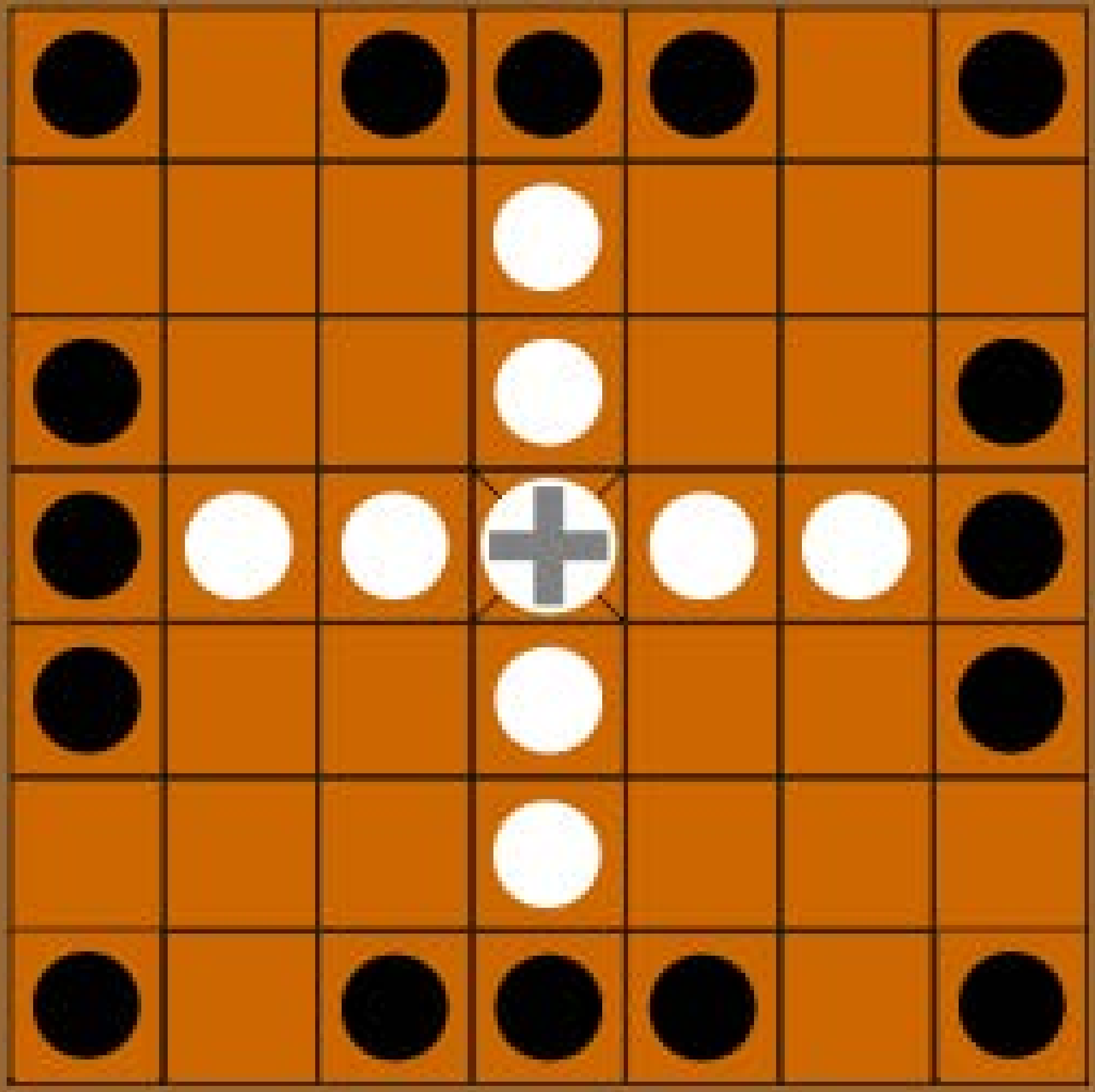

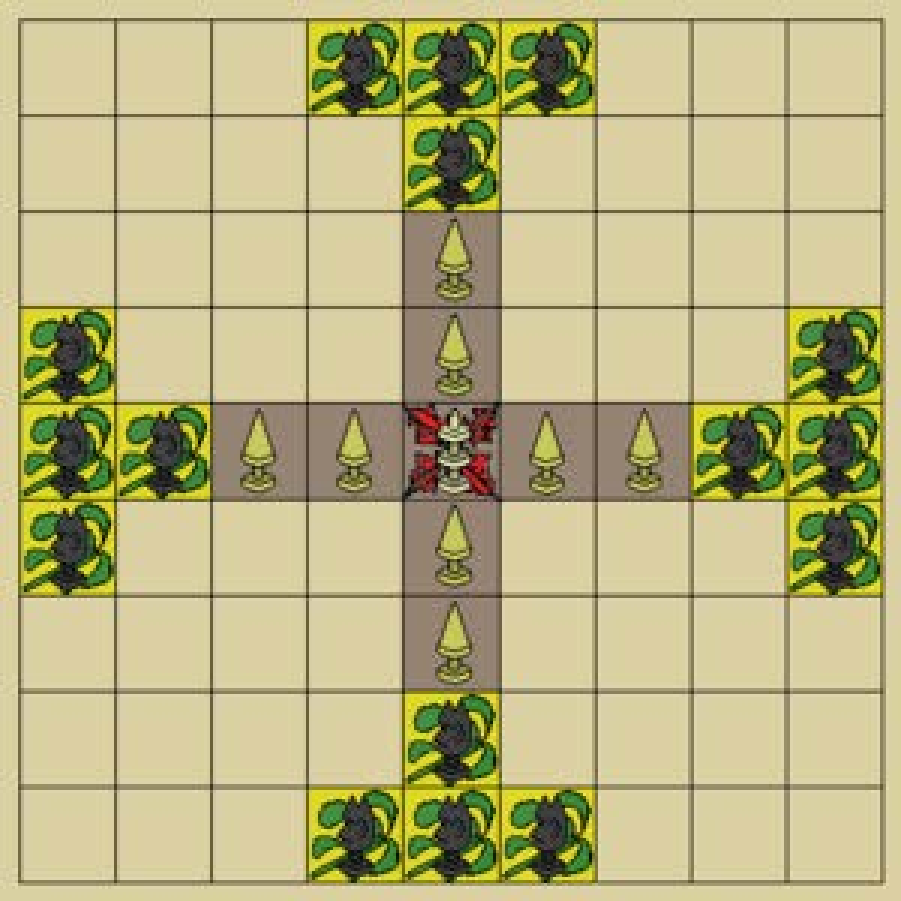

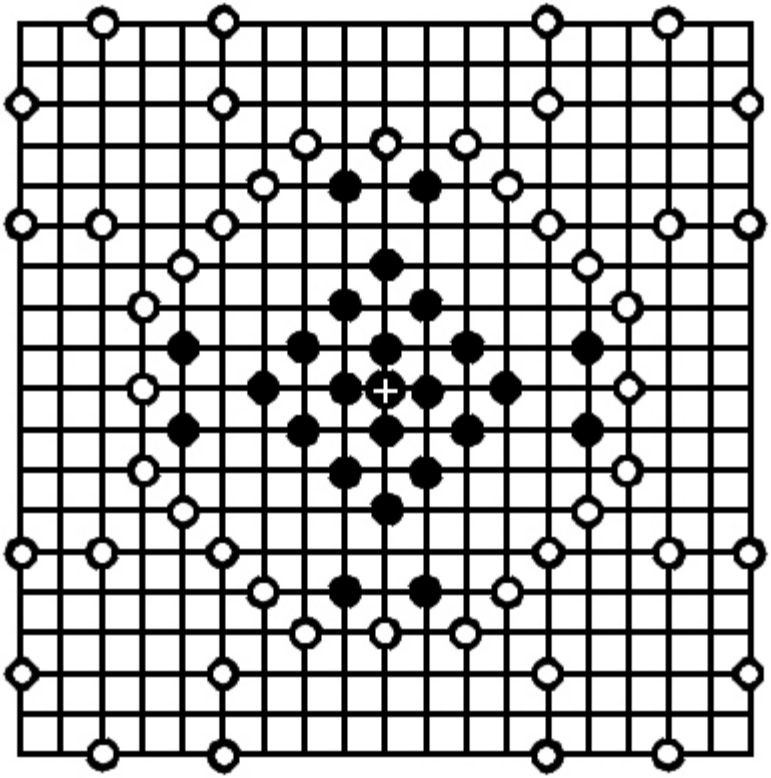

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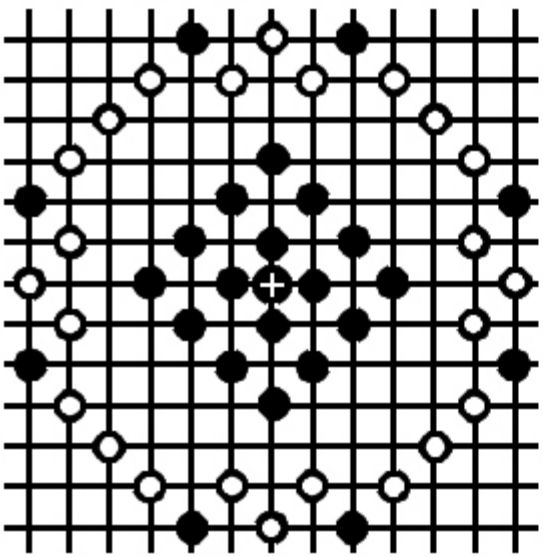

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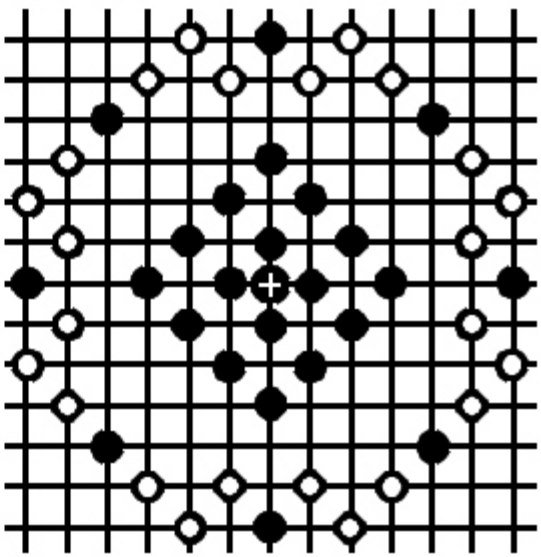

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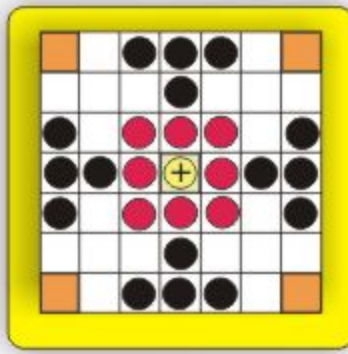

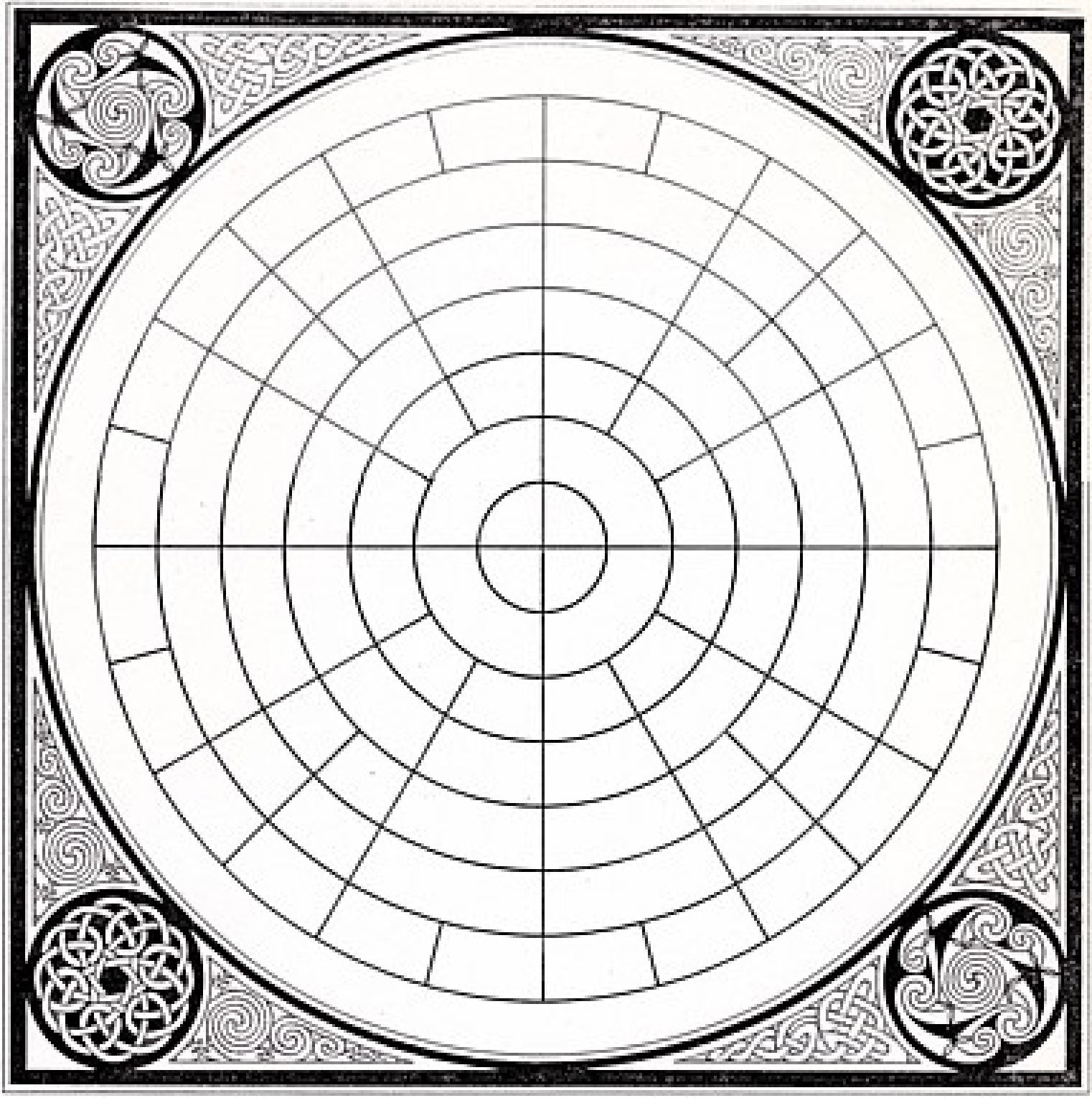

with the 24 attackers equally spaced on the four edges of the board. The term Gwyddbwyll seems to be older than Tawlbwrdd. Part of the theory in regard to Latrunculorum is that Gwyddbwyll was its Welsh counterpart, and that Tawlbwrdd may have been imported by Norse and/or Saxon invaders and therefore gradually replaced Gwyddbwyll.

In the end, we have to remember that these were probably "folk games" whose rules could vary from one village to the next. It is possible that all the names above were simply regional terms for just one or two games. Unlike modern Chess, Checkers, or Backgammon they probably did not have internationally standardized rules. That they appear so frequently in the surviving folklore does suggests that they were an important part of the culture, and no doubt more than one ale was spilt, or clan feud begun, over the "correct" rules for what should have been a friendly game between strangers.

Each Team has 2 ways of Winning:
D- King Captures Enemy Jewel w All Pieces
A- Captain Kills w All Pieces

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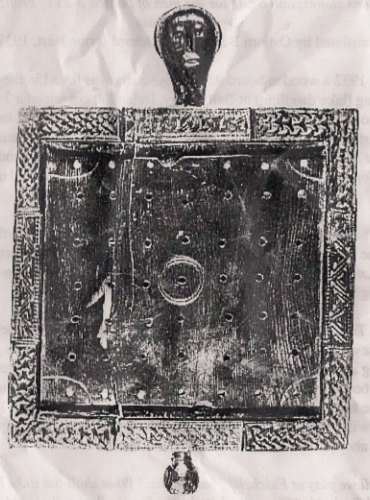
Fidchell

An Ancient Irish Game



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"What is thy name?" said Eochaid.
"Not famous," said he, "Midir of Bri Leith."
"What has brought thee?" said Eochaid.
"To play Fidchell with thee," said he.
"Of a truth I am good at Fidchell," said Eochaid.
"Let us make trial of it," said Midir.
"The queen is asleep," said Eochaid, "and it is in her house that the Fidchell board is." "I have here," said Midir, "a Fidchell board that is not inferior." That was true: a silver board and golden men, and each corner there lit up by precious stones, and a bag for the men of plaited links of bronze. -The Wooing of Etain

Translated by Osborn Bergin, and Richard Irvine Best, 1937.

In 1932 a wooden board 9.5 inches square was found in the remains of a crannog (lake dwelling) at Ballinderry, Ireland. It contained a 7 X 7 grid of holes, and was carved with designs similar to those used in the 10th century on the Isle of Man. The central hole is circled, and quadrants marked the four corner holes. Two heads, resembling knobs, or handles, were carved on opposite sides of the board. The artifact is often referred to as a "Fidchell," game (also spelled Fitchneal, Fithcheall, or Ficheall).

What little we know of Fidchell comes to us from Irish myth and legend. The Irish god Lugh is credited with having invented the game of Fidchell (Lugh was multi-talented god -among other things, he also claimed to be a wright, a smith, a harper, a sorcerer, and a poet-historian.)

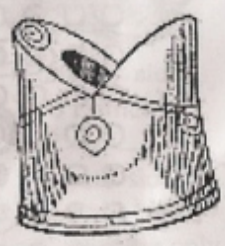
In *The Wooing of Etain*, the god Midir challenged King Eochaid Airem to several games of Fidchell. When Eochaid realized he was playing and beating a magical being he decided to take advantage of the matter and the stakes became great nearly impossible tasks to be completed. But when it came to the last game Midir would recoup his losses by claiming a kiss from the king's wife if he won. When Midir took Etain into his arms he quickly seized her and flew off with her to the halls of faerie.

"Shall we play at Fidchell?" said Midir. "What shall the stake be?" said Eochaid. "The stake that either of us shall wish," said Midir. That day Eochaid's stake was taken."Thou has taken my stake," said Eochaid. "Had I wished I could have taken it before now," said Midir. "What wouldst thou from me?" said Eochaid. "My arms around Etain and a kiss from her," said Midir. Eochaid was silent. "Come a month from to-day and that shall be given thee."

Although rules specific to Fidchell have never been found, most scholars agree that the Ballinderry artifact is most likely a variation on a Tafl, or Hnefatafl game. These games were apparently played by Scandinavian peoples as early as 400 A.D., and were the primary strategy games in Northern Europe until they were replaced by Chess. Based on surviving examples they consisted of square boards with grids having 7, 9, 11, or 19 spaces on a side. Unlike Chess, or Checkers which are fought by opposing armies from opposite sides of the board, Tafl games involve a single king and his defenders in the center of the board and under siege by an army of attackers twice their number.

The rules for Tafl games have come to us from a number different sources. A game called Tablut was recorded in the diary of the Swedish botanist Linnaeus in 1732. He found the game being played by Alpine Lapplanders and recorded the set up and a description of the rules. An even earlier description of Hnefatafl survives in an English manuscript from the reign of King Athelstan (A.D. 925-40). It includes a diagram of a board and the starting positions on a 19 x 19 grid and at least partial rules for the game.

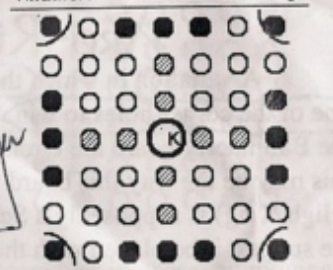
The king's piece for the enclosed game is inspired by a bone game piece found in Woodperry, Oxfordshire, England.



Rules

The pieces are set up as in Figure #1. The white King and defenders are in the center, and the dark attackers are at the edges. The center hole is the throne, and only the King can occupy it. Other pieces can pass over the throne, but cannot land on it. The defenders win if the King escapes to the edge of the board. The attackers win if they capture the King.

Fig. #1 Set-up



The defender moves first. All pieces move in the same manner as a Rook in Chess -any number of spaces left, or right; or up and down. There are no diagonal moves, and you may not jump over pieces. When the King

has a clear line to the edge of the board, the defender should announce it by saying "check." If he has a clear path in two directions it is a "checkmate."

Men are captured by trapping them between two of your own pieces (Fig.2), or by trapping them between one of your pieces and the throne. The King must be captured by surrounding him on four sides (Fig. 3). He can also be captured along with an adjacent defending piece. However, a player can voluntarily move a man between to opposing pieces without being captured.

Fig. #2 Capturing Pieces
A: An attacker captured
B: a defender captured against the throne.

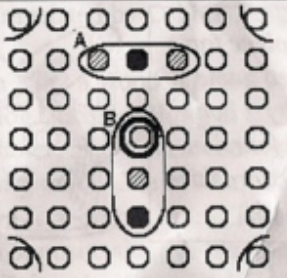
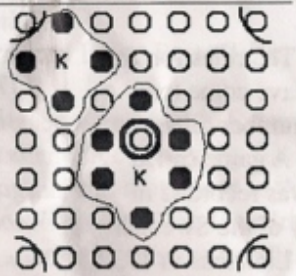


Fig. #3 Capturing the King



Other optional rules to try

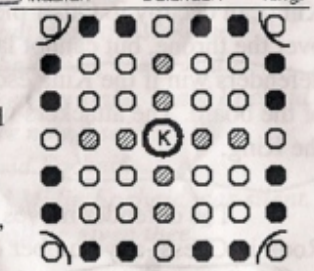
- The King may not assist in capturing enemy pieces.
- Pieces can only move one space at a time.
- A piece can sacrifice itself to capture an opponent by moving onto the throne to trap an enemy. The piece that moved on to the throne is immediately lost as well

Game Variations

Ard-Ri.

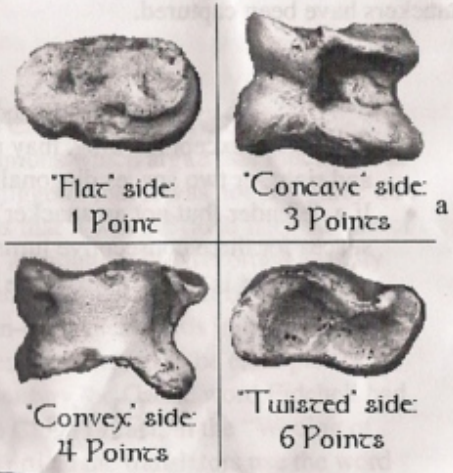
A variation in which the King must reach one of the corner holes to win. The corners of the Ballinderry board are circled, and suggests this may be the way this board was used. *Ard-Ri* (High King) is supposedly a Scottish variant, and we suggest it be played with the set-up below (Fig. 4) which starts with the corners empty. Another suggested rule change for Ard-Ri is that, like the throne, the corners cannot be occupied by any piece but the King.

Fig. #4 "Ard-Ri" Set-up
Attacker: ● Defender: ⊘ King: K



Tawl-bwrdd

Often translated as "Throw Board," this version comes from a Welsh game that has been said to have used dice. We include a replica of a sheep knucklebone to use as a four-side die, although standard die can be used instead. Numbers are assigned to four sides of the knuckles as illustrated. At the beginning of each turn the player rolls one "bone" (or die), and the game can be played in either of two ways:



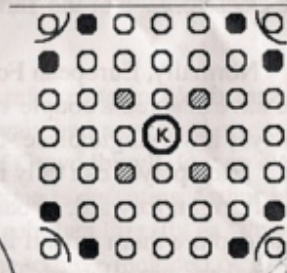
If the bone lands lying flat, with the "concave," or "convex" side up, you can move any of your pieces. If the bone lands standing with the "flat", or "twisted" side up, you lose that turn. (With a standard die players can only move if they roll an odd number. If they roll an even number, they must skip a turn.)

Or you can roll the bone (or die) to determine the maximum number of spaces you can move any one piece during that turn.

Brandubh

(pronounced bran-doo and translated as "Black Raven") this version seems to be a modern invention as we have seen no documentation for the rules. The number of men used is documented in an early description. Set up is as in Figure 5. The attacker has eight men. The defender has a King, plus four men. (Or, for a different challenge you can try it with the number of pieces and set-ups illustrated previously) The attacker makes the first move. Pieces may move one space in any direction. Pieces are captured, as in chess, by moving into the space the enemy piece is occupying and removing it from the board. The King cannot be captured. The center is the throne. No other piece except the king can move onto -or cross over the throne. The attacker wins if they

Fig. #5 "Brandubh" Set-up
Attacker: ● Defender: ⊘ King: K



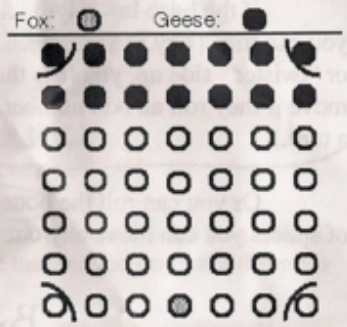
capture all the defenders. Likewise, the King/Defender wins if all of the attackers have been captured.

Optional Brandubh rules

- All pieces, except the king, may move one space up & down, or left and right, or two spaces diagonally.
- If a defender (but not an attacker) remains on one of the four corner spaces for three consecutive turns, he is considered "lost in the woods" and is removed from the board.

Hala-Tafl,

Fig. #5 1 Fox & 14 Geese



Hala-Tafl is mentioned in the Grettis Saga of Iceland which was first written down around 1300 A.D. It is often assumed to be related to a game played in many cultures called Fox & Geese. This game is considered to be related to Tafl games in that one player's pieces out-number the opponent's. An interesting cultural note is that the name has changed as this game migrated from one country to another to reflect the local fauna. Other examples include crows, vultures, tigers. Thus, considering the importance of ravens in Celtic mythology, it is not unreasonable to think that "Brandubh" (Black Raven) is related to the Fox & Geese branch of the Tafl family.

Normally, European Fox & Geese is played on a cross-shaped board, but we have adapted a couple versions for playing on our square board. One player has a single piece -the "fox," and the other player has fourteen "geese." Each player can only move one piece per turn. All of the pieces move left, right, forward, or backward one space at a time. The fox can jump geese to capture them wins if it can capture all of the geese. Multiple jumps, as in Checkers, are allowed. The geese win if they can trap the fox so it cannot move. At the start of the game the geese are placed in two rows. The fox is placed on the opposite side.

Variation: The geese can only move forwards as in standard Checkers, and the fox move one space at a time in any direction as a king in Chess. The fox wins if it can break through the line of geese, and again the geese win if they can trap the fox.

"Lost" Celtic Games

There are some dissenting opinions which argue that Fidchell was not a Tafl-style game. One argument suggests that it was not any game that is currently known. The other theory is that it was a British Isles variant of a Roman game called Latrunculorum. Although it was recorded as early as the first century B.C., Latrunculorum itself is a subject of debate among classical scholars. A number of Roman-era game boards in both square and rectangular shapes and in varying sizes are believed to be examples of it. To add to the confusion, by the 15th century the Gaelic word Fidchell had commonly become adapted to refer to Chess In fact, in the "Wooing of Etain" quoted at the beginning of this article the translators use the word Chess rather the Fidchell. In fact, in the modern Irish spelling, "Ficheall" can be used as a generic for any kind of wooden board game. However, the Ballinderry artifact, with its clearly marked central hole as a possible king's throne, along with similar square-grid boards which have been found on the Orkney Islands suggest Tafl games more than anything else.

There are quite a number of other games mentioned in British Celtic folklore that continue to be mysteries to the modern researcher. Brandubh (Black Raven) appears in the Irish sagas as early as the 12th century, one such source describes the use of 5 men against 8. This would seem well-suited to a small Tafl-like game played on a small grid like the Ballinderry board, or similar engraved boards found on the Orkneys. Buanfach, Cennchaem, and Conchobair are also mentioned in Irish legends but again, details about the games are missing. There are also vague Scottish references to a game of Ard-ri, or High King.

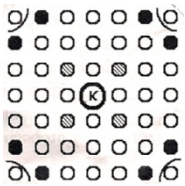
Gwyddbwyll , and Tawlbyrdd are both referred to in Welsh sagas. In one of the Arthurian legends the Welsh hero Owain had a magical army, and while he and King Arthur are playing a game of Gwyddbwyll, Owain's army continues to defeat Arthur's men, as long as Owain is defeating Arthur in the game. Tawlbwrdd has been translated by some scholars literally as "throw-board" and for that reason it is believed by some to have included dice. Fortunately a manuscript from 1587 in the Welsh National Library solves the mystery in regard to Tawlbwrdd. The description is unmistakably a Tafl-style game set on an 11x11 grid: "The king in the center of the board and twelve men in the place next to him, and twenty-four lie in wait to capture him" -

Flat

On Edge

FIDCHELL

"Let us make a trial of it!" said King Midir to Eochaid.
"I have here a Fidchell board that is not inferior." And that was true.
It was an oaken board with gold and silver men, each corner lit by prescious stones.
And a bag for the men of plaited links of bronze.



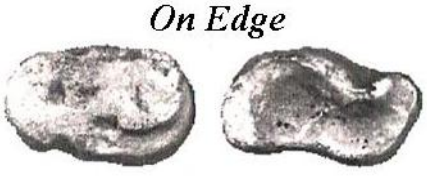
OBJECT OF THE GAME:
Each team has two ways to win:
The ATTACKERS win (1) if they capture the King, or (2) all other enemy pieces.
The DEFENDERS win (1) if the King captures a Jewel, or (2) if they capture all enemy pieces.

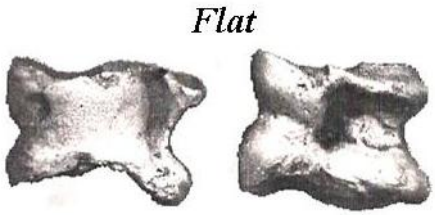
ORDER OF PLAY:
The Attacker always moves first.

PIECES:
The Attacker has eight Silver Men.
The Defender has four Gold Men plus the King.

HOW TO MOVE:
All pieces move *one space* left, right, up or down.
No diagonal moves. No jumping over pieces.
The King can move one space in *any* direction. Only the King may occupy/cross over the Throne (center space) or move into any of the four corner spaces.

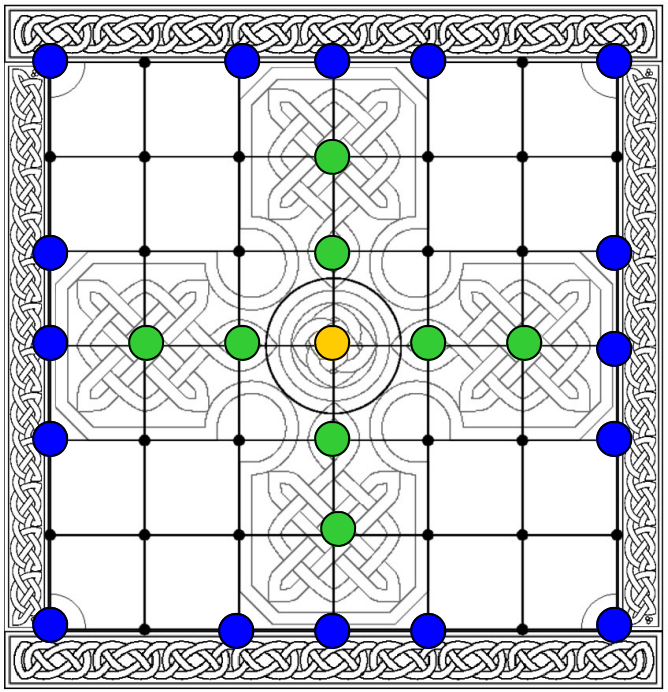
CAPTURES:
All pieces (including the King) are captured by moving into the space the enemy is occupying, and removing it from the board.





THROWING THE BONE:
Each player throws the bone once at the beginning of their turn.
If the Bone lands lying *flat* (with the concave or convex side up) you are free to move any of your pieces.
If the Bone lands lying *on edge* (with the flat or twisted side up) you lose that turn.

Fidchell



See above for the starting position of Fidchell.

Fidchell is comprised of two teams: the attackers ● (blue) and the defenders ● (green) with their king ● (yellow). The attackers are attempting to lay siege to the king, while the defenders are attempting to help the king escape.

In order for the attackers to win, they must surround the king on all four sides. The defenders must help the king escape to the edge of the board, in order to win.

Attackers move first. Then players take turns, each moving one piece per turn. All pieces move as far as they choose along any straight line (like a rook in chess).

Attackers cannot stop on the throne (the center space) but may pass through it.

Pieces are captured by flanking them on two sides. If a piece moves between two pieces of the opposing team, that piece is not captured; the capturing party must actively capture a piece of the opposing team. The king is captured by surrounding him on all four sides. If the king is on a space immediately next to the throne, it takes only three Attackers to capture him.

1.

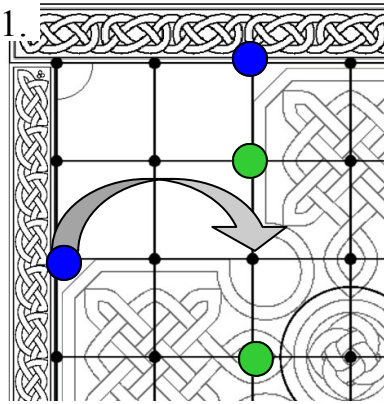


Diagram 1. shows a legal move on the attackers part to capture a defender. The piece about to move will not be captured by making this move.

2.

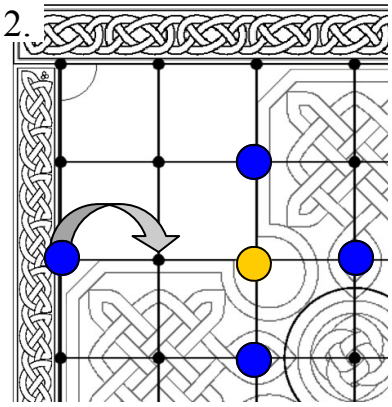
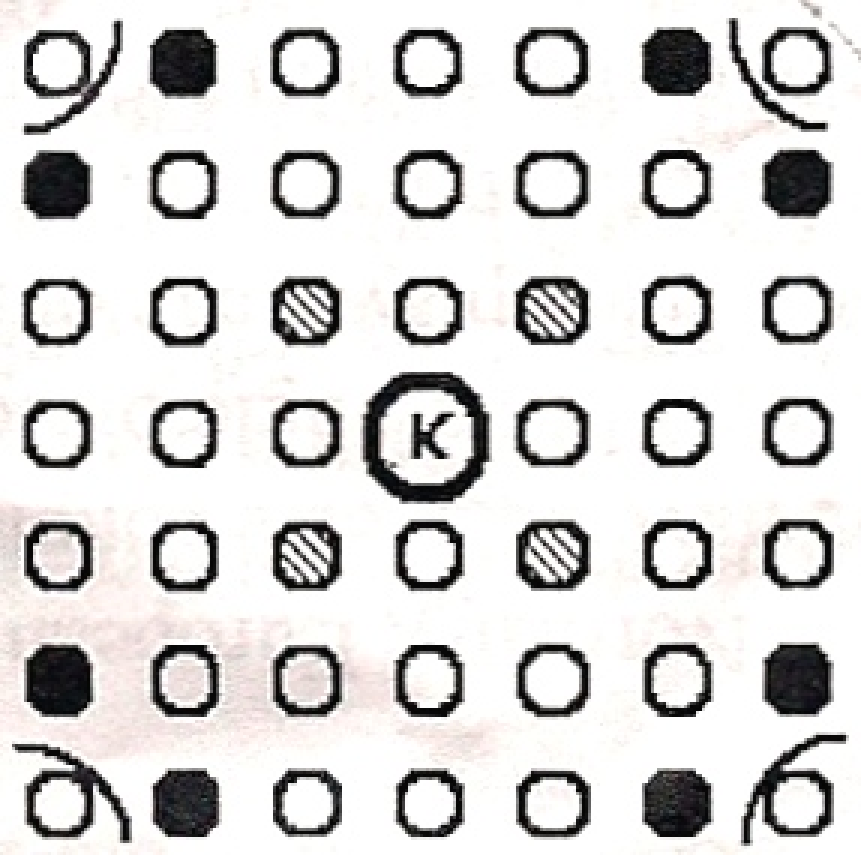
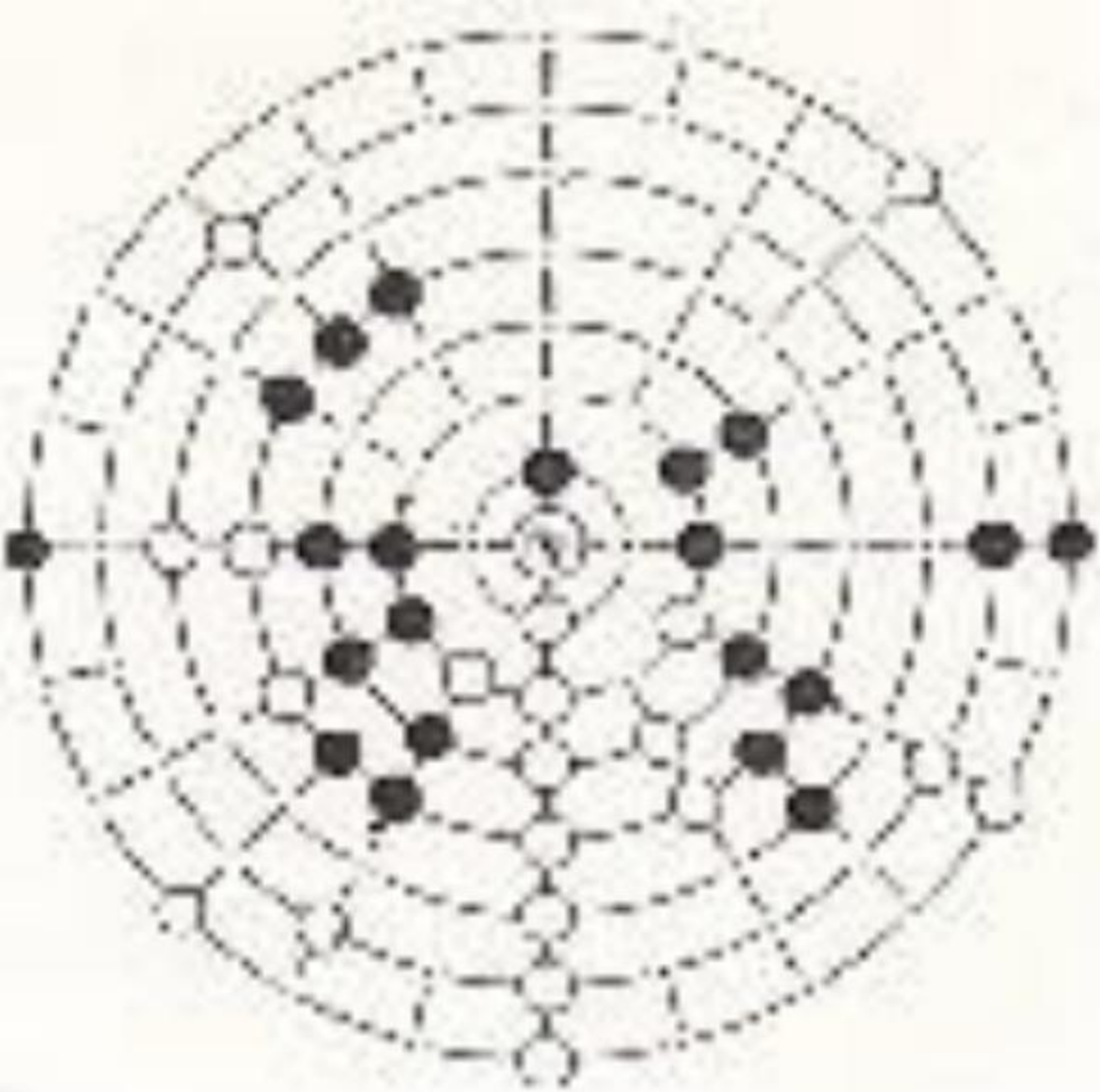
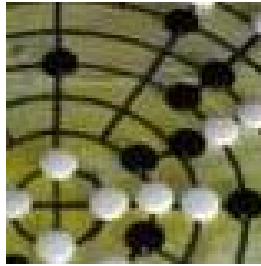
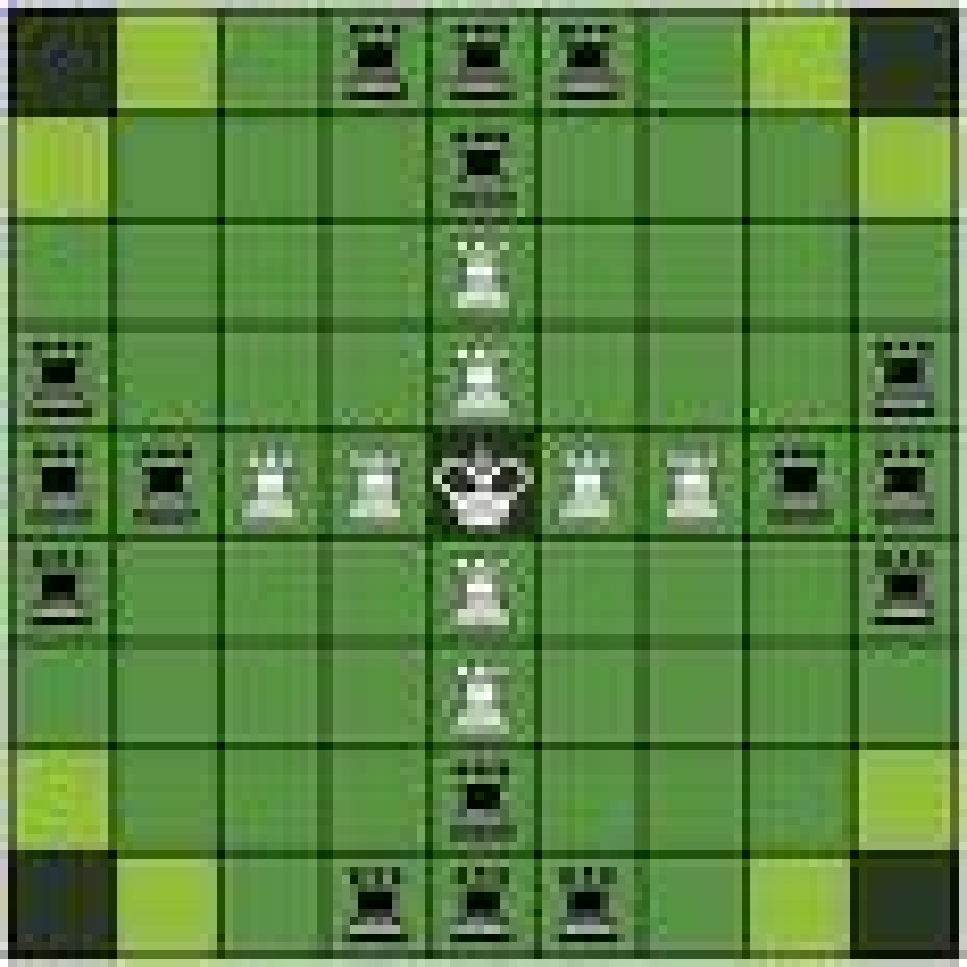
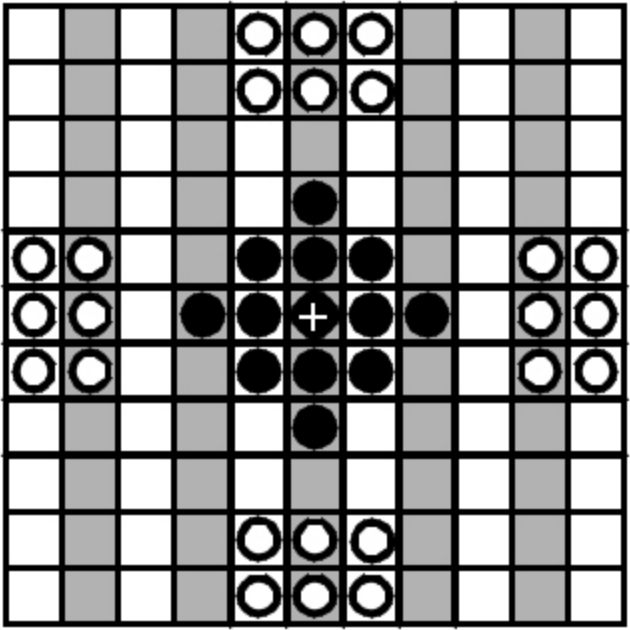


Diagram 2. shows a legal move to capture the king.

Variation: Hneftafl

The king can only win by reaching one of the four corners. The attackers do not start on the corners, (thus they only begin with 12 pieces) nor can they enter any of the four corners during play. To capture the king along the edge of the board, it takes only three attackers.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