From Dróttinn to King

The Role of Hnefatafl as a Descriptor of Late Iron Age Scandinavian Culture

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Abstract

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Nothing invigorates nor expresses a culture quite like a national sport or game. These events could be viewed as outlets functioning not only as a means of entertainment, but as a manner through which competitors strive to sculpt their minds and bodies with the mentality, prowess, and raw strength that epitomise the ideals of the associated culture(s). The sports and games of a culture can lead to the creation and reinforcement of generalisations – thereby ultimately leading to a fabrication and proliferation of stereotypes. However, through careful observation of the rules, cultural ideas, and messages contained within these games, one may be able to see past the stereotypes and gain a glimpse of the true character of the associated culture. Using the relationship between the game of chess and medieval European culture as a comparison, this paper will examine the Iron Age Scandinavian board game of *hnefatafl* in order to dispel misconceptions and suggest an alternative, more constructive, means of describing Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture.
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Limitations in knowledge regarding the Late Iron Age of Scandinavia

Before any attempt at exploring Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture, the limitations of the current knowledge regarding this period must be made explicit in order to produce as transparent a process of analysis as possible. A range of sources including literary, historical, and archaeological will be used in this paper to discuss Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture and the game of *hnefatafl*.

Producing descriptive statements regarding Scandinavian culture prior to the Medieval Period is problematic. This is primarily because prior to the Medieval Period, there was no emphasis placed on producing written records in Scandinavia. While literacy did exist, it was not utilised for historical documentation, as records were kept as part of a rich oral tradition and passed down from one generation to the next (Hedeager 2012, p. 11). These oral traditions would eventually be set down in ink upon parchment, but not until decades and even centuries had passed since the events were said to have occurred. This transition from oral history to written history would result in the Sagas of the Icelanders. The problem with these sources is that, although these sources are highly descriptive and invaluable, they represent pre-Christian traditions described from a Christian worldview (Hedeager 2012, p. 11). Furthermore, the sagas are literary interpretations

and may or may not refer to actual historical events and facts (Kellogg 2001, p. 21). The sagas do indeed offer a very valuable source of information, but the limitations mentioned above must always be kept in mind when applying them to an interpretation of cultural structure.

Although the Scandinavians themselves did not record their own history, other cultures produced records that could be considered historical documentation. Two such examples are the Lindisfarne Chronicles and Ahmad ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus. While both offer descriptions of the Iron Age Scandinavians, these documentations must be recognised as produced from third-person historical accounts at best. The authors of these documents are writing from their own personal perspective – a perspective that did not belong to that of a Scandinavian worldview. This likely created some cultural inaccuracies which must be kept in mind while utilising these sources.

Archaeological sources can also be problematic. Whereas archaeology is able to offer concrete evidence of material culture, it is limited in its ability to produce detailed statements referring to what purpose that material culture may have represented. Therefore, archaeological sources cannot produce answers to questions that deal with the more intangible portions of culture and cultural activities.

By acknowledging these limitations and by making the analysis process as transparent as possible, it is hoped that this paper can demonstrate aspects of Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture in the game of *hnefatafl*.

Defining *hnefatafl*

Hnefatafl refers to a type of *tafl* or table game popular in Scandinavia throughout the majority of the Iron Age. The following section will conduct a review of etymological, literary, historical, and archaeological sources with the aim of defining *hnefatafl*. The exact origins of *tafl* style games in the Scandinavian tradition are difficult to define. A brief etymological study of the words associated with *hnefatafl* is thus a logical starting point. *Tafl*, the root word in *hnefatafl*, was a Germanic word derived from the Latin *tabula* either in reference to a style of game played on a rigid surface or a specific game (Murray 1952, p. 56). This word is believed to have been adopted sometime in the 1st or 2nd centuries CE. Eventually, *tafl* would be expanded to also include reference to a type of game that was played by moving game pieces over the top of a table-like surface. The further evolution of *tafl* as a descriptive word for a table game can be plainly seen in the Poetic Edda, *Völuspá* stanza 8: "*Tefldo í túni, teitir vóro*" (Krause & Slocum 2013) which translates to "in their dwellings at peace, they played at tables" (Bellows 1923, p. 5). The Old Norse word of interest in this line is *tefldo* which Krause & Slocum (2013) describe as the 3rd person plural past tense form of the verb *tefla*, meaning to "play tables" or to "play board games".

Although *tafl* obviously became important as a descriptor for a type of game and the act of playing those games, its etymology also alludes to the actual origins of the Scandinavian-type of *tafl* game. For *tafl* to become a part of the North Germanic lexicon there must have been some sort of cultural exchange with a Latin-speaking culture. Such exchange did occur, owing to the Roman Empire's conquests stretching the Roman borders towards a close proximity with Northern Europe and thus Scandinavia. So influential were the Romans during this period that Scandinavian archaeologists have classified it as the Roman Iron Age of Scandinavia – a period marked by a blending of Roman-Scandinavian motifs in artefacts that would last roughly from 1 CE until around 400 CE (Wilson 1989, p. 16).

At some point during the Roman Iron Age, *tafl* became a form of pastime – a fact that is evident through the inclusion of a *tafl* board within a Roman Iron Age grave site near Funen, Denmark (Murray 1952, p. 58).

The Roman game in reference was a military-themed strategy game called *Ludus Latrunculorum* (here referred to by its other name *latrones*). A favourite amongst soldiers, *latrones* would have been one of the cultural staples brought out to the very edges of the empire (Solberg 2007, p. 265). The combined presence of *latrones* along the Scandinavian frontier and the establishment of trade routes likely helped this game to permeate into Scandinavia. Once adopted by Scandinavian culture, *latrones* was modified into a game that was definitely unique amongst Iron Age Scandinavian culture (a topic that will be explored more thoroughly later). The theory that *latrones* was the predecessor of the *tafl* variants is based on the cultural exchange occurring around this time coupled with several similarities shared between the games. For example, *latrones* and the *tafl* variants are both military-strategy-themed and are played on latticed boards. Furthermore, the movement and capture rules of both games are also nearly identical (for a set of rules for *latrones* see Murray 1952; Parlett 1999). Thus it is logical to theorise that *latrones* was the foundation from which the *tafl* variants were derived sometime around 400 CE.

Tafl was a popular type of game by the Late Iron Age in the Scandinavian world – a fact supported by a variety of archaeological discoveries of *hnefatafl* paraphernalia in sites such as: Sweden at Björkö graves Bj 750 (Fig. 1), & Bj 624 (Fig. 2) (Historiska Museet 2011a; 2011b) and Skamby (Rundkvist & Williams 2008); Norway at Gokstad (Murray 1952, p. 58) and Trondheim (Fig. 3) (Roesdahl & Wilson 1992, p. 378); Scotland at the Brough of Deerness (Orkneyjar 2011); and England (Murray 1952, p. 60). The spread

Fig. 1. Glass *hnefi* and *hunn* pieces from grave Bj 750, Björkö, Sweden. Note the decoration of the *hnefi* and the two colours of *hunn* pieces. Photo by the Swedish History Museum, Stockholm.

Fig. 2. Bone *hnefatafl* pieces found in grave Bj 624, Björkö, Sweden. The *hnefi* piece is marked by a cap of bronze. Photo by C. Åhlin, Swedish History Museum Stockholm.

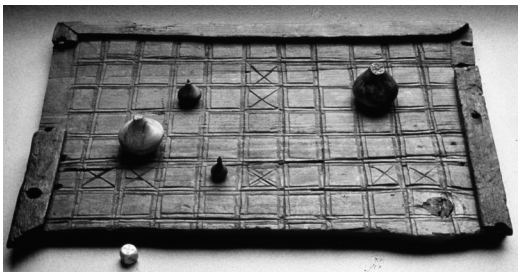

Fig. 3. Wooden *hnefatafl* board (N29723) from Trondheim; the game pieces are made from walrus ivory. Photo by P. Fredriksen, NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet.

of this game outside of the Scandinavian peninsula likely resulted from *tafl* being brought along as a form of entertainment. Gradually, *tafl* was introduced and adopted by the locals coming into contact with the Scandinavians. These cultures changed *tafl* into their own version (similar to how Scandinavians adapted *latrones*), thereby creating several *tafl* variants unique to specific col-onies – *tawlbwrdd* in Wales (Murray 1952, p. 63), *alea evangelii* in England (Murray 1952, p. 61), *brandub* in Ireland (Murray 1952, p. 59), and *tablut* in Lapland (Murray 1952, p. 63).

By 1000 CE, *tafl* and its variations had been well established through the Scandinavian world. By this period however, foreign table games from outside of Scandinavia began to gain a following. The issue was that these games were also referred to as *tafl*. Such an ambiguous naming system for a variety of unique games was problematic. Therefore, around this time an effort was made to differentiate between the varieties of table games. This was accomplished by attaching a differentiating prefix to each *tafl*. Chess, tables, and fox games (all games of foreign origin to Scandinavia) were thereby referred to in Old Norse as *skáktafl*, *kvatrutafl*, and *halatafl* respectively (Murray 1952, pp. 56 f.). Scandinavian *tafl* was also distinguished, becoming known as *hnefatafl* (Murray 1952, p. 60).

Rules of *hnefatafl*

The currently accepted reconstruction of the rules of *hnefatafl* comes from Murray (1952). The reconstruction he developed was based on a number of archaeological and historical sources that considered all variants of Scandinavian *hnefatafl*. His work shows that there is a definite congruence between the variants of *hnefatafl*. The parallels are so strong in fact, that the *hnefatafl* variants could more accurately be described as regional rules rather than entirely separate games (Murray 1952, pp. 55 ff.). Although it is neither an authentic nor necessarily complete set of *hnefatafl* rules, Murray's reconstruction is an adequate model representing this game. Therefore it can be utilised in the exploration of Iron Age Scandinavian culture.

Murray's reconstruction of *hnefatafl* is as follows. Two players compete against one another. The playing field is often a board latticed 11 × 11 or 13 × 13; however depending on the region, the lattice may instead be 18 × 18, 9 × 9, or 7 × 7. One player plays the attacking team while the other plays the evading team. There is a 2:1 ratio of pawn-like playing pieces, referred to as *hunn*, in favour of the attacking team at set-up. The evading team has an additional piece called the *hnefi*, a sort of king-piece, that starts in the centre of the board called the "throne" or *konakis*. The evading team then place their *hunn* pieces around the *hnefi* in a diamond pattern. The attacking team's *hunn* start in four equal groups situated along the perimeter of the board (Fig. 4). All game pieces move like the chess rook, and captures are made when the two adjacent vertical or horizontal squares around a *hunn* piece are occupied by the opponent. A player may choose to move a piece of her/his own between two opposing pieces without penalty of it being captured. The *hnefi* can only be captured after being surrounded on all four sides. If the *hnefi* is captured, the attacking team wins. If the *hnefi* escapes to one of the four corners of the board, the evading team wins (Murray 1952, pp. 63 f.).

Describing Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture

Describing the social and cultural structure of Late Iron Age Scandinavia is a particularly difficult task due to the lack of historical documentation. A plausible hypothesis of this sys-

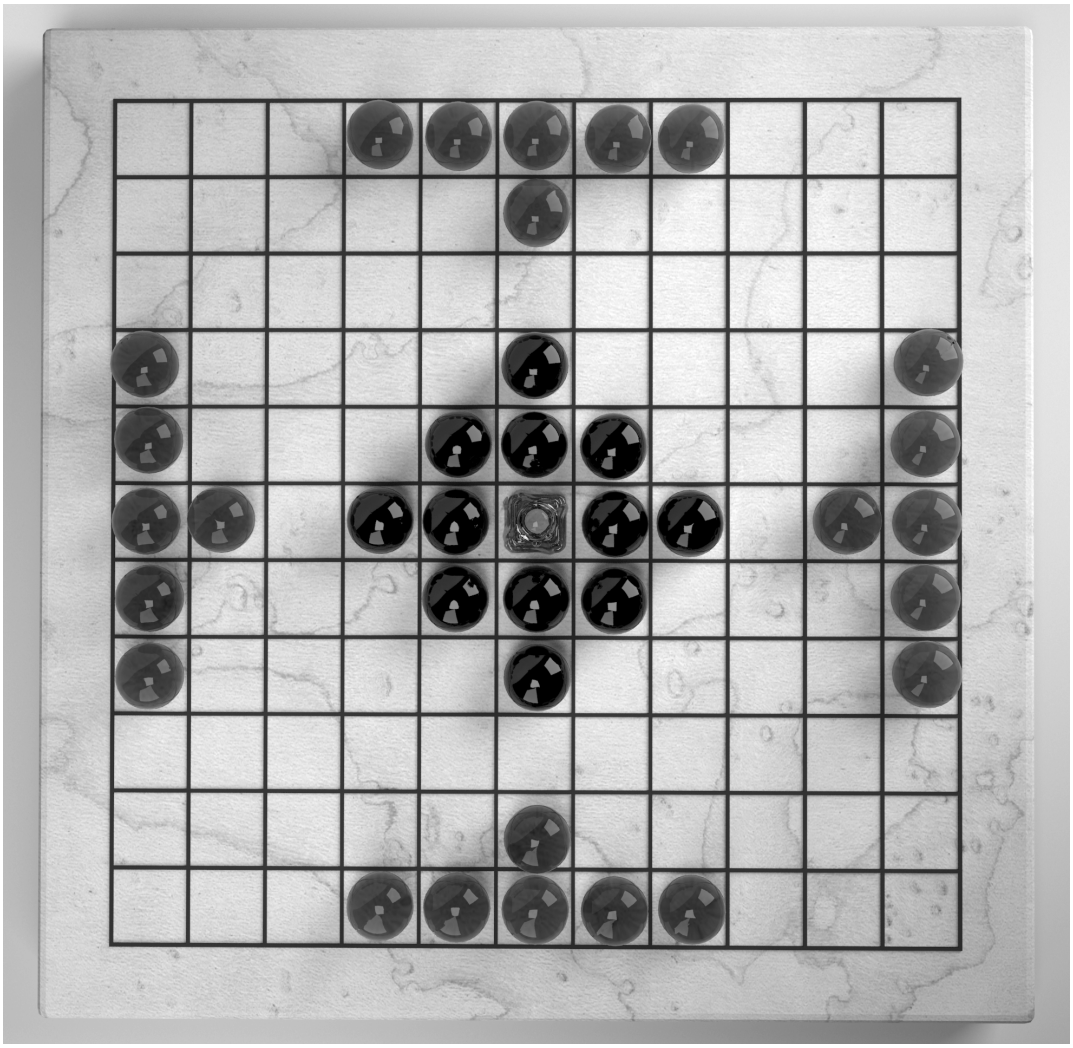

Fig 4. *Hnefatafl* set-up on an 11 × 11 board, the *hnefi* is in the centre. Image by J. J. L. Kimball.

tem is based on apparent kings ruling over a group of named people. The specific reference is from Jordanes, who writes that a Norwegian king named Roduulf ruled over the *Ranii* people (Brink 2012a, p. 24). Brink hypothesizes that Scandinavian societal structure was similar to that of Anglo-Saxon England or early Ireland where society was a kind of stratified hierarchy with some form of leader at the top and a series of societal levels that divide the free peoples, semi-free peoples, and slaves (Brink 2012a, p. 24).

Other scholars appear to argue along these lines as well. Thurston (2001, pp. 115 ff.) provides a more descriptive version of the aforementioned hierarchy. According to Thurston (2001, p. 115) the entirety of Scandinavia was divided into a series of rural bands known in Old Norse as a *drótt*. These *drótts* were based not on family or lineages (as is typical of a monarchy), but rather on the bonds between warriors and their leaders. Therefore a *drótt*

was a form of political hierarchy where the position of a man was determined by his *metnaðr*, or social qualities and abilities (Solberg 1985, p. 69). It was then through these same qualities that an individual could have the role of leader bestowed upon him. The leader of a *drótt* was given the Old Norse title of *dróttinn* literally meaning 'leader' or 'lord' (Slocum & Krause 2013). In this sense, any warrior was capable of securing the position of *dróttinn* provided that he was elevated to this status by the consensus of his peers (Thurston 2001, pp. 115 f.) and had a suitable degree of economic wealth (Solberg 1985, p. 69).

Below the *dróttinn* were the intermediate elite warriors; a group that would be defined further in the Early Viking Age as consisting of the *thegn* (older warrior), *drengr* (younger warrior), *skipari* (captain of a high-status ship), and *himthiki* (lowest-ranking elite warrior) (Thurston 2001, p. 117). Several *drótts* could together elect to have one particular *dróttinn* represent the collective as an overlord; however it must be stressed that this was intended as a temporary measure. The title for an overlord varied depending on his characteristics – for example, a young, ambitious overlord was referred to as *dróttinn* whereas an older, more experienced overlord was referred to as *frea* (Thurston 2001, p. 117). It is important to recognise that all lower tiers – collectively called the *folc* – were expected to uphold and defend the laws of their culture (Thurston 2001, p. 117). If an overlord or a *dróttinn* was suspected of abusing his position and power, the cultural expectation was that the *folc* would forcibly remove that individual from the position of power – a key distinction that separates the *drótt* system from a monarch system.

A somewhat similar social structure was prevalent in the Saga Age of Iceland that prevailed from 870 CE until just after 1000. Although perhaps not as finely defined as the above description, the similarities between the two are easily distinguishable. According to Kellogg (2001, p. 31), the social structure of Iceland was characteristically rural in character. A few powerful men were considered to be leaders, referred to in the plural as *höfðingjar*. Beneath these men came the free farmers, the *bændur*, who were dependent on the *höfðingjar*. Kellogg (2001, p. 31) mentions that there appeared to have been somewhat of a disparity within the *bændur* group: while all *bændur* were able to hire help for their farms and own slaves, it appears that some *bændur* owned massive farms with 50–70 men working for them and over a hundred people residing at the farm. Such locations could indeed be termed small farming villages and clearly describe a variation in power between individual *bændur*.

The concept of honour is also an important theme in the sagas. In terms of protagonist representation, honour was the most important because it drove that individual with a "powerful desire for approbation, good reputation, [and] distinction" (Kellogg 2001, p. 32). Honour furthermore functioned to encourage the foundation of bonds between individuals and ensured their continued maintenance. These bonds ranged from kinship (whether blood or foster), to marriage, friendship, and political alliances (Kellogg 2001, p. 32). The concept of honour closely parallels the relationship between the *dróttinn* and the *folc* that was discussed previously. In Iron Age Scandinavia culture, honour is clearly considered as a quality of the warrior class of individuals. Kellogg, however, points out that honour was also represented in the general social structure of Scandinavian society as all members from warriors to farmers governed their actions bearing this in mind (Kellogg 2001, p. 33).

Games as descriptions of past cultures

Before exploring the culture of Late Iron Age Scandinavia through the game of *hnefatafl*, it is important to understand how a game can function as a descriptor of its associated culture. In order to establish this connection and the role it can play within cultural research, the game of chess has been selected as an analogue. It must be clarified, however, that *hnefatafl* and chess are definitely not the same game – despite a few parallels in game design, a short chronological overlap, and colloquial references that describe *hnefatafl* as "Viking Chess". *Hnefatafl* is a uniquely Scandinavian game that precedes chess. The important concept to recognise is that these games function as vessels containing information about their respective cultures. As a means to an end, and as the more prolific, well-documented, and well-researched of the two games, chess is the logical platform upon which a process of analysis can be conducted on its associated culture of origin – a process that can then be applied to *hnefatafl* and Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture.

To begin the analysis of medieval European culture through chess, a brief history of the origins of the game is necessary. Chess likely descends from a military-strategy game from India called *chaturanga*, which may have been introduced to Western Europe as early as the 8th century CE (Hooper & Whyld 1992, p. 173) and by 1000 CE had thoroughly penetrated Europe and its culture (Hooper & Whyld 1992, p. 173; Vale 2001, p. 171; Adams 2006, p. 2). What makes chess interesting is that its predecessor underwent a process of assimilation whereby it was transformed from a foreign game into one that would be familiar within medieval European society (Hooper & Whyld 1992, pp. 173 f.; Vale 2001, pp. 173 f.; Adams 2006, p. 2). What is crucial to understand is that the result was not simply a transformation of appearance and rules, but rather an imbuement of culture and symbology into the actual game itself. Thus the structure and appearance of chess are reflections of important cultural values and can therefore be analysed to understand more deeply the medieval European society that created the game of chess.

In terms of rules, chess is actually quite similar to its predecessor from the Middle East, as it retains nearly all of the original rules. The only two exceptions concern the bishop and queen-type game pieces. Originally the bishop/judge-type piece, while still able to move diagonally, was limited in the number of possible squares it could move (only being allowed to jump the diagonally adjacent square to land on the following square). The queen-type piece, on the other hand, was even more limited in that it could only move diagonally and only by one square per turn (Adams 2006, p. 2).

These important changes become more apparent when they are paired directly with the alterations in appearance. Originally the bishop/judge was represented as an elephant and the queen as a male counsellor (Yalom 2004, p. xiii; Adams 2006, p. 3). Adams (2006, p. 3) further notes that the knight piece was also changed, gaining an anthropomorphic appearance as either a knight or a horseman (cf. Caldwell *et al*. 2009, p. 63), but in most modern pieces today it seems to have reverted back to being represented simply as a horse's head. Regardless, these changes definitely reflected the social roles of medieval culture in Europe (Adams 2006, p. 3). When coupled with the changes in the rules, something more interesting becomes apparent. First, the bishop/judge piece wields more power by being able to move any number of squares in one diagonal direction provided there are no pieces to obstruct the movement (Yalom 2004, p. 17). Second, and most notable, is that

the queen was allowed to enjoy the greatest freedom of movement: all directions and no restrictions on number of squares in a move, hindered only by obstructing pieces and the edges of the board (Yalom 2004, p. XIII).

The crucial concept here is that these changes are clear indicators of the status that individuals holding these offices enjoyed. Bishops and judges obviously occupied prominent positions in medieval society, and as such these chess pieces were given more power by increasing their range on the board. The queen piece, on the other hand, appears to have been altered the most, changing from the king's male counsellor/advisor to his life companion, the queen. Yalom (2004, pp. xiii ff.) points out that the queen's power on the chessboard reflects the role and status of a medieval European queen in four unique ways: first, the pairing of a king and queen together reflects the Christian concept of monogamous marriage (2004, p. 17); second, the queen was often left in charge of the kingdom whenever the king was either absent or incapable of ruling (2004, pp. 21 f.); third, the queen actually expected to have some political power, especially considering that she was often wed in order to obtain power, establish relations between realms, and/or to secure foreign territories (2004, pp. 11 f.); and fourth, the queen was even occasionally expected to be present alongside her husband on the field of battle and even, when necessary, lead her king's men into battle (2004, p. 11). It is fair to state that the queen piece in chess embodies these attributes extremely well.

Of course, changes to the rules and appearance were not the only way that chess became deeply ingrained within medieval European culture. Chess was so important that several allegorists began using it as a tool to help indoctrinate members of European society – offering instruction on the roles of each member of a given society from the king down to the common farmer. One allegorist who has drawn a considerable amount of attention from modern scholars was an Italian man – Jacobus de Cessolis – who wrote *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium ac popularium super ludo scachorum* (The Book of the Morals of Men and the Duties of Nobles and Commoners, on the Game of Chess). Adams (2006, p. 4) describes the purpose of the *Liber* as being a manual used to groom young heirs for ascent to the throne using chess as an analogy. Cessolis instructs that although the king piece was the most important of all the game pieces, the other pieces moved independently of the king piece and could therefore affect the eventual outcome of the game itself. This book therefore uses chess as an analogy to teach an important lesson: it is the combined effort of all pieces on a team, rather than just the king, that empowers it for victory over any opposing power.

This concept, where a cohesive effort resulting from all of the game pieces performing their designated roles could be successful in achieving victory, was Cessolis' clever analogy for medieval society in general, whereby each member's actions could make an impact on the success of the society as a whole (Adams 2006, p. 158). This is significant as it marks a departure from the state-as-body model of governance which viewed the head of state as having direct command over the actions of the body of subjects under it. In its place was the above concept that is viewed as the body politic, where each individual must understand her/his role in the society and perform that role for the benefit and success of that society (Adams 2006, pp. 19 f.). Thus, pawns would eventually no longer be viewed simply as fodder on the chessboard, but rather as filling a specific role in society (Vale 2001, p. 173). In other words, Cessolis' *Liber* worked towards helping all members of medieval society, rich and poor, to understand more profoundly their position and value in that society. Cessolis drove this concept further by creating per-

sonas for the pieces. Book 2 of the *Liber* describes the back row (nobility) pieces whereas Book 3 describes the front row (commoner) pieces. The common peoples' trades are visualised in each of the eight pawns from left to right as follows:

> First pawn [farmers]
> Second pawn [smiths and carpenters]
> Third pawn [notaries and wool-workers])
> Fourth pawn [merchants and money changers]
> Fifth pawn [doctors and apothecaries]
> Sixth pawn [tavern keepers]
> Seventh pawn [toll keepers and custodians of the city]
> Eighth pawn [wastrels, players, and messengers] (Adams 2006, p. 17)

Furthermore, the common pieces are also visually described as being associated with their specific tools of trade; for example smiths holding hammers and innkeepers offering food (Adams 2006, p. 36). Cessolis also describes how the starting positions of all chess pieces could be viewed as representative of the actual structure in medieval society. For example, all members of the society are dependent on the farmer (pawn 1) for sustenance. To ensure that the crops are distributed where they are needed, the king's vicar (rook 1) is situated in immediate proximity to the farmer. However, the farmer also requires protection, which is thus afforded by the knight that is also located in the immediate vicinity. These interconnections are continuous and aid in describing medieval society (for a more detailed description of these interconnections, see Adams 2006, p. 36). It is crucial to understand that the purpose behind the changes in rules and appearance, as well as the visualisation of stratified social class structures in the actual chess pieces themselves, directly results from what Adams states as stemming from a European desire to see themselves, their social structure, and their culture metaphorically and figuratively visualised in the board game of chess and its gaming pieces. Medieval chess, therefore, can be used as a tool for exploring and describing medieval European culture.

Thus far, it has been clearly demonstrated that a game belonging to one culture can be used to comment on the important values and norms of that society. Moreover, not only are games culturally imbued – a trait that is exploited by that same culture to teach and reinforce those values and norms – but they are also competitive activities that encourage participants to engage their opponent to the best of her/his ability in order to secure the winner's prize. Such promotion of skill and reward for winning is also similar to physical sports – another form of gaming that is present in every society. Therefore, games (whether referring to chess, football, etc.) must be considered as part of a larger sphere of *cultural activities*, that in turn can be utilised in the exploration and understanding of their host culture. It is through this method that Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture may be viewed through the game of *hnefatafl*.

Discovering Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture through *hnefatafl*

When the same methods used to peer into medieval European cultures are applied to *hnefatafl*, a portrait of Late Iron Age Scandinavian society can be developed. Disregarding the *hnefi* piece for a moment, there is absolutely nothing to distinguish between the game pieces in *hnefatafl*, apart of course from their respective team colours. This uniformity between the *hunn* pieces could be indicative of a specific trait in Iron Age Scandinavian social hierarchy: that all free men were equal amongst others within the *folc*. The *hnefi* on the other hand, seems to hold a very promi-

nent status amongst the *hunn*, however. This fact is blatantly obvious considering that the *hnefi* is the easiest piece on the game board to identify owing to some form of distinctive feature (e.g. size, colour, ornamentation) that sets it apart from the *hunn* pieces. Instead, the *hnefi* seems to be considerably elevated in status compared to the other game pieces. Although this disparity will be further explored below, it does appear to agree with the stratified social hierarchy defined above where the *hnefi* clearly holds some position of power like the *dróttinn*, while the *hunn* pieces appear to represent the warrior class as a part of the *folc*. Not only is the presence of two different social classes evident in *hnefatafl*, it also seems to echo the societal structure that is apparent in the sagas.

Despite the apparent difference regarding social status represented in *hnefatafl*, the *hnefi* piece is bound by the exact same rules as the *hunn*. For example, the *hnefi* must move just like the *hunn* and is able to assist in the capture of enemy pieces. One could take this a step further and state that the *hnefi* plays a major role in determining its own fate, unlike the king in chess (for example) which is relatively weak and dependent on the other fifteen pieces in his army. This concept closely mirrors the role of the *dróttinn* who would have been expected to stand alongside his men in battle and thereby contribute toward the fate of himself and his men (Thurston 2001, p. 115). Therefore, the fact that the *hnefi* piece is bound by the same rules and laws as the *hunn* pieces (and is largely responsible for defending itself) appears again to be a reference to the equality of all men – especially while engaged in combat on the battlefield.

Another feature of *hnefatafl* that is reflective of Late Iron Age Scandinavian society is the representation of conflict in the game itself where the central "throne square" (*konakis*) functions not only as the simple starting point for the *hnefi* piece, but also as a significant cultural analogy. As explored previously, Scandinavia at this time was not characterised by large kingdoms, but instead by smaller local chiefdoms. At the centre of the chiefdom was the *dróttinn*'s longhouse. In *hnefatafl*, the *hnefi* resides on a central spot with his men surrounding him in a diamond fashion. This could be interpreted as the *dróttinn* and his men residing within the *dróttinn*'s longhouse with the attacking force on the doorstep. According to the sagas, if a man was convicted of a crime and punished by having his land taken from him, it happened occasionally that an individual would gather a group of loyal men and make a last stand from within his longhouse (Kellogg 2001, pp. 559 f.). *Hnefatafl* certainly could reflect such a scenario based on the goals and set-up of the game.

The final aspect to be examined is what the actual act of playing *hnefatafl* suggests. Like chess, *hnefatafl* is irrefutably a game of tactical and strategic thought. This characteristic is important as it takes skill to develop and implement military strategy and tactics when engaging in war. Such matters undeniably require careful forethought and preparation, while at the same time it takes a sharp eye and quick mind to come up with viable reactions to events as the situation changes minute by minute and sometimes even second by second. Although the Vikings were popularly known for their physical ability in battle, wars are not simply won by brute strength alone. The presence of a game like *hnefatafl* suggests, then, that Late Iron Age Scandinavians were certainly aware of this fact (Whittaker 2006, pp. 106 f.). Therefore it is logical to view *hnefatafl* like chess (cf. Whittaker 2006, p. 106): as a game that celebrated, taught, and refined military-relevant methods of strategic and tactical thinking – a set of components that were highly regarded in Late Iron Age Scandinavian society.

Until now, this analysis has overlooked a seemingly critical inconsistency regarding the

hnefi in *hnefatafl*: if the *hnefi* is based on the *dróttinn*, then why does he dishonour his social obligations to his men in favour of attempting to preserve his life through escape? After all, behaviour such as this does not seem to have been characteristic based on the societal and cultural description of Iron Age Scandinavia. The *dróttinn* was expected to fight and die alongside his men if necessary. This code of ethics was so incredibly important that it was directly written into their mythology and views of the afterlife, ensuring that warriors adhered to their culture's expectations with utmost ferventness (Thurston 2001, p. 115). Even some convicts described in the sagas, who amassed their closest friends together to defend a farm from being divided up as legal punishment, seem to conform to this societal code of honour (Thorsson 2001, p. 600).

How then can the highly anomalous objective of the defending team in *hnefatafl* be explained regarding Scandinavian culture? As mentioned above, *hnefatafl* owes its development to both contact and conflict between the Roman Empire and Germanic tribes of Europe. What is interesting is that, when examined closely, the overall conflict within *hnefatafl* is highly reflective of two events that were common during this period: regicide and exploitation. Germanic tribes were known to commit regicide whenever they felt that their leader was holding on to power too long, attempting to increase it, or began to consider himself as being preeminent compared to other warriors. When a leader began to exhibit such characteristics, the culturally acceptable course of action was the removal of his power through death (Thurston 2001, p. 118). In addition, during this period the Romans often sought to exploit this cultural behaviour for their own ends. The Germanic tribes had inflicted great casualties on the Roman troops when Emperor Augustus attempted to press the Roman conquest into Northern Europe. After the failed conquest, the Romans switched their strategy and began to encourage infighting between the Germanic tribes with the intent of allowing them to kill each other off (Thurston 2001, p. 118). What is important to note is that some tribal leaders were historically documented as having allied themselves with the Roman Empire in order to increase their power by securing help in killing their rivals (Thurston 2001, p. 118).

Utilising these two historically documented events, an explanation can be developed to explain the seemingly anomalous goal of the defending team. The scenario that can be painted is one where the *hnefi* piece represents a *dróttinn* that has become corrupt with power and has perhaps even sought connections with the enemy in order to strengthen his hand against his rivals. The corruption of power is represented by the overt display of differentiation between the *hnefi* piece and all other pieces on the board. The attacking force could then either be a rival group, or members from within the *dróttinn's* group seeking to dispose of the *dróttinn* and his power. The *dróttinn*, having his life threatened, then rallies the men still loyal to him and engages in battle alongside them. Unknown to those men however, the corrupt *dróttinn* continually seeks an opportunity to slip quickly away from the battle instead of making the honourable and socially moral choice of fighting to the death with the men loyal to him. This motif can clearly be interpreted from *hnefatafl*'s rules and goals.

If this indeed was the intent behind the conflict in *hnefatafl*, then it certainly would serve as an important descriptor not only of what was important in Germanic and, later, Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture, but also of what was loathed. *Hnefatafl*, in this role, would function to reinforce the notions of equality amongst warriors through the representation of all attacking pieces being equal. Although a representation of the *dróttinn* piece is likely included amongst the attack-

ing pieces, Germanic/Viking culture dictates that the leader be considered as an equal with the warriors, the *folc*, under his command (Thurston 2001, p. 115) and so his game piece is thus left unmarked. At the same time, the conflict in *hnefatafl* would function as a warning to dissuade the players from falling prey to the corruption that power can bring. The *dróttinn* piece is clearly not displayed as an equal to the other pieces on his team. Furthermore, the corruption has seemingly also caused him to abandon his cultural obligations to fight alongside his warriors whether or not victory was a possibility. Instead, his goal is to avoid death in battle in favour of sneaking off in order to secure self-preservation. In short, the attacking team can thereby be seen as embodying everything that is highly regarded in Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture, whereas the defending team – with particular emphasis on the *dróttinn* piece – can be seen as the embodiment of those traits that are despised. Therefore, the attacking team's actions symbolically represent the expulsion of the negative traits from society – either by chasing the *dróttinn* piece from the board or, preferably, completing the culturally sanctioned regicide by capturing it.

Hnefatafl shows that these individuals were very much capable of thinking in concise, methodological ways – meaning that they approached war with the intent to win and not necessarily to enjoy it purely as a risky blood-sport. Instead, the overall strategy shows that the Late Iron Age Scandinavians not only planned attacks designed to limit their opponent's ability to survive – they were also training in preparation to defend against that very situation should they be unfortunate enough to find themselves in it. It is conceivable, then, as was the case with medieval European chess, that these skills were so valued by the society that the *folc* and *dróttinn* classes were likely encouraged to partake in a game of *hnefatafl* once in a while. Doing so would not only help to establish bonds between people, it would effectively work towards integrating all members into society while reinforcing Late Iron Age Scandinavia's most highly celebrated cultural traits. *Hnefatafl* consequently stands as a testament against some of the stereotypes prevalent today, especially the view that the Late Iron Age Scandinavians were an unlawful, bloodthirsty people that randomly pillaged villages for glory, blood, treasure, and slaves.

From pagan *dróttinn* to Christian king

Beginning in the 8th century CE, Scandinavia started to experience an increase in contact with the Christian world – particularly with Europe. This contact marked the beginning of the end for *hnefatafl* and other unique Scandinavian cultural practices, beliefs, and activities. Of these changes in culture, perhaps the most obvious effect was the conversion of Scandinavians from pagans to Christians; however, this was only part of a larger collection of processes termed "Europeanisation" (Brink 2012b, pp. 622 ff.). In any case, it is irrefutable that this process effectively wrenched Scandinavia out of the Late Iron Age to then thrust it into the thick of the multicultural European Middle Ages. Of course the transformation of Scandinavian culture into a European medieval culture did not happen immediately. This process instead occurred over several centuries, beginning first with the social elites who became Christian kings and, through a combination of inspiration and coercion, further spread the cultural changes to those in their realms (Brink 2012b, pp. 622 ff.).

This Europeanisation of Scandinavia indisputably contributed to the demise of *hnefatafl*. This occurred primarily as a result of novel cultural activities becoming adopted by Scandinavians at this point. The variety of

new cultural activities became so popular that they were even referenced in Scandinavian cultural history: chess, for example, is mentioned in the sagas and *halatafl* is even depicted on a runestone (Fig. 5). Of these, chess represented the most allegorical reflection of medieval society and would eventually become the most prolific and highly-praised game of the medieval period. Conversely, the popularity of *hnefatafl* and its variants began to decline – although how quickly the decline in popularity occurred is difficult to determine exactly. Some historical sources describe *tafl* variants several centuries after the medieval period had begun in Scandinavia – *tawlbwrdd* in the 1230s and again in 1587, and *tablut* in 1732 are the notable examples (Murray 1952, p. 63). Unfortunately, there appear to have been no major attempts to document the Scandinavian *tafl* games, most likely because people were more preoccupied with chess. Archaeological sources involving *hnefatafl* also appear to dwindle in number around this period. It is likely that the decline in *hnefatafl* artefacts resulted in large part from the abandonment of pagan burial rituals. When Scandinavians converted to Christianity, they also adopted its ascetic burial customs which forbade the inclusion of grave goods alongside the interred. Outside of burials, a limited number of *hnefatafl* boards have been found dating into the medieval period (eg. a few stone *hnefatafl* boards have been found associated with several monasteries and within contexts dating to the 13th century CE (Caldwell *et al*. 2009, p. 180)). Thus it can at least be stated that there is some archaeological evidence for *hnefatafl* persisting at this time. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to find evidence of *hnefatafl* in the transition period between pagan and Christian, despite the beginnings of written documentation in Scandinavia.

Fortunately, there is one other way that archaeology can reveal evidence of *hnefatafl* persisting within this transition period. Remnants of the old Scandinavian culture can clearly be seen in chess pieces from this transitional phase – specifically those pieces found in the Lewis hoard. Discovered on the Isle of Lewis in the Hebrides in Scotland, the chessmen are one of the most stunning examples of craftsmanship from the early medieval period in Scandinavia. It is stated that these pieces were probably crafted in Trondheim, Norway in the 13th century CE (Caldwell *et al*. 2009, p. 190) and owned by someone of high status and with an appreciation for board games. The Lewis hoard set contains enough chess

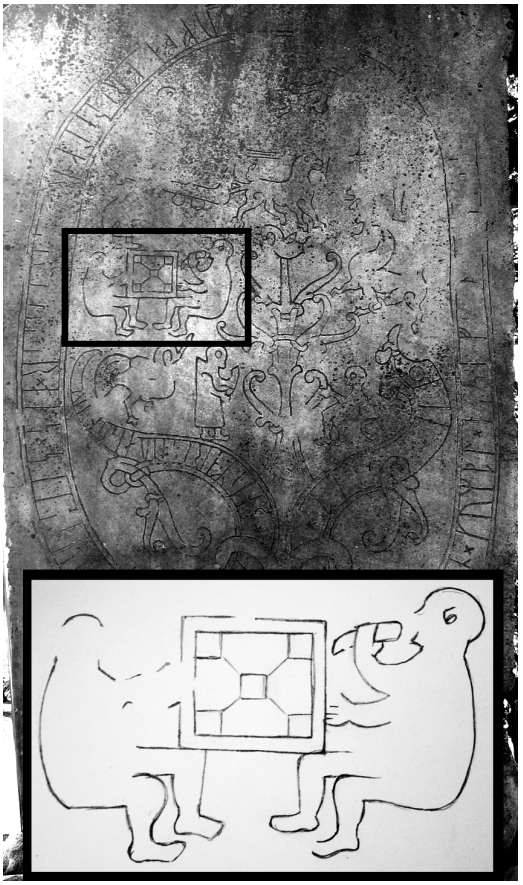

Fig 5. Ockelbo runestone showing two individuals playing a board game (most likely *halatafl*). Photo by Berig, Wikimedia Commons. Drawing (inset) by K. J. J. Havana.

pieces to represent at most four individual sets. Furthermore, some pieces (specifically the cylindrical pieces) may have been used in both chess and *hnefatafl*. According to Caldwell *et al*. (2009, p. 179) the concept of duality in board games was actually preferable, especially considering that the transition period between the Iron Age and the Middle Ages spanned at least two hundred years.

The concept of duality can be seen elsewhere in the Lewis chessmen. A few specific pieces from this set have been referred to as depicting the berserker type of warrior from Iron Age pagan Scandinavia. These pieces are linked to the berserker of Scandinavia primarily because they appear to be gnawing on their shields (Fig. 6) – a trait that was unique to this brand of warrior (Price 2002, pp. 374). Caldwell *et al*. (2009, p. 179) argue however that these pieces are not berserkers because the figures are shown to be clad in mail shirts. The other attribute of the Scandinavian berserker was that they entered battle either naked or at least with no protective armour. Instead of referring to them as berserkers, the shield-gnawing is instead suggested to be a reference to the slow pace of chess (Caldwell *et al*. 2009, p. 179). Although this could indeed be a plausible explanation, there is a clear defence for the interpretation as berserkers clad in mail shirts: duality and transition. Caldwell *et al*. (2009, pp. 178 ff.) have very clearly shown that the Lewis chessmen are an example of the transitional period between the Iron Age and the Middle Ages. Furthermore, these pieces have been demonstrated to originate from Trondheim, part of the Scandinavian peninsula. Therefore, it could be argued that these pieces do in fact depict berserkers – but only that they are in a transition stage themselves. Perhaps these berserkers represent a sort of taming of the barbaric pagan Scandinavian warrior, a documentation of the process by which he is being refined into the sort of classic rank-and-file foot solider of the European Middle Ages. Yes, the berserker may be clad in a mail shirt, but his expression gives away his heritage. The berserker pieces may therefore be interpreted as representing the transition from Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture into part of a collective Medieval European culture – a depiction that is captured and visible in game pieces that are a product of a culture experiencing that very same transformation.

Fig. 6. Two "berserker" pieces from the Lewis hoard. Note that both are gnawing on their shields. Photo by J.J.L. Kimball.

Conclusion

Clearly *hnefatafl* does indeed serve as an indicator of what Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture was like, just as medieval chess functions to describe its own associated cultures.

Although it could benefit from much more testing, this method has the potential to become an important tool for exploring cultures through their material and literary remains. Through such studies, archaeologists have the ability to paint a clearer picture that will undoubtedly help to dispel common misconceptions and negative stereotypes – that are at best erroneous and at worst detrimental – of cultures that were considerably more sophisticated and unique than is commonly believed. *Hnefatafl*, when analysed with this method, arguably illustrates many aspects of Late Iron Age Scandinavia, including land divisions, societal stratification, military capabilities, and championed cultural traits. Most importantly, this game stands as an indication that these people were highly competent and organised groups of individuals. Therefore, by using the relationship between cultural activities and their cultures, archaeologists not only have the ability to explore and understand an ancient society from a different perspective, but also to share this knowledge with the general public in a language that requires little or no translation. The analysis of *hnefatafl* accordingly provides a constructive description that can be used as a unique form of insight into Late Iron Age Scandinavian culture from its pagan *dróttinn* through until its Christian kings, and beyond.

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