

9th Century Glass Game Pieces

(For the playing of *Hnefatafl* or *Tablut*)

By Lady Arganhell verch Briauc

In this project I have recreated a set of lampworked glass game pieces from the 9th century, suitable for playing *Tablut* or *Hnefatafl*.

In the material I have found, there seems to be confusion about exactly which game ‘*Hnefatafl*’ or ‘The Viking Game’ actually refers to. *Hnefatafl* or *Tafl* was known in Scandinavia before 400 AD and was carried to Viking colonies such as Iceland, Greenland, Ireland, Wales and Britain, before it was replaced by Chess in the 11th and 12th Centuries.¹ *Tafl* in Old Norse means ‘table’ and by the end of the Viking period most probably referred to a variety of board games (including Chess – *Skak-tafl*).² *Hnefatafl* was often mentioned in the Sagas, and was a respected intellectual pursuit.³

In descriptions of *Hnefatafl* in the Sagas, the King and defenders are dark, while the attackers are the lighter colour.⁴ This matches with the principal example I have used as a reference, a set up lampworked glass pieces found in grave # 750 in Bjorko, Sweden. The set consists of 25 hemispherical pieces (aprox. 25-27mm in diameter), 17 in light blue green glass, and eight in opaque dark green glass, as well as a stylized figure of a man in green glass. Assuming this set includes a spare attacker, it is consistent with pieces used to play the game of *Tablut*.⁵



However, in the rules of *Tablut*, as documented by Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist in 1732, the King is Swedish, and therefore ‘Blonde’ and the attackers are dark Muscovites.⁶ Some references assume that the regional variations of *Tafl*, such as *Tawl-bwrdd* (Wales), and *Alea Evangelii* (Saxon England) were differentiated by the numbers of squares on the board (and therefore playing pieces)⁷. Other suggest, that as some regions are known to use boards of varying sizes – i.e. the Welsh texts describe a 9x9 and a 11x11 version, that *hnefatafl* may have been a game with non uniform rules and board size.⁸ This conflicting information makes it impossible for me to be sure whether my pieces are for *Hnefatafl* itself, or *Tablut*, (or whether they could be one and the same – one interpretation of a riddle in the

¹ Christie Ward (Gunvor Silfrafarr), *King’s Table: Game of the Noble Scandinavians*, <http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/games.shtml> pg 1. Last updated 6th Jan 2010.

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*. pg 2 and

Sten Helmfrid, *Hnefatafl – the Strategic Board Game of the Vikings*, http://hem.bredband.net/b512479/Hnefatafl_by_Sten_Helmfrid.pdf. pg 1

⁴ Ward, *King’s Table*, p5

⁵ Helmfrid, *Hnefatafl*, p12

⁶ Ward, *King’s Table*, p4

⁷ *Ibid*, p4-7

⁸ Helmfrid, *Hnefatafl*, p113-14

Hervarar Saga points to the King having 8 defenders and a 9X9 board)⁹. I am however, confident that the finds I am using as reference indicate a game was played in the 9th century using this style and number of glass pieces.

Using the Bjorko find as a guide, I proceeded to make a set of 25 pieces. As I am waiting on a delivery of glass, I did not have a suitable green to use for the defenders pieces. It is described as a dark green opaque (although it appears to me from the photographs that it may be a very dark transparent). I have elected to utilise a dark cobalt blue which I have documented as used in several different styles of glass beads from this period¹⁰ (and in fact can be seen decorating the 'king' piece in the image above). I was able to closely match the colour for the attacking side.

I have also included one sample of a decorated style, similar to those found in another 9th Century grave at Bjorko. This set was of only 8 pieces, 2 of which were larger, so it is unlikely it was used for playing a hnefatafl.¹¹



The next decision I had to make was regarding construction technique. Lampworked beads are made on a mandrel (a metal rod which creates the hole in the centre). It is logical to suggest that the game pieces were made in the same way, but using the end of the mandrel so the hole does not go all the way through. Unfortunately none of the photos of period glass finds show the bottom, and none of the descriptions mention a hole. Many pieces made with other materials, such as wood, bone etc, have been found with a hole in the centre. It is suggested they were made on a lathe, and may have been played using pegs in the holes that fit into holes on the board, like the one found at Ballinderry, Ireland.¹² I have written to the Stockholm Museum asking for information about the underside of the pieces in their collection, but have not yet heard back.

In the meantime, as I am most used to working on mandrel, I have decided to use that construction technique for this project. I do think, however, that it is also highly possible they were made off-mandrel (a punty of glass or metal is used to support the glass, then 'broken' off just before completion) so I have made one piece in a opaque dark green glass to demonstrate the off mandrel technique (you will note that there is no hole with this technique).

Although in my set the defenders are blue, I have recreated the 'king' from the Bjorko find, for authenticity. I have also supplied a king in a period style, that matches the current pieces (i.e. in cobalt blue).

⁹ *ibid*, p14

¹⁰ Suzanne Tate. *Timeline of Lampworked Glass Beads*, <http://www.solarflarecreations.com.au/Timeline.htm>

¹¹ *Hnefatafl – Königszabel* (roughly translated using Google Translate) <http://www.leikmot.net/indexd.html>

¹² Helmfrid, *Hnefatafl*, p12-13 and

Ward, *King's Table*, p3 and

Isabel Ulfsdottir, *Glass Hnefatafl Set*, http://www.willadsenfamily.org/sca/isabel_as/tafl/Glass_Hnefatafl_Set.pdf



Bibliography

Ward, Christie (Gunvor Silfráfarr), *King's Table: Game of the Noble Scandinavians*, <http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/games.shtml> Last updated 6th Jan 2010.

Helmfrid, Sten *Hnefatafl – the Strategic Board Game of the Vikings*, http://hem.bredband.net/b512479/Hnefatafl_by_Sten_Helmfrid.pdf.

Hnefatafl – Königszabel <http://www.leikmot.net/indexd.html>

Ulfsdottir, Isabel *Glass Hnefatafl Set*, http://www.willadsenfamilj.org/sca/isabel_as/tafl/Glass_Hnefatafl_Set.pdf