VIKING CHESS
HNEFATAFL

Viking Chess, also known as *Hnefatafl* (pronounced "nef-ah-taf-uhl") or "the King's Table," is an ancient Scandinavian board game that predates modern chess. It was popular during the Viking Age (from roughly the 8th to 11th centuries) and has parallels to chess in terms of strategic gameplay, but the two games are quite different in their rules, design, and objectives.

The game is asymmetrical in nature, meaning that the players have different pieces, numbers of pieces, and objectives. The game takes place on a board with a grid of squares, with variations ranging from 7x7 to 19x19 grids. Each player takes a specific role during play:

Defender (The King's Side): One player controls a central king (often referred to as the *Hnefatafl* piece) and a small force of defenders. The objective is to get the king safely to one of the corners of the board, representing escape.

Attacker (Raider): The other player commands a larger number of raiding pieces surrounding the edges of the board. The attacker's goal is to capture the king by surrounding him on all four sides.

Hnefatafl was widely played in Viking territories, including Scandinavia, Britain, and Ireland, as well as in areas settled by the Vikings, like Iceland and Greenland. Archaeological finds of game boards and pieces have been discovered in Viking burial sites, suggesting the game was highly regarded. The game likely originated in Northern Europe during the Iron Age, with variations appearing in different cultures, though it reached its peak in the Viking Age.

The game's popularity declined after chess began spreading through Europe during the Middle Ages. By the end of the Viking Age, chess had largely displaced it as the dominant strategy game. However, in modern times, there has been a revival of interest in *Hnefatafl*, with historical enthusiasts, Viking re-enactors, and game historians reconstructing its rules from old texts and archaeological evidence.

Hnefatafl held a significant place in Viking society, reflecting their warrior culture. It was a game of tactics and strategy, mirroring the importance of battlefield maneuvers and leadership, much like chess would later symbolize power and intellect in medieval European courts. While *Hnefatafl* never gained the global traction that chess did, it remains a fascinating window into the minds and leisure activities of the Vikings, offering insight into the cultural evolution of strategic board games.

COMPONENTS

Both the attacker (Raider) player and the defender (the King and his soldiers) are represented by their own set of pieces. The attacker uses the set marked with viking helmets, while the defender uses the king and the soldier set.

The game board represents the "battle zone" and is superimposed with an 11x11 grid of squares used to regulate movement of the game pieces. At the center of the grid is the "Keep" and at the corners of the grid are four "Ports." Along the edges of the board are "beach" areas indicating where the attacking Raider pieces are initially placed. Surrounding the Keep is a fenced area indicating where the defending soldiers are initially placed. Other than their use in the initial setup of the pieces, neither the beach or fenced areas have any effect on play.

MOVEMENT AND COMBAT

Players alternate turns, beginning with the attacking Raider player, to move *one* of their pieces.

MOVEMENT

Pieces are moved orthogonally (side-to-side or up-and-down). Pieces never move diagonally. A piece may move any number of squares, but must stop if it reaches the board edge or moves adjacent to another game pieces. A moving piece may not move through another piece, enemy or friendly.

RESTRICTIONS

There are five squares on the map that are considered "restricted," that have an additional effect upon movement:

Ports: Only the King may enter a Port square (and in so doing, achieves victory). For the purpose of combat against other units, assume these squares to be enemy occupied.

Keep: The square at the center of the board is the King's Keep. Only the King may enter and remain in this square. Other pieces may move *through* the Keep, but may *not stop in it*. If the Keep is vacated by the King, assume it is occupied by an enemy piece for the purpose of combat.

Coast: The squares along the edges of the island are considered "coastline." The water areas adjacent to these squares are considered restricted with regards to capturing the King only.

COMBAT

Combat occurs by surrounding an enemy piece with friendly pieces. When a friendly piece (Raider or Soldier) is moved adjacent to an enemy piece which is already adjacent to a friendly piece

on its opposite side, the enemy piece is immediately removed. Note, however, that voluntarily moving a piece between two enemy pieces does not cause the moving piece's elimination.

Depending on how enemy and friendly pieces are positioned, it is possible to eliminate multiple enemy pieces simultaneously.

Note that restricted terrain acts as if it were occupied by a friendly unit for the purpose of combat, so surrounding an enemy piece with a friendly piece and restricted terrain also eliminates the enemy piece.

In order to capture the king, all four sides of the King's square must be covered by Raider pieces or restricted terrain. Note that once the King exits his Keep, the Keep becomes prohibited terrain and can therefore be used to capture the King.

Note the examples of combat and King capture shown below and on the facing page.

OPTION

When the king enters a position from which he can freely move to a Port space, the defending player must announce "Flight!" (similar to stating "Check!" when playing chess).

ABOUT THIS EDITION

I had never heard of **Viking Chess** until I encountered a copy of the game for sale in Reykjavík, Iceland during my honeymoon (Iceland is a fascinating place to visit, if you've never been). The game sat around for a bit until I finally broke it out to give it a try. It is a truly unique experience that is very, very different from the version of chess we're all used to. The asymmetric style of play makes every game different and challenging, allowing players to try different strategies.

The version of the game that I had, though, was really quite bland as were a lot of the editions I found on-line. After playing the game for a bit, I thought I'd try to create a map that was a little more evocative of what the game is trying to portray (the King desperately trying to get through the advancing hordes of Vikings to safety. So it made sense to turn the corners of the map into ports and give the entire board sort of an *island* feel. I also decided to use an 11x11 square grid as this seemed to be one of the more common grid sizes and provides ample room to maneuver a fair number of pieces. The whole thing provided an nice exercise for my graphic design skills.
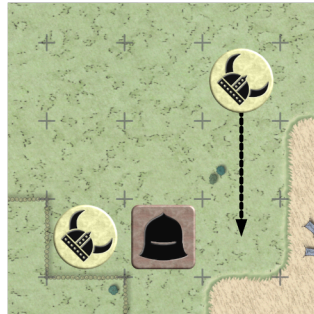
I hope that you enjoy the game!

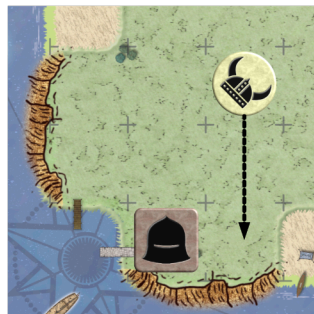*Mike Nagel, 2025*

COMBAT EXAMPLES – SOLDIER CAPTURE

EXAMPLE 1

The soldier piece is eliminated by a raider piece moving adjacent to it, thus surrounding the raider on both sides.

EXAMPLE 2

The soldier piece is eliminated by a raider piece moving adjacent to it, thus surrounding the soldier by a raider to one side and impassible terrain (a Port or Keep) on the other side.
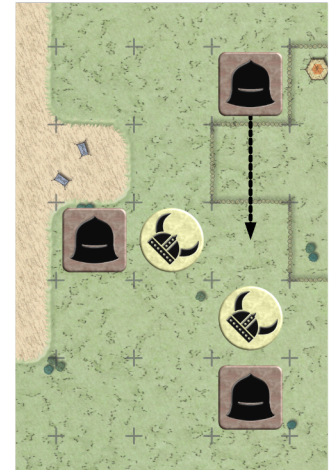

EXAMPLE 3

A double elimination occurs when the moving soldier piece moves adjacent to raider pieces that are adjacent to another soldier piece and impassable terrain (a Port or Keep).
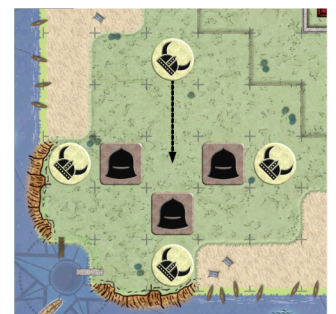

EXAMPLE 4

A double elimination occurs when the moving soldier piece moves adjacent to two raider pieces that are adjacent to other soldier pieces, thus surrounding both simultaneously.

EXAMPLE 5

A triple elimination occurs when three soldier pieces are surrounded by a moving raider piece and either static raider pieces or prohibited terrain (such as an empty Keep).
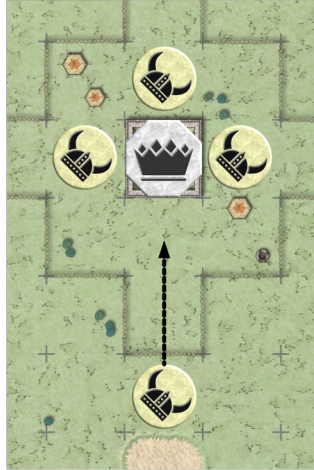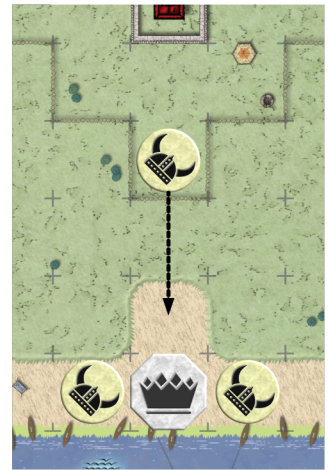
COMBAT EXAMPLES – KING CAPTURE

EXAMPLE 1

The king is captured when a moving raider piece moves adjacent, thus surrounding the king on all sides. This may occur while the king remains within his Keep.
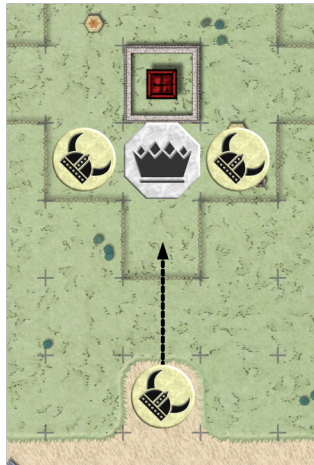
EXAMPLE 3

The king may be captured if trapped by raiders against coastline.

EXAMPLE 4

The king may be captured if trapped by raider pieces or impassible terrain in a fashion that does not allow the king to move. In this example, the moving raider piece completes the encirclement of the king and a soldier piece. Since the king cannot move during the following turn, the king is captured.
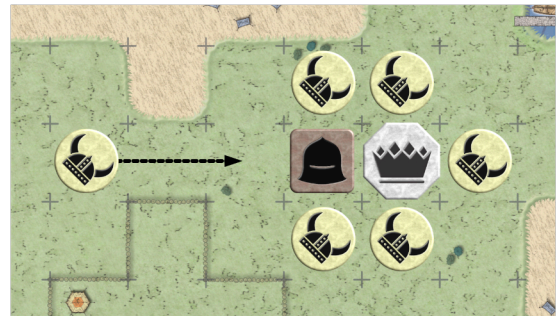
EXAMPLE 2

Once the king leaves his Keep, the Keep is treated as impassible terrain. Thus, the king may be surrounded by both raider pieces as well as the Keep to cause the king's capture.
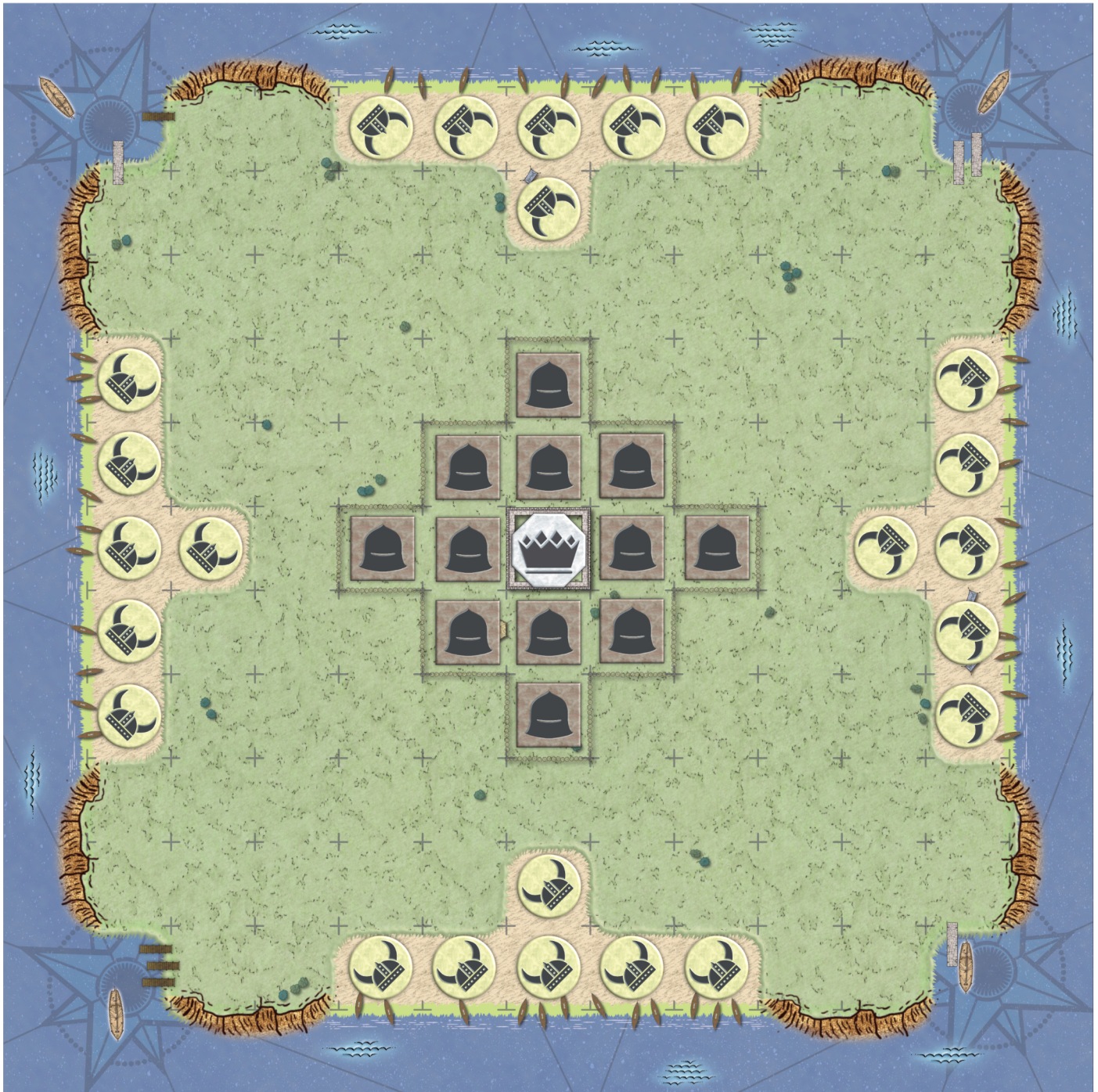
KING ESCAPE AND VICTORY

ROYAL VICTORY

If the king is moved into one of the four ports at the corners of the game board, the king has escaped. Victory!

GAME SETUP EXAMPLE

GAME CREDITS

Game Design: Somebody From A Long Time Ago!

Edition Design: Mike Nagel

Cover Image: ChatGPT

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