts the game.<sup>22</sup> It seems to me sensible and simplest to take *hnettafl* as an intentional name; the “knot game”.

Will the texts allow us to equate *hnettafl* and *hnefatafl*? Was the king called *hnefi*? And what is *halatafl*? This investigation is a bit of a journey, but I think is worth the effort, as we can check our assumptions and improve our understanding of the Old Norse board game.

### 3.2.1 Hervarar Saga (Icelandic, 14<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>23</sup>

Odin, disguised as Gestumblindi, poses riddles to king Heidrek, three of which refer to *tafl* or *hnettafl* (see Appendix 2: Hervarar Saga riddles), and one of these explicitly connects *hnettafl* with *hnefi*. This text is pure gold as, unlike riddles such as those in the Exeter Book,<sup>24</sup> the answers are provided.

I’ve taken the Icelandic text from [germanicmythology.com](http://www.germanicmythology.com),<sup>25 26</sup> and have suggested translations based on an online Icelandic dictionary, Google Translate, and Nora Kershaw’s 1921 translation.

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21 <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hneta>

22 This is a speculation; I have not investigated whether there are other similar usages of “knot” in Old Norse. But in English, a “knot” has a number of possible meanings including a group of people standing close together.

23 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hervarar\\_saga\\_ok\\_Hei%C3%B0reks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hervarar_saga_ok_Hei%C3%B0reks)

24 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exeter\\_Book\\_Riddles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exeter_Book_Riddles)

25 <http://www.germanicmythology.com/FORNALDARSAGAS/HERVARARKERSHAW.html>

26 <http://www.germanicmythology.com/FORNALDARSAGAS/HervararSagaTunstall.html>

Þá mælti Gestumblindi:

Hverjar eru þær brúðir,  
er sinn drottin  
vápnláusan vega;  
inar jarpari hlífa  
um alla daga,  
en inar fegri fara?  
Heiðrekr konungr,  
hyggðu at gátu.

Then Gestumblindi said:

Who are the brides,  
Who daily go before  
their unarmed lord;  
The dark defend,  
the fairer go forward?  
Honourable king,  
Guess what it is.

Góð er gáta þín, Gestumblindi, getit er þessar. Þat Your riddle is good, Gestumblindi, I've guessed  
er **hnettafl**; inar dekkri verja **hnefann**, en hvítar it. That is **hnettafl**; the dark ones defend the  
sækja. **hnefi**, while the whites attack.

This confirms that *hnettafl* is a game similar to *tablut*; in the “knot game”, dark pieces defend the *hnefi*<sup>27</sup> while light pieces attack. The regular pieces are personified as warrior maids and the central piece as *drottin*, “lord”.

### 3.2.2 The Saga of Fridthjof the Bold (Codex Regius, 13<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>28</sup>

There are several different manuscripts<sup>29</sup>, and I've not found it easy to match up translations, scanned manuscripts and digitised transcriptions. However, *Fridthjof* contains an extended board game scene and warrants study.

The most accessible digitised transcription merely says that Fridthjof “*sat at tafli*”, almost certainly meaning a board game.<sup>30 31</sup>

En konungs synir söfnuðu liði ok fengu lítit lið ok sendu orð Friðþjófi ok báðu hann liðs, en hann sat at **tafli**, er sendimenn kómu til hans.

Þeir mæltu: “Konungar várir sendu þér kvedju ok vildu þiggja liðsinni þitt til orrostu með sér.”

Hann svaraði engu ok mælti við Björn: “Leita ráðs fyrir at **tefla**, því at tvíkostr er þér á tvá vega,” sagði hann.

This is rendered by Google Translate (with a little finicking) as:

27 *hnefann* is the definite accusative of *hnefi*, “the fist”: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hnefi>

28 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frithjof%27s\\_Saga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frithjof%27s_Saga)

29 see <https://skaldic.org/db.php?id=8&if=default&table=text> for a description of the manuscripts, however this site only gives the poetic sections and is not searchable.

30 Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Ed. *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna* <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2003.02.0012%3Achapter%3D2>

31 [http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Fri%C3%B0%C3%BEj%C3%B3fs\\_saga\\_ins\\_fr%C3%A6kna](http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Fri%C3%B0%C3%BEj%C3%B3fs_saga_ins_fr%C3%A6kna)



But the king's sons gathered a team and got a small team and sent word to Friðþjófi and asked him for help, but he was playing a board game when the messengers came to him.

They said: "Our kings sent you greetings and wanted to take your army to battle with them."

He didn't answer anything and said to Björn: "Seek advice before playing a board game, because you have a double advantage in two ways," he said.

However Larsson's 1898 transcription of ms FriðA<sup>x</sup> 516 specifies the game as *hnefatafl*:<sup>32</sup>

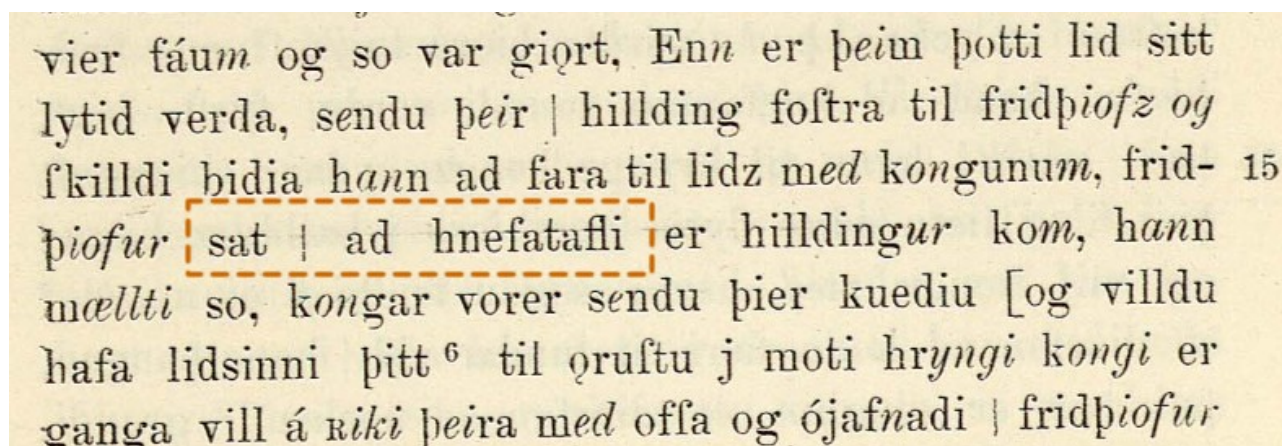


Figure 6: Extract from Larsson's 1893 transcription of *Frithjof's Saga*

In the transcription, we see the word *hnefanum*<sup>33</sup> repeated, which has routinely been translated as "king" as we shall see.

<sup>32</sup> <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?c303367>

<sup>33</sup> *hnefanum* is singular dative; <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hnefi>

aptur, Björn mællti þá, tuijkoftur er þarna foftbroder  
 og tuo vega frá ad tefla | fridþiofur sagdi, þá mun ráð  
 ad sitia fyrft ad hnefanum, og mun þá <sup>1</sup> verda otraudur  
 tui | kofturinn, ogguann fieck hilldingur annann vrfkurð  
 5 [sinna erinda, <sup>2</sup> for hann aptur fkiott til motz | vid  
 kongana, og sagdi þeim suor fridþiofz þeir spyria <sup>3</sup>  
 hillding huoria þyding hann tæki vr þe | fsum ordum,  
 hilldingur sagdi þar er hann ræddi vm bilid, þar mun  
 hann [á bil <sup>4</sup> hyggia vm [ferd þessa <sup>5</sup> | med yckur,  
 10 enn þar er hann lieft setia mundi ad fogru <sup>6</sup> toflunni,  
 það mun koma til jngebiargar | syftur yckar, giætid  
 [hennar vel <sup>7</sup> so vijft, enn þa er eg hiet hanum afar-  
 koftum af yckur, það | wirdte björn tuijkoft, enn frid-  
 þiofur kuad ad hnefanum mundi verda fyrft lagt,  
 15 það | mællti hann til hryngz kongz, sydann biugguft  
 þeir, <sup>8</sup> og lietu ádur flytia jngebiorg j balldurz haga |  
 og viij konur med henni søgdu fridþiof ei mundi <sup>9</sup>  
 so diarfan ad hann færi til fundar vid | hana þangad,  
 bui þar er einginn so diarfur ad nøckru <sup>10</sup> grandi,

Figure 7: Extract from Larsson's 1893 transcription of *Frithjof's Saga*

This scene was translated by George Upton from Ferdinand Schmidt's German text as:<sup>34</sup>

Frithiof was sitting with Björn in his hall at Framnäs before a splendid chessboard, the squares of which were alternate gold and silver, when Hilding entered. Greeting the old man kindly, Frithiof led him to the high-seat and bade him refresh himself with a horn of mead till he and his adroit adversary should have finished their match. But without waiting, Hilding began:

"I come on behalf of the two princes, Helge and Halfdan, to pray you to make peace with them. King Ring has declared war and they fear for the kingdom."

"Take heed, Björn," cried Frithiof, "thy King is in danger! A pawn, indeed, may save him; pawns are lightly sacrificed!"

34 <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59689/59689-h/59689-h.htm>

Alexander Bugge translated the text into Norwegian in 1901,<sup>35</sup> and Google Translate renders this into English as:

Fridtjov was sitting at the board game when Hilding came and said: "Our kings send you their greetings and want you to accompany them to battle against King Ring, who wants to go against their kingdom with arrogance and injustice." Fridtjov did not answer a word, but said to Bjørn, with whom he sat playing: "There is no hurry, foster brother; you must not move that piece; rather I wanted to attack the red piece and see if it stands safely." Hilding then said: "King Helge asked me to tell you, Fridtjov, that you should go with them on this campaign, otherwise you would have to pay for it, when they got home." But Bjørn then said to Fridtjov: "There are two things to choose between here, foster brother, and two ways to move the piece." Fridtjov says: "Then it is best to look after the king first; then it will be easy to choose." Hilding got no other answer to his errand, but immediately went back to the kings and told them what Fridtjov had said. They asked Hilding how he interpreted these words. Hilding replies: "When he talked about not being in a hurry, he probably meant that he didn't want to rush to go with you. But when he said he wanted to attack the red piece, he was probably thinking of your sister Ingebjørg. "

Finally, Margaret Schlauch published an English translation in 1928, again based on one or more longer versions of this scene:<sup>36</sup>

But as their troops seemed but few to them, they sent Hilding, their foster father, to Fridthjof, and asked him to join the troops of the Kings. Fridthjof was sitting at chess when Hilding came. He said,

"Our Kings send word to thee, and they would have thy fighting men for the war against King Hring, who wishes to fall upon their kingdom wrongfully and tyrannically". Fridthjof made no answer, but said to Bjorn, with whom he was playing,

"That is a weak point, brother! But thou needest not change it. Rather I will move against the red piece, to know whether it is protected." Hilding spoke again:

"King Helgi bade me tell thee, Fridthjof, that thou shouldst go on this raid, else thou wilt suffer hardship when they come back." Bjorn said,

"Thou has a choice of two moves, brother; two ways of saving it." Fridthjof said,

"First it would be wise to move against this King, and that will be an easy choice."

Hilding received no other answer to his errand. He went back to the Kings and told them the reply of Fridthjof. They asked Hilding what sense he made of these words. Hilding said, "When he spoke of the weak point he meant this raid of yours; and when he said he would move with the fair piece, that must refer to your sister Ingebjørg. Therefore look to her well. And when I promised him hardship from you, Bjorn called that a choice, but Fridthjof said that the King had first to be attacked, and by that he meant King Hring.

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35 [http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Sagaen\\_om\\_Fridtjov\\_den\\_fr%C3%B8kne](http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Sagaen_om_Fridtjov_den_fr%C3%B8kne)

36 <https://archive.org/details/medievalnarrativ0000schl/page/8/mode/2up>

By comparing the transcription with the translations, we see *hnefanum* as the “king” piece in a game called *hnefatafl* and we see again fair and dark / red pieces.

### 3.2.3 Grettis saga (Icelandic, late 13<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>37</sup>

The digitised text in the Icelandic Saga Database again gives us *hnettafl*:<sup>38</sup>

Það var eitt sinn að Þorbjörn öngull sat að tafl. Þá gekk stjúp móðir hans hjá og sá að hann tefldi **hnettafl**. Það var stórt **halatafl**. Henni þótti hann óþrifinn og kastaði að honum nokkurum orðum en hann svarar illa.

This can be rendered as:

Once upon a time, Þorbjörn ángull was sitting at a board game. Then his stepmother walked by and saw that he was playing *hnettafl*. It was a big *halatafl*. She thought he was untidy and threw some words at him, but he didn't respond well.

*Halatafl* means “tail board” or perhaps “fox board”<sup>39</sup> and is usually interpreted as a game similar to Fox and Geese.<sup>40</sup> The Swedish “fox game” is played on a 9x9 grid; Fox and Geese is played on an 11x11 grid. The “knot game” and the “fox game” could therefore share a board just as chess and draughts do.

Þorbjörn may have been playing “the knot game” on a large “fox game board” - perhaps an 11x11 like the Trondheim board, as opposed to a 9x9 *tablut* board.

### 3.2.4 The Greenland Lay of Atli (Codex Regius, 13<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>41</sup>

In *Atlamáli in Grænlensko* (The Greenland Lay of Atli), as transcribed by Guðni Jónsson,<sup>42</sup> that remarkable woman Guðrún mentions *hnefi* in stanza 73<sup>43</sup>:

Kostum drepr kvenna

karla ofríki;

í kné gengr **hnefi**<sup>44</sup>,

ef kvistir þverra;

This literally means something like “the tyranny of men kills women; the fist on the knee, if the twigs wither”. Henry Adams Bellows failed to make sense of this passage and rewrote it in his 1936

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37 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grettis\\_saga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grettis_saga)

38 [https://www.sagadb.org/grettis\\_saga](https://www.sagadb.org/grettis_saga)

39 <https://old-norse.net/search.php#search>

40 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fox\\_games](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fox_games)

41 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlama%C3%A1li#Date\\_and\\_provenance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlama%C3%A1li#Date_and_provenance)

42 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gu%C3%B0ni\\_J%C3%B3nsson#Publications](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gu%C3%B0ni_J%C3%B3nsson#Publications)

43 <https://web.archive.org/web/20130511210808/http://etext.old.no/Bugge/atlamal.html>

44 *hnefi* is the indefinite nominative, “fist goes”: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hnefi>

translation<sup>45</sup> as “The tree-top bows low | if bereft of its leaves”, with a note on the obscurity of the text.

The text could refer to a person on bended knee with their fist on their knee, but the mention of twigs, perhaps likening the *hnefi* with its defenders to a tree with spreading branches, allows an interpretation along the lines of “*hnefi* is defeated if its supporters fail”. There is nothing in the surrounding text to suggest a reference to a board game but it’s a plausible allusion. As we will see later, *Hnæf* was a well known figure, and I think it is possible that Guðrún was making a historical reference - “*Hnæf* is defeated when his companions fail”. Indeed, the author may have had multiple interpretations in mind - *Hnæf*, the game and the image of a falling warrior.

### 3.2.5 Kroka-Refs Saga “The Saga of Ref the Sly” (Icelandic, 14<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>46 47</sup>

Ref’s Saga is an entertaining and fanciful story about a troublemaking gadgeteer. During the story, a man called Bárður gives a gaming board to a king:

Fer Bárður fyrir konung einn dag og mælti: “Hér er eitt **tafl** herra er yður sendi hinn göfgasti maður af Grænlandi er Gunnar heitir og vill ekki fé fyrir hafa heldur vinfengi yðart. Var eg með honum tvo vetur og varð mér hann góður drengur. Vill hann gjarna vera vin yðar.”

Það var bæði **hneftafl** og **skáktafl**.

Konungur leit á um hríð og það þann hafa þökk fyrir er slíkt sendi: “Skulum vér víst vináttu vora á móti leggja.”

This can be read as something like:

Bárður went before the king one day and said: "Here is a gaming board, sir, sent to you by the noblest man from Greenland, whose name is Gunnar, and he does not want money for it, but your friendship. I was with him for two winters and he became a good boy to me. Will he would like to be your friend."

There was both *hneftafl* and chess.<sup>48</sup>

The king looked at it for a while and asked him to thank the one who sent such a message: "Surely we shall send our friendship in return."

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45 <https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/poe/poe35.htm>

46 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kr%C3%B3ka-Refs\\_saga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kr%C3%B3ka-Refs_saga)

47 [https://www.sagadb.org/kroka-refs\\_saga](https://www.sagadb.org/kroka-refs_saga)

48 The Old Norse skák means chess: <https://old-norse.net/html/s.php#sk%C3%A1k>

The gift was probably a gaming board with a chessboard one side and a *hnefatafl* board the other, though it may have comprised two sets of fancy pieces<sup>49</sup> which would have been a more noteworthy gift than a wooden board.<sup>50</sup>

From the archaeological evidence and the texts quoted above, I am confident that a game similar to the Saami *tablut* was known in mediaeval Iceland as both *hnettafl* and *hnefatafl*, and that the central piece was called *hnefi*. One player had light pieces, the other red or dark.

In the references above, *hnefi* clearly means a person and cannot be meaningfully translated as “fist”. There may be some reason that it made sense in Old Norse, but I have not seen any convincing explanation.

To personify game pieces as humans or animals is natural when playing a battle strategy game.<sup>51</sup> In the minds of the players and storytellers, *hnefi* was not a body part; he was a man. But who? Which battle leader might be commonly referred to as *hnefi*?

## 4 Hnæf and the siege at Finnsburg

We now turn to Old English poetry and the heroic character *Hnæf*, who appears in the Finnsburg Fragment:<sup>52</sup>

{Hn}æf hléoprode ðá hea{þ}ogeong cyning:	Then proclaimed <i>Hnæf</i> , the battle-young king:
'Né ðis ne dagað éast{a}n né hér draca ne fléogeð	This is not the eastern dawn nor is a dragon flying
né hér ðisse healle hornas ne byrnað.	here
	nor here does this hall's gables burn
Ac hér forþ berað <...>, fugelas singað,	But here they bear forth, birds screech,
gylleð gráeghama, úðwudu hlynnæð,	the grey-coated wolf bays, the war-wood clashes,
scyld scefte oncwýð.	the shield answers the shaft. <sup>53</sup>

The key events of this story are as follows:

*Hnæf of the Half-Danes and his sixty warriors are visiting his brother-in-law King Finn of Frisia at his fortress or burh. The Frisians attack the hall where Hnæf and his men are staying; Finn is perhaps unwilling to burn his own hall and instead lays siege to it. Hnæf's thegns Sigeferð and Éaha defend one door; Ordláf, Gúpláf and Hengest defend the other.*

*After holding out for five days, Hnæf is slain and an uneasy truce reached between the survivors; the Danes are forced to stay the winter because of rough, icy seas.*

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49 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis\\_chessmen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis_chessmen)

50 *Tafl* literally means board or table, but can mean a game or gaming set.

51 For example fox and geese, almost all chess pieces and “tablemen” in backgammon-style games.

52 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finnesburg\\_Fragment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finnesburg_Fragment)

53 <https://heorot.dk/finnsburh-en.html>

This prince *Hnæf* son of *Hoc* is also mentioned in the Old English poem *Beowulf* where the events following this siege are described, and in the poem *Widsith* which notes that *Hnæf* rules the tribe of the *Hocings*.<sup>54 55</sup>

In *Beowulf*, *Hrothgar*'s *scop* honours *Beowulf* with a story of a Danish victory, which indicates that the early mediaeval audience knew *Hnæf*'s story well.

## 5 Hnæf the hnefi?

*Hnæf* and *hnefi* sound similar, but they may be unrelated; vowels are important, as we know from English words such as will, wall, weal, well and wool. And would the Old Norse people have known about prince *Hnæf*?

Several authors have discussed a possible relationship between *Hnæf* and *hnefi*.

In his 2005 article, Carl Hammer discussed concentrations of people in eighth-century Bavaria bearing heroic names known from the Old English poems *Beowulf*, the *Finnsburg* Fragment, and *Widsith*.<sup>56</sup>

Hammer writes that Bishop *Thegan*, writing in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century, stated that the emperor Charlemagne's third wife, *Hildegard*, was the grand-daughter of *Nebi* and the great-grand-daughter of *Huoching*. He mentioned that writers including J. R. R. Tolkien considered the names *Nebi* and *Huoching* to be derived from *Hnæf* and *Hoc*, the original meanings of the names being lost but the characters being well known from heroic poetry.

Hammer concludes that these poems had travelled from Scandinavia and Frisia to southern Germany via Anglo-Saxon churchmen and missionaries, and makes a comment on the meaning of *Hnæf*:

Old Norse “*hnefi*” (modern English “fist”), from which *Hnæf*'s name apparently derives, has no cognate in Old High German (or in Old English).

P. A. Shaw in 2020<sup>57</sup> took a different view, stating that the name *Hnæf* was an anglicisation of *Hnabi* or *Nebi* and the *Finnsburg* episode may derive from a feud between *Hnabi* and the Alamannic prince *Bertold* in the early eighth century; he further said that Forstemann<sup>58</sup> equates *Hnabi*, *Hnæf*, *Nebi* and *Nebe*.<sup>59</sup>

Shaw concludes that *Hnæf* probably derived from a Continental Germanic origin, not from the Old Norse *hnefi*. However, he mentions that *Hnefi* occurs as a name in later Scandinavian sources, as the

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54 <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/b/beowulf/summary-and-analysis/lines-10631250>

55 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Widsith>

56 Hammer, Carl I. *Hoc and Hnaef in Bavaria? Early-Medieval Prosopography and Heroic Poetry*, Board of Trustees of Western Michigan University through its Medieval Institute Publications, 2005.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44946464>

57 <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350145795.ch-004>, see endnotes for full reference to Shaw.

58 Förstemann, E. *Altdeutsches Namenbuch: Erster Band, Personennamen*, 2nd edn, Bonn: Hanstein. 1900.

59 Old Norwegian differentiated early from Old Icelandic by the loss of the consonant h in initial position before l, n and r; thus whereas Old Icelandic manuscripts might use the form *hnefi*, "fist", Old Norwegian manuscripts might use *nefi*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old\\_Norse#Old\\_West\\_Norse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Norse#Old_West_Norse)

name of a twelfth-century inhabitant of the Orkneys, a sea-king mentioned in a verse in the Prose Edda and a companion of *Hjalmar* in *Örvar-Odds saga* (see Lind 1905–1915: s.v. Hnefi).

We cannot date the *Finnsburg* Fragment as the manuscript has been lost, but *Beowulf* dates to the late tenth century and *Hnæf* himself may have lived in or before the late eighth century,<sup>60</sup> so could have been known to later Old Norse game-players.

The writers may have been Continental Germanic, but *Hnæf* himself is Scandinavian, described as a Half-Dane and *Scylding*,<sup>61</sup> so is perhaps of interest to a Scandinavian audience.

I suggest that just as *Hnabi*, or *Nebe*, became *Hnæf* to the Old English storyteller, he became *Hnefi* to speakers of Old Icelandic when his story spread north from the Danish or Continental Germanic territories; this is consistent with both Hammer and Shaw’s interpretations, and *Hnefi* was a Scandinavian name well within the time-range of our saga-writers. Furthermore I think it is plausible that the borrowed name would be adapted to match a familiar word.

## 6 Conclusion

From the evidence above, I am confident that:

- Our game was called both *hnefatafl* “*hnefi* game” and *hnettafl* “knot game”. It closely resembled *tablut* in which a war leader with a small army is besieged by a larger, leaderless, force.
- Whether the game was called *hnettafl* or *hnefatafl* the central piece was called *hnefi*<sup>62</sup> and was a familiar allegorical reference to a war leader.
- This game was well known at the highest levels of society and was on a par with chess as a strategy game.

I suggest that:

- *Hnefi* here explicitly refers to a man - a war leader - and “fist” is a secondary meaning.
- The story of *Hnæf* was widely known in the Germanic territories and could have spread to Iceland, perhaps via traders or churchmen.
- *Hnefi* as name in later Old Norse is a localisation of the name written in Old English as *Hnæf*.
- Blond attackers, red defenders tentatively fits with the Frisians attacking *Hnæf* Half-Dane.<sup>63</sup>

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60 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hn%C3%A6f>

61 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Finnsburg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Finnsburg)

62 We have seen *hnefi* in both definite and singular articles, so I don’t think we can conclude whether it should be read as a name or an object.

63 Frisians are stereotyped as blond, while the early Danes may have been darker or even red-headed. This tentative association may indicate the same pattern of blond attackers and red / dark defenders that we have seen in the sagas. Linnaeus recorded the defenders as Swedes and the attackers as Muscovites, but the Saami people he met in 1732 may have reversed the colours - Linnaeus didn’t say which side had the lighter pieces.

<https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/the-people/appearance/>

<https://www.thedockyards.com/red-hair/>



I propose that *hnefatafl* is literally “*Hnefi*’s game” and the Old Icelandic<sup>64</sup> people saw it as a representation of *Hnæf* and his thegns defending the hall at *Finnsburg*. This was not a fortress with defences such as a river or curtain wall - it was a longhall with multiple entrances allowing attack from either side, which excellently matches the game. And like *Hnæf*, the defenders in *hnefatafl* cannot hold the hall forever, and must either break out or be overwhelmed.

We can see *hnefatafl* as not only a strategy war-game but also a cautionary tale about how badly wrong a Yule-tide visit to the in-laws can go!

## 6.1 Further avenues of research

While the “*Hnæf*’s game” theory beautifully fits the character of *hnefatafl* and pairs the game with a highly appropriate story, it is speculative and relies on two key points:

- that *Hnæf*’s story was known in Iceland and his name was borrowed into Old Icelandic as *hnefi*.
- the lack of a better explanation of why the word *hnefi* means the central piece, noting that is is universally translated as “king” and never as “fist”.

A wider study of the saga texts and ideally the original manuscripts, or at least more recent transcriptions, may throw more light on how the *hnefi* game piece was regarded both contextually and linguistically.<sup>65</sup>

There may be non-Saga sources that tell us whether the mediaeval Icelanders and Old Norse people were aware of foreign histories such as the battle of Finnsburg.

The texts I’ve quoted are Icelandic sagas. I don’t know of any material from the Scandinavian mainland which gives specific names to board games of the Viking Age - but there may be?

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## Acknowledgements

Peter Bone originally suggested the connection between *Hnæf* and *hnefatafl*; I came across the Finnsburg fragment recently and was inspired to investigate the possibility further. I have not seen this idea mentioned anywhere else and therefore believe it to be original to Peter and myself.

I am grateful to my reviewers, Katie Hambrook, Harry Bedford and Dan Towse for their many excellent suggestions and corrections to this article. Any remaining errors or omissions are of course my own.

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64 I have only found *Hnefi* as a man’s name, and *hnefatafl* / *hnefi* as names for the board game and central piece, in later sources. Indeed the name of the game may be purely an Icelandic tradition. Possibly an existing game was renamed *hnefatafl* as the story of *Hnæf* became popular in Iceland.

65 My understanding is that while in modern English we would expect a proper name to be capitalised, this is not necessarily the case in a mediaeval manuscript. However there may be other clues in the phraseology.

## 7 Appendix 1: sources

### 7.1.1 Translations of Linnaeus' description of *tablut*

[http://aagenielsen.dk/tablut\\_translations.html](http://aagenielsen.dk/tablut_translations.html)

### 7.1.2 The Icelandic Saga Database

This contains modernised Icelandic orthography transcriptions of many saga manuscripts, and open format translations into other languages.

<https://sagadb.org>

### 7.1.3 Heorot.dk (Beowulf in Cyberspace)

Finnsburg fragment original text and translation: <https://heorot.dk/finnsburh-en.html>

### 7.1.4 Project Gutenberg (a library of free eBooks)

<https://www.gutenberg.org/>

### 7.1.5 Perseus Digital Library

Also known as Perseus Hopper.

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>

### 7.1.6 Germanic Mythology

<http://www.germanicmythology.com/>

### 7.1.7 Heimskringla

An online collection of Old Norse source material

<http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Forside>

### 7.1.8 Internet archive

A non-profit library of free books

<https://archive.org/>

## 7.2 Dictionaries

### 7.2.1 Dictionary of Old Norse Prose

This is a searchable archive of transcriptions of Old Norse manuscripts and a fantastic resource for finding uses of individual words. Definitions, where given, are in Danish, but can easily be translated into English with Google Translate.

<https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php>

For example, these searches show uses of variants of *hnefatafl* and *hnefi*:

*Hnefatafl*

<https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o35544>

<https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o35547>

<https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o35548>

<https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o99201>

*Hnefi*

<https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o35545>

An Icelandic-English Dictionary, Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, Oxford, 1874.

<https://old-norse.net/search.php>

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## 8 Appendix 2: Hverrar Saga riddles

The other riddles in Hverrar Saga which mention board games are interesting in themselves, though they pose more questions than they answer.

### 8.1.1 Riddle - *tafli*<sup>66</sup>

Þá mælti Gestumblindi:

Hverir eru þeir þegnar,  
er ríða þingi at  
sáttir allir saman<sup>67</sup>;  
lýða sína  
senda þeir lönd yfir  
at byggja bólstaði?  
Heiðrekr konungr,  
hyggðu at gátu.

Then Gestumblindi said:

Who are the thegns  
who ride to the Thing,  
all in accord;  
that travel the land over  
to build a steading?  
Honourable king,  
Guess what it is.

Góð er gáta þín, Gestumblindi, getit er þessar. Þat Your riddles are good, Gestumblindi, but I can  
er Ítrekr ok Andaðr, er þeir sitja at **tafli** sínu. guess them. This is Itrek and Andad<sup>68</sup>, as they sit  
at table (playing a board game).

In this context, *tafl* generally means a board game, but we can't glean much here; we've lost the story to which this presumably refers.

### 8.1.2 Riddle - *húnn*

Þá mælti Gestumblindi:

Hvat er þat dýra,  
er drepr fé manna  
ok er járn kringt utan;  
horn hefir átta,  
en höfuð ekki,  
ok fylgja því margir mjök?  
Heiðrekr konungr,  
hyggðu at gátu.

Then Gestumblindi said:

What is the animal  
killing people's flocks  
surrounded by iron outside  
It has eight horns (or angles / corners)<sup>69</sup> and no  
head  
Many people follow it  
Honourable king,  
Guess what it is.

Þat er **húnn** í **hnettafli**.

That is *húnn* in *hnettafl*

The surrounding iron seems likely to be the metal edging of a high-quality gaming board. The many followers might be the defenders, the larger attacking force or even an audience watching a game.

66 The numbers I've given these riddles have no meaning outside this article, they're just for convenience.

67 This has previously been translated as "sixteen all together", but the Old Icelandic word "sáttir" means "satisfied".

68 This is generally thought to be Odin and a giant, Andad, playing *tafl*.

69 <https://old-icelandic.vercel.app/word/horn>

But what is *húnn*? According to dictionaries the word has several possible meanings:<sup>70</sup> “knob at the top of the mast-head”, “urchin” and “bear cub”.<sup>71</sup> One can propose a number of possible interpretations for *húnn* as a component of *hnettafl*, based on the idea of eight “horns”:

- Eight warriors surrounding the king piece, as in *tablut*, implying a 9x9 game board.
- The eight squares that surround the king’s starting position. In both these cases *húnn* perhaps has its “knob” meaning, describing a central cluster.
- The attacking force, which in *tablut* is initially divided into four groups, each with two outlying end pieces to give eight “horns”. In this case *húnn* perhaps has the “bear cub” meaning, as many smaller creatures attack the central group.
- The corners of a die, and we know from archaeological finds that dice were well known in early mediaeval Europe. *Fé* (“flocks”) can also mean “money” or “wealth”, and gambling does indeed destroy peoples’ wealth. If correct, it would suggest that *hnettafl* uses a die. Dice are common in gambling games and the *tabula* family of race-games which preceded backgammon. However I think that a strategy game is more likely to be a pure game of skill - consider *tablut*, go and chess.
- The board itself has eight corners, but it already has a name, *tafl*, so I think that cannot be the answer.

## 9 Appendix 3: Gull-Þóris saga

This saga presents a fantastical scene, with little explanation, but it’s a great “mood piece” about *hnefatafl* so I include it here for your amusement and interest.

Sagadb.org gives us modernised Icelandic orthography<sup>72</sup>:

Það vandist á að Þórisstöðum að þar hurfu gimburlömb tvö grákollótt hvert vor og höðnukið tvö með sama lit.

Það var eina nótt um vorið að Þórir mátti ei sofa. Hann gekk þá út og var regn mikið. Hann heyrði jarm þangað er stíað var. Þórir gekk þangað og sá á réttargarðinum að þar lágu kið tvö bundin og lömb tvö en í rétt sátu konur tvær. Þær léku að **hnettafli** og var taflíð allt steipt af silfri en gyllt allt hið rauða. Þær brugðust við fast og urðu hræddar mjög. Þórir fékk tekið þær og setti niður hjá sér og spurði því að þær legðust á fé hans. Þær buðu allt á hans vald. Hann spurði hverjar þær væru. Það var önnur Kerling dóttir Styrkårs í Barmi en önnur kveðst vera dóttir Varða ofan úr Vörðufelli og nefndist hún flagðkona en hin hamhlaupa. Þórir gerði þá sætt með þeim að þær hefðu sauði með sér en hann taflíð og það er þar fylgdi en á tuglunum **taflpungsins** var gullbaugur settur steinum en annar silfurbaugur var í borðinu. Þetta allt tók Þórir og skildu við það.

70 <https://old-norse.net/html/h.php#h%C3%BAAnn>

71 There are several individuals called Hun or Húnn in early mediaeval texts, but none leaps out as having a connection with the game: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_figures\\_in\\_Germanic\\_heroic\\_legend\\_Hi%E2%80%93Hy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_figures_in_Germanic_heroic_legend_Hi%E2%80%93Hy)

72 [https://sagadb.org/gull-thoris\\_saga.is](https://sagadb.org/gull-thoris_saga.is)

Google Translate renders this as something like:

It used to happen at Þórisstaður that two grey-headed lambs disappeared there every spring, as well as two young she-goats<sup>73</sup> with the same color.

There was one night in the spring that Þórir could not sleep. He then went outside and it was raining heavily. He heard a roar towards the stable. Þórir went there and saw in the court yard that there were two goats tied up and two lambs, but two women were sitting in the court. They played **hnettafl** and the board was all cast in silver, but all the red was gold. They reacted strongly and became very afraid. Þórir was able to take them and put them down with him, and therefore asked that they be applied to his money. They offered everything at his disposal. He asked who they were. There was another Kerling daughter of Styrkár in Barmi, but the other one is said to be the daughter of Varður from Vörðufell and she was called a flag woman and the other Hamhlaupa. Þórir then made a deal with them that they would have a sheep with them and he would play the table and that's what followed, but on the pegs of the table top there was a gold ball set with stones, but there was another silver ball in the table. Þórir took all this and parted with it.

Even allowing for Google's rough and ready translation, this is a strange scene with little explanation. However, we see women playing *hnettafl* and further confirmation that it is a high-status game, mentioning again a set made with gold and silver.

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73 <https://old-icelandic.vercel.app/word/hodnukid>