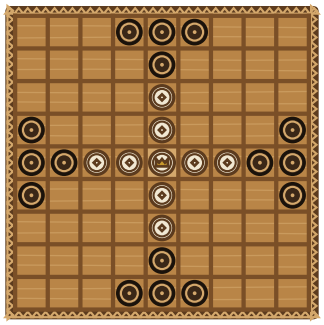
Hnefatafl: The Viking Game

Name _____

Read about the board game the Vikings played.



A 9 x 9 board set up to play: the king (center) and his defenders, surrounded by attackers.

The Vikings came from Scandinavia (today's Norway, Sweden and Denmark). They are famous as sailors, traders and raiders, but at home on long winter nights they played board games. Their favorite was a family of games called tafl, which means "table" or "board." The best known is hnefatafl, the king's game.

Tafl is a battle game for two players, and the two sides are not equal. A king and his small band of defenders start in the middle. A bigger army of attackers surrounds them. The king tries to escape, and the attackers try to trap him.

Archaeologists have found tafl boards and pieces across the Viking world. A wooden board with 49 holes, 7 across and 7 down, was found at Ballinderry in Ireland. A board from the Gokstad Viking ship burial in Norway has a tafl grid on one side and a different game on the other. Sets of gaming pieces, often with one special king piece, have been found in Viking graves.

The Vikings never wrote down the rules. In 1732 the Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus traveled to Lapland, in the far north, and watched the Sami people play a 9 x 9 tafl game called Tablut. He wrote a short description in his diary, and the rules most people play today are based on it.

Questions

1. Where did the Vikings come from?

2. What does the word "tafl" mean?

3. What does the king try to do, and what do the attackers try to do?

4. How do we know anything about the rules today?