

# Board games of the Vikings – From *hnefatafl* to chess

By Michael Schulte

The relationship between the Viking game *hnefatafl* and the new board game of chess is an intricate one, made all the more so by the fact that both are described by the same term: *tafl*. In this paper, I focus both on the archaeological and the literary evidence for the two board games and the diagnostic features that set them apart. At the outset, the famous reference to *tafl* by Kali Kolsson, the future Earl Rognvaldr of Orkney, is highlighted, and it is argued that Kali actually meant *skáktafl*, i.e. chess, when he used this term. The Ballinderry board from Ireland and the Ockelbo rune-stone from Sweden are subsequently presented as typical examples of the Viking game *hnefatafl*. Part of the discussion dwells on the eddic poem *Vǫlospá* and the symbolic value of the golden gaming pieces, which, I argue, reflect the Nordic memory culture of the Viking Age. In what follows, the most important evidence for chess in the North is addressed: the Lewis chessmen. A consideration of all these various forms of evidence leads to the conclusion that Vikings played a key role in the reception and reshaping of the game of chess in Scandinavia and beyond.

## 1 Aim and focus

The aim of this article is twofold:

- To find evidence that the *tafl* mentioned by Kali Kolsson from Agder, the future Earl Rognvaldr of Orkney, in *Orkneyinga saga*, most probably meant chess,
- To find evidence, more broadly, to support the hypothesis that Vikings played a key role in the reception and the reshaping of chess in Scandinavia and beyond.

Modern chess, as it is known to us today, has not been fully developed until the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. But earlier variants of the game of chess such as the Lewis chessmen are in evidence in the North and in the Viking diaspora at least from the 11<sup>th</sup> century on. The two basic goals of this paper are thus interconnected. If it is possible to show that prominent Norsemen such as Knútr the Great, Sigurðr Jórsalafari and Haraldr harðráði in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries had knowledge of chess, there is a strong likelihood that this applies to Kali Kolsson as well. To support the second claim that Vikings played a key role in the reception and the reshaping of chess in Scandinavia and beyond, the paper deals with the two major transfer routes (or rather full-fledged route systems) of chess both via continental Europe and Russia to the North, hence the notion of a symbiosis of the European chess game. The two road systems are generally referred to as *Austrleið* and *Vestrleið* (see section 8). Obviously the Vikings had a complex road system that led to Byzantium and the Muslim World. It is often stated, for instance by Eales (1985: 48), that Vikings would have been impervious to other cultures until Christian times and hence did not indulge in high-scale contact in the East. However, this is likely to be a misconception. To this end the article explores the archeological, literary and linguistic evidence of ON *skák* in its relation to the earlier table game, *hnefatafl*. As will be shown, the early source material is rather limited and surprisingly heterogenous; but it sketches a rather clear picture of early chess in Northern Europe.

## 2 Petrus Alfonsi and Earl Rognvaldr of Orkney

“I am eager to play *tafl*, I have mastered the nine skills,” bragged a young Norwegian poet from Agder in the early 12th century. The event is reported in *Orkneyinga saga*, Ch. 58, and the poet in question is none other than Kali Kolsson, the future Earl Rognvaldr of Orkney (c. 1100–58 AD). Putting a northern twist on Petrus Alfonsi’s *septem industriae* (seven skills), the future Earl Rognvaldr of Orkney proudly announced:

Tafl emk qrr at efla,  
íþróttir kannk níu,  
týnik trauðla rúnum,  
tíð er mér bók ok smíðir.

Skriða kannk á skíðum,  
 skýtk ok rók, svát nýtir,  
 hvárt tveggja kannk hyggja  
 harpslótt ok bragþóttu. (Orkneyinga saga, 130, my emphasis).

In Guðrún Nordal’s prose translation (Nordal 2001: 31; my emphasis), the poem runs as follows:

I am eager to play **chess**,  
 I have mastered nine skills,  
 I hardly forget the runes,  
 I am interested in book and carpentry,  
 I know how to ski,  
 my shooting and sailing skills are competent,  
 I can both play the harp and construe verse.

As the Norwegian-Orcadian Earl Rognvaldr was “a truly international figure” (Jesch 2013: 154; see also Crawford 2004), it is natural to look for classical European models for his nine skills, to see whether they include chess or, more broadly, board games in general. Petrus Alfonsi, a 12th-century Spanish cleric and Council of Troyes, considered chess part of a nobleman’s education, whether lay or clerical. In his *Disciplina clericalis*, a kind of curriculum for the Clergy, he gave the *septem industriae* or seven accomplishments as follows:

Industriae vero hae sunt: equitare [‘riding’], natare [‘swimming’], sagittare [‘archery’], cestibus certare [‘classical boxing’], aucupare [‘falconry’], scaccis ludere [‘playing chess’], versificari [‘verse-making’].

Together with the seven skills (*septem industriae*), Petrus Alfonsi presents a system of the seven liberal sciences (*septem artes liberales*) and seven moral virtues (*septem probitates*) which, together, yield a perfectly symmetrical system of thrice seven qualities. The number *seven* thus functions as the overall structuring principle in this passage which I present here in its entirety:

Unus ex discipulis interrogavit magistrum suum et dixit: “Cum septem sint artes et septem probitates et septem industriae, vellem, ut haec mihi, sicut se habent, enumerares.”

Magister: “Enumerabo. Hae sunt artes: dialectica, arithmetica, geometria, phisica, musica, astronomia. De septima vero diversae plurimorum sunt sententiae, quanam sit. Philosophi, qui prophetias sectantur, aiunt nigromantiam esse septimam. Aliqui ex illis videlicet, qui prophetiis non credunt, philosophiam volunt esse septimam, quae res naturales vel elementa mundana praecellit. Quidam, qui philosophiae non student, grammaticam esse affirmant. Industriae vero hae sunt: equitare, natare, sagittare, cestibus certare, aucupare, scaccis ludere, versificari. Probitates hae sunt: ne sit vorax, potator, luxuriosus, violentus, mendax, avarus et de mala conversatione.”

Discipulus: “Hoc tempore puto neminem huiusmodi esse.” (Petrus Alfonsi 2000: 30–31).

One of his pupils spoke to a teacher and said to him, “I would like for you to enumerate the seven arts, seven principles and seven gentlemanly pursuits in order.”

The teacher answered, “I will enumerate them for you. These are the arts: dialectics, arithmetic, geometry, physics, music, and astronomy. Concerning the seventh, many diverse opinions exist. The philosophers who do not believe in prognostication say that necromancy is the seventh; others among them, namely those who believe in prognostication and in philosophy, think that it should be a science which encompasses all natural matters and mundane elements. Those who do not devote themselves to philosophy say that it is grammar. These are the gentlemanly pursuits: riding, swimming, archery, boxing, fowling, chess, and poetry. The principles are the avoidance of gluttony, drunkenness, lust, violence, lying, avariciousness, and evil conversation.”

The pupil said, “I believe that in these times no one with these qualities exists.” (Petrus Alfonsi 1969: 49).

The framework is a dialogue between master and disciple where the master enumerates the *septem artes* first: dialectics, arithmetic, geometry, physics, music, astronomy and, regarding the seventh science, he provides three options depending on the schooling of the interpreter: *nigromantia* ‘black science’, *philosophia* ‘philosophy’, or *grammatica* ‘grammar’. When it comes to games such as chess, however, certain factions in the Church were eager to impose restrictions. As Petrus Alfonsi himself noted in 1129, almost twenty years after he had finished the *Disciplina clericalis*, chess, along with hawking and hunting, was strictly forbidden for crusaders in the order of the Knights Templar (Murray 1913: 411). In view of the fact that the Knights Templar were the elite fighting force of their day, well-trained and shrewd tacticians, the prohibition seems rather

odd since chess was the game of strategy *par excellence*.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite the existence of ecclesiastical criticism of chess and other games, the clergy often enjoyed using chess, among other such games, as teaching tools in their sermons. Hence there was an interesting tension, where chess seems to be both prohibited and promulgated by the same class of people. As Murray (1913: 411) states, “[m]uch of the early European literature on chess was the work of members of the monastic or preaching orders.” It was impossible to impede the progress of chess in Western culture.

### 3 Chess or *hnefatafl* in the Nordic sources?

Unfortunately, the word that Kali Kolsson from Agder uses for the game is Old Norse *tafl*, not *skáktafl*, which would clearly indicate chess. The noun *tafl* derives from the Latin *tabula* meaning ‘table’ or ‘game-board’. It denotes both the board and the game; compare the two meanings of the English word *dice*, viz. the small cubes of ivory, bone or other material used to play this game, and, in an abstract sense, any game played with dice.<sup>2</sup> The chess-historian H.J.R. Murray (1952: 56) noticed that *tafl* also denoted the ‘olden’ board game *hnefatafl*, which was probably already played by Scandinavians before 400 AD. Similarly, Murray (1913: 444) criticized the direct equation of the “indeterminate word *tafl*” with chess, in many works, without clear warrant. The term *tafl* referred to different board games in different periods, firstly, *hnefatafl*, roughly until the end of the Viking Age, and secondly, *skáktafl*, in the Christian era. The verbal derivative *tefla*, an Old Norse *ijan*-verb, means ‘to play board games’ in most contexts, but it can also refer to chess in a straightforward sense (Fiske 1905: 57–58).<sup>3</sup> In Modern Icelandic and Faroese, the meaning of *tafl* and *talv* is confined to chess, but this semantic narrowing is a fairly recent lexical development.<sup>4</sup>

- 1 On the rules of the Templars, see especially Barber/Bate 2002; Upton-Ward 1992.
- 2 See Simpson and Weiner (1987: 430 [629]), under *die* (pl. *dice*, *dies*).
- 3 Fritzner (1896 III: 681), under *tefla*, has only the standard meanings (1) ‘play a board game’, (2) ‘make a move, move a piece’, and (3) ‘win the board game’; cf. also Finnur Jónsson 1931: 564. On Old Norwegian *tafl*, see Fritzner (1896 III: 656–57) and Hægstad and Torp (1997: 434); the latter has one basic entry ‘board game’ for *tafl*.
- 4 For early modern Icelandic, see Blöndal (1920–24: 838), under *tafl*. – Note that Mod.Far. *talv* (Mod.Dan. *Tavl*) shows regular metathesis of ON *-fl-* to Far. *-lv-*,

Concerning this, the philosopher Wittgenstein reinforces the general claim that games, or *Spiele*, are rather diverse and indeterminate categories with few common denominators or none at all.<sup>5</sup> Which features distinguish the broad category of table games from card games, dice games, string games, riddles, puns, word games and language games? Both Wittgenstein and the structuralist F. de Saussure found close parallels between the rule system of games such as chess and the structure of language itself, as witnesses the following remark: “If you ask me: where lies the difference between chess and the syntax of a language I reply: solely in their application” (Wittgenstein 1979: 104).<sup>6</sup> To sum up, the indeterminate terminology of table games or *tafl* is backed up in terms of their syntax: it is a rule-system with a particular usage.<sup>7</sup>

The Faroese lexicographer Jens Christian Svabo, in his dictionary (the oldest manuscript of which is dated to 1773), glosses early modern Faroese *talv* as ‘skakspil’; as he puts it:

For Tidsfordriv spiller man især om Vinter-Aftener *Tavl*, *Skakspil*, men dette ældgamle Spil er ikke saa almindeligt nu som før i Færøe;”

hence Far. *talv* and *telva* as opposed to Old Norse *tafl* and *tefla*. On this type of metathesis, see Höskuldur Thráinsson et al. (2004: 55–6), also Kristján Árnason (2011: 30, 123).

- 5 See for example Wittgenstein 1997: § 66 (my transl.): “Schau z.B. die Brettspiele an, mit ihren mannigfachen Verwandtschaften. Nun geh zu den Kartenspielen über: hier findest du viele Entsprechungen mit jener ersten Klasse, aber viele gemeinsame Züge verschwinden, andere treten auf. [...] Und so können wir durch die vielen anderen Gruppen von Spielen gehen. Ähnlichkeiten auftauchen und verschwinden sehen.“ [‘Look at the board games for instance, with their commonalities. Now move on to the games of cards: here you find many correspondences with the first class, but many common features disappear, whereas others appear. [...] And in this way we can treat many different groups of games. Noting similarities and realizing how they vanish.’] The impressively wide range of medieval games is exemplified by Vale 2001 and Wilkins 2002.
- 6 On the chess game comparison of language cf. de Saussure 1959: 22–23, 88–89, and 110.
- 7 Kenny (2002: 126–40) pursues further striking parallels between chess and language games in Wittgenstein’s thoughts, but this is beyond the scope of this article (cf. fn. 5 and 20).

‘As a leisure activity people play *tavl*, chess, especially on the winter evenings, but this ancient game is not as common now as it once used to be on the Faroes.’<sup>8</sup>

Hence the question arises whether Kali was well-versed in chess, or in board games in general. Scholars have long argued about the semantics, whether Kali meant the old game with one king, *hnefatafl*, the Viking game *par excellence*, as mentioned, for instance, in *Króka-Refs saga*, a fictional Icelandic saga from the 14th century, or whether he meant chess more specifically, the new board game with two kings. As we know, chess made persistent headway in the late Viking Age and early medieval period. To judge from the sources, the promotion of chess and Christianity were roughly contemporaneous and are, in certain ways, connected.<sup>9</sup>

The chess-historian H.J.R. Murray, in *A History of Board Games other than Chess*, draws a clear line between what he labels ‘war-games’ and ‘hunt-games’ (1952: 4–5). The two types of games are defined in contrast to each other: Hunt-games are games in which one player endeavours to hem in and immobilize his opponent’s men (e.g. fox and geese) whereas war-games endeavour to capture or immobilize all or some of their opponent’s men. The typical European games of this type are chess and draughts.

Murray, in his authoritative work, places *hnefatafl* into the same category as chess, but it is noteworthy that *hnefatafl* displays features that are typical of what he classifies as the ‘hunt-game’ (Murray 1952: 55–64, especially 56).<sup>10</sup> The most extensive description of a descendant of this game is the account of the Saami game *tablut*, in Carl Linné’s diary (Linnaeus 1811, II: 55–58). Each side has a different objective. The basic rule, which could be modified, was that the king started at the central field and won by entering one of the four corners. Further rules and the use of dice may have added to the complexity of this game. The Norwegian scholar Sten Helmfrid (2005: 3) notes that in order to win *hnefatafl*, “[t]he king has to make clever sacrifices to create paths into the open, but without weakening his own forces too much.” Murray (1952: 56) concedes that “[t]his game has more affinity with a siege than with a battle”,

8 Svabo 1773, cited after Matras (1962: 27); translation M.S.

9 On the nature of these connections, see sections 8–9 below.

10 The reconstructed rules are summarized by Helmfrid 2005.

but his argument in favour of a war-game remains intuitive: “It [viz. *hnefatafl*, M.S.] is included here because those who played it clearly regarded it as a war-game”. To my knowledge, there is no corroborative evidence for this statement.<sup>11</sup>

Again the question at stake is whether Kali had an accurate knowledge of chess? My colleague Judith Jesch (2013) from the University of Nottingham assumed that this is very likely, in that chess was the latest fashion for young aristocrats in northern Europe in the twelfth century. And rightly so; this is only to be expected as Kali, in the *Orkneyinga saga*, is characterized as a stylish and talented man-about-town in the current fashion of the 12th century, *en vogue* in any and every way possible. At only fifteen years of age, the saga reports, Kali went to England on a trading voyage, and when spotted at a stop-over in a drinking hall in Bergen, he is depicted as a splendid young man wearing the latest *haute couture*, or *sundrgørðir miklar* in the saga’s own wording (Íslenzk Fornrit 34: 132). The key term here is *skartsmaðr mikill*, which likewise alludes to a man of high fashion. Furthermore, Kali’s own poems show an awareness of the terminology associated with chess. In a poem we have not yet considered (stanza 23), Kali wittily applies the Old Norse term *hrókr* as a kind of pun, both in its old meaning ‘ungainly fellow, scoundrel’ and in its new technical sense ‘rook’ in chess terminology (Jesch 2013: 156). The chess term *hrókr* (Icel. *hrókur*, Far. *rókur*) is a loan from Persian *rukḥ* via Middle Latin *roccus* and Old French *roc* (cf. 12, Appendix).<sup>12</sup> Why would one suppose that Kali had not mastered the new board game?

The *Orkneyinga saga* was probably written down in the period 1200–10 AD, at a time when there is ample evidence, both literary and archaeological, of chess in Central Europe, the British Isles, Scandinavia

11 Murray (1952: 55–56) summarizes the features of this game as follows: “Played on the points of a lattice of 18 x 18 cells, or on the cells of boards of 13 x 13, 11 x 11, 9 x 9, or 7 x 7 cells. Two persons play, one having a king, placed on the central point or cell, and a number of men who are arranged symmetrically around the king; the other has double the number of men who are arranged symmetrically around the edge of the board. Both king and men possess the rook’s move in chess. [...] The player with the king wins if in his turn of play the king has an open row or column to the edge of the board; his opponent wins if he captures the king.”

12 On the word history of ON *hrókr* see Ásgeir Bl. Magnússon 1995: 77, under *hrókur* (2) and (3).



and probably in Iceland as well.<sup>13</sup> Our earliest reference to chess in Europe is a verse collection from the monastery of Einsiedeln, the *Versus de scachis* in the *Einsiedeln manuscripts* 319 (pp. 298–99) and 365 (pp. 95–94 [sic]), now rather exactly dated to the middle of the 10th century or even earlier.<sup>14</sup> In addition, there are two Spanish wills from c. 1010 AD mentioning chess. In one of them, Count Ermengaud I of Urgel bequeaths a chess set to the Church: *Et ad sancti Aegidii cenobii ipsos meos schacos ad ipsa opera de Ecclesia*.<sup>15</sup> However, the earliest evidence of chess in Scandinavia lags c. 150 years behind, when compared to its earliest attestations in continental Europe: the Lewis chessmen (see section 6).

The replacement of the Viking game *hnefatafl*, by the modern game of chess deserves our particular interest, and, as such, stands in need of further investigation.

#### 4 Eddic and runic evidence for board games

On the basis of the literary sources, it is by no means easy to draw a clear line between *hnefatafl* and *skáktafl*, since both were referred to as *tafl*. Needless to say, this is also the case in modern Norwegian where many rather different types of games are denoted with the common term *tavl*.<sup>16</sup> For example, a brief passage in *Króka-Refs saga*, the ‘Saga of Refr the Sly’, tells of a *tanntafl*, a board game of walrus ivory (Old Norse *tann*), fabricated by Gunnar the Greenlander, in the eleventh century, as a gift for King Haraldr harðráði of Norway (Murray 1913: 444). Nothing else is reported in the saga about the game except that the saga writer succinctly states: *Þat var bæði hnefatafl ok skáktafl*, ‘it was both a *hnefatafl* and a *skáktafl*.’ This duplexity is corroborated by archaeological finds: the Gokstad board, for instance, has a square board of 13 x 13 cells, on one side, where the odd-numbered fields on the second and fifth columns from either side of the board are chequered. The reverse of the board

13 On the dating of *Orkneyinga saga*, see Finnbogi Guðmundsson, Íslenzk Fornrit 34: VIII.

14 On the *Einsiedeln verses* and the two Spanish bequests, see Gamer 1954, also Murray 1913: 497 and Forster 2004.

15 The quote is from the 12th-century manuscript Cartulary of the Church of Seu de Urgel; see Murray (1913: 413).

16 See e.g. Hovdenak et al. 1986: 730.

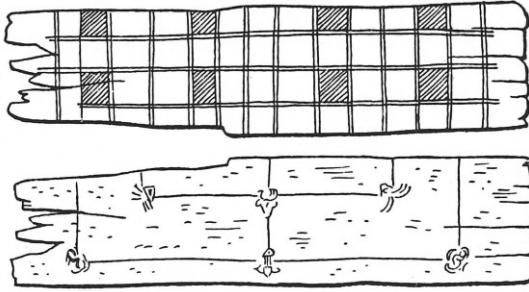


Figure 1: Game-board from the Gokstad ship, wooden fragment, 900 AD (Source: Murray 1952: 58).

shows a different pattern of merels, widely known as *morris* (see Murray 1952: 38, 58).

Therefore, if both kinds of gaming-board can occur on different sides of the same board, it becomes difficult to draw a sharp line between them. In each individual case, a given literary reference to chess has to be scrutinized. When the word *skákttafl* is used, it may simply be a modernization in the final version of the text made for the sake of catching up with recent trends and standards. After all, chess became more and more fashionable in the medieval period, emerging as *the* new board game of kings and gods in the North. It may be objected that the gods had lost their domain after the first advances of Christianization, but as we know, they had an afterglow in Nordic society which was largely based on cultural memory.<sup>17</sup>

The *locus classicus* for this type of memory culture is the eddic poem *Vǫlospá*. The golden gaming pieces in stanza 61 recall the gaming of the Æsir in the olden days. A keyword in this conjunction is *minnaz* ‘remember’ because memory is the precondition for retrieving the ancient game and applying its set of rules (*Vǫlospá* 60–61. Edda 2014). However, it is hard to tell which game the gods played on *Iðavǫllr*. Was it possibly a variant of *hnefatafl*?

The *gullnar tǫflor*, as Lindow (2014: 54–55) notes, function as a site of memory; they trigger a re-activation of the now lost past. In a similar vein, the Kievan finds of Norse jewellery, particularly pendants from the tenth-century, testify to a living Norse culture that shares then current

17 Cultural memory is a technical term for a particular way in which a given culture reflects on its perceived past. See Lindow 2014; Schulte forthc.

ideological and religious values with the Scandinavian homeland.<sup>18</sup> These cultural values are clearly present in *Vǫluspá*. The poem alludes to the balanced state of ancient lore by the gaming gods in the meadow – and by the impending threat that Ragnarøk imposes on society. Under this focus, there is an ideological balance in Norse thought about the ancient past, in that it is concerned both with the theme of harmony, and that of destruction.

*Vǫluspá*, stanza 8 and 60–62:

St. 8

Teflðo í túni,	teitir vóro,	
var þeim vættergis	vant ór gulli,	
unz þriár qvómo	þursa meyjar,	
ámátcar mioc,	ór iotunheimom.	(Edda, 1983: 2).

‘They played chequers in the meadow, they were merry, they did not lack for gold at all, until three ogre-girls came, all-powerful women, out of Giant-land.’ (The Poetic Edda, 2014: 5, stanza 8).

St. 60

Finnaz æsir	á Iðavelli
oc um moldþinur,	mátcan, dæma,
oc minnaz þar	á megindóma
oc á Fimbultýs	fornar rúnar.

St. 61

Þar muno eptir	undrsamligar
gullnar tǫflor	í grasi finnaz,
Þærs í árdaga	áttar hǫfðo.

St. 62

Muno ósánir	acrar vaxa,
þǫls mun allz batna,	Baldr mun koma;
búa þeir Hǫðr oc Baldr	Hroptz sigtóptir,
vel, valtívar —	vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?

(Edda 1983: 14).

18 On the Kievan Rus’ see section 8–9.

‘The Æsir find one another on Idavoll  
and they converse about the mighty Earth-girdler,  
and Fimbultyr’s ancient runes.  
There will be found again in the grass  
the wonderful golden chequers,  
those which they possessed in the bygone days.  
Without sowing the fields will grow,  
all evil will be healed, Baldr will come;  
Hodr and Baldr will settle down in Hropt’s victory-homesteads,  
the slaughter-gods are well – do you want to know more: and what?’  
(The Poetic Edda, 2014: 11, st. 57–59).

The golden gaming pieces symbolize the Golden Age and give expression to the wealth, concord and harmony of the primeval state as described in *Vǫluspá* st. 8. The gaming pieces point forward as well as backward. The retrieval of the game is thus part of the *double cursus* of the poem, indicating the cyclic renewal of the world after the events of Ragnarøk (cf. van Hamel 1934: 50). In terms of memory culture, the game unifies the three aspects of time, viz. Past, Present and Future, or in terms of memory: cultural/past memory – living memory – constructive/prospective memory.<sup>19</sup>

The German-born Swiss poet Hermann Hesse has explored this unifying function in his novel *Das Glasperlenspiel*, or *The Glass Bead Game*. The game after which the novel is named, is a quest for perfection, “a kind of synthesis of human learning in which themes, such as a musical phrase or a philosophical thought, are stated”.<sup>20</sup> To quote the central character Joseph Knecht, who expounds his understanding of the Game:

19 On *constructive* memory, see, e.g., Lindow 2014; also Schacter and Addis 2007.

20 See the anonymous book review in *Time Magazine*, 17.10.1949. In this context it would also be interesting to draw attention to Wittgenstein’s discussion of *Spiel* and *Sprachspiel* and the problems of defining their core zone (cf. also fn. 5 above): “Denken wir doch daran, in was für Fällen wir sagen, ein Spiel werde nach einer bestimmten Regel gespielt” [‘Let us recall that a game is to be played according to a certain rule’] (Wittgenstein 1984: 270). Few ideas are more important for Wittgenstein’s philosophy in his later period than the notion of *Spiel*. As he emphasizes (e.g. Wittgenstein 1984) the rules of a game are not absolutely fixed and hence can be altered (see section 1). But it would lead us too far to follow Wittgenstein’s discussion here.

“Das Spiel, wie ich es meine”, schrieb Knecht einmal an den Alt-Musikmeister, “umschließt nach absolvierter Meditation den Spieler so, wie die Oberfläche einer Kugel ihren Mittelpunkt umschließt, und entläßt ihn mit dem Gefühl, eine restlos symmetrische und harmonische Welt aus der zufälligen und wirren gelöst und in sich aufgenommen zu haben.” (Hesse 1995: 216).

“The Game as I conceive it,” Knecht once wrote to the former Music Master, “encompasses the player after the completion of meditation as the surface of a sphere encompasses its center, and leaves him with the feeling that he has extracted from the universe of accident and confusion a totally symmetrical and harmonious cosmos, and absorbed it into himself.” (Hesse 1987: 197).

In this sense, the Game embraces its players and places them at the center of a perfectly harmonious and symmetrical world, a characteristic which it evidently holds in common with board games such as *hnefatafl* and chess. It is noteworthy that the aura of the gaming gods in *Vǫlospá* is rehearsed on the pictorial rune-stone from Ockelbo. This rune-stone, likely from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, has not received much attention in the research literature on board games. However, as we shall see, this is not because it lacks significance to this field of study.

### 5 *Hnefatafl* on the Ockelbo rune-stone?

*Hnefatafl*, unlike chess, is an asymmetrical game with one king only. The king or *hnefi* (literally ‘fist’) wins by strategy, not by strength. As we have seen, this is not a straightforward war-game as it shares features of the category ‘hunt-game’ according to Murray’s classification (see section 3 above). There are several archaeological finds of game boards with a central hole and four corner holes that are likely to represent variants of *hnefatafl*, the famous Ballinderry board from Ireland and the stone fragment from Derrykeighan, in Ireland. Yet, while it seems very likely that several finds from the Viking Age, and even later times, represent *hnefatafl*, our earliest clear evidence of chess dates to the 1150s, in the form of the now famous Lewis chessmen.<sup>21</sup>

21 On the Lewis hoard, see section 6.

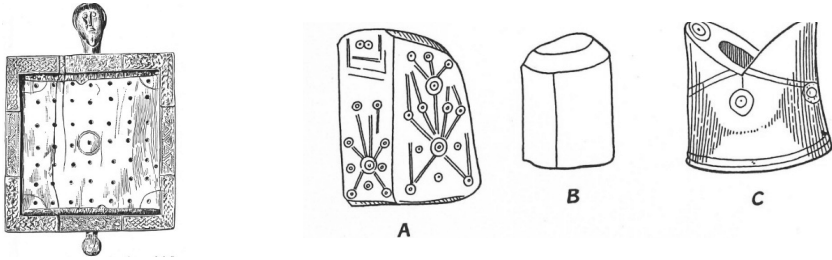


Figure 2: The Ballinderry game-board, National Museum of Ireland, and hnefatafl pieces, jet and bone, Great Britain, Warrington and Oxfordshire (Source: Murray 1952: 59–60)

An important case in point is as we have mentioned, the Ockelbo rune-stone from Gästrikland in Sweden. As is generally the case with rune-stones, dating and interpretation are interdependent, but it seems safe to state that the runic inscription and the drawings on the Ockelbo stone pertain to the end of the 11th century, rather than an earlier period (see especially Berger 1998: 279). The stone was destroyed together with the Ockelbo church in a fire in 1904. The present rune-stone is a copy made in 1932 after drawings by Karl Hjalmar Kempff and Brynolf Måhlén, which has since been erected outside the church.

The Ockelbo stone belongs to a group of rune-stones which depict imagery from the legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, or, Sigurd the Dragonslayer. To this, Schück (1932) and later Ploss (1966) compared the Sigurd imagery on the Gök-stone (SÖ 327) and the Ramsund carvings (SÖ 101), both from Södermanland.<sup>22</sup> Ploss (1966) dealt with historical and typological aspects of motifs connected with the general theme of Siegfried-Sigurd, the Dragonslayer. For our purposes, it merits particular mention that one of the images on the Ockelbo stone shows two gambling men with a drinking horn at a game board. It is eminently possible that both men are holding a drinking horn each, but the illustration (blueprint) is not sharp in this particular area of the stone (see figure 5 below and Källström 2016: 25, ill. 10–12). The Ockelbo stone is lost, but its pictorial de-

22 Ploss' work *Siegfried-Sigurd, der Drachenkämpfer* (1966) received overly positive comments by Kunstmann (1968). Most of the Sigurd stones belong to Uppland, Södermanland and Gästrikland: SÖ 40 Västerljug, U 1163 Drävle, GS 2 Österfärnebo, and GS 9 Årsunda; see Samnordisk runtextdatabas. On the Sigurd stones cf. Fuglesang (2005: 83–87) and Ney (2017).

sign and the runic inscription are preserved through Karl Hjalmar Kempff's and Brynolf Máhlén's blueprint from 1884 (on the history of the Ockelbo stone see Källström 2016: 20–29). Kempff (1885–86: 230–31) describes the rediscovery of the two parts of the rune stone in some detail:

Det var imellertid ej lätt att komma till stenen, ty bade hade K[yrko]h[erde] Nordlund, som ej länge varit där, aldrig sett stenen och visste sålunda ej hvar han kunde finnas [...]. Til sist funno vi imellertid de båda stenhalfvorna vände med ritningen inåt mot väggen i rummet bakom altaret. Med hjälp af folk fingo vi nu båda stenhalfvorna sammanlagda på golfvet i samma rum. Jeg hade tagit afklappningspapper och borste med mig. [...] Inom ett par timmar hade vi fullbordat det; men papperen voro ännu våta. Jag fick derföre lemna dem kvar åt Máhlén att taga reda på och medtaga, då han några dagar senare återvände till Gefle. Några dagar efter hade jag dem ock, och med dem ett nytt tillfälle att i ro och mak taga reda på Ockelbostenen.

'It was not easy, however, to get to the stone because Father Nordlund, who had not been in office there for a long time, never had seen the stone and hence did not know its location [...]. Finally we found the two parts of the stone in the room behind the altar with the carving facing the wall. With the support of other people we put the parts together on the church floor in the same room. I had taken with me blueprint paper and a brush. [...] Within a few hours we completed our task; but the sheets of paper were still wet. Therefore I had to leave them and give them to Máhlén to take care of them until his return to Gävle some days later. After some days I received them, and together with them a new occasion to study the Ockelbo stone at my leisure.' (Cited after Källström 2016, 24; translation M.S.)

Note that the four corners and the central field of the board on the Ockelbo stone are marked, the structure of a *hnefatafl*. The 11th century, to which the Ockelbo rune-stone most likely belongs, was a transitional period between the pagan and Christian religion. In this respect, the eddic poem *Vǫluspá*, which is generally dated to c. 1000 AD or slightly later, is a valuable point of comparison.<sup>23</sup>

23 On the dating of *Vǫluspá*, see Edda (2014 I: 128–31).

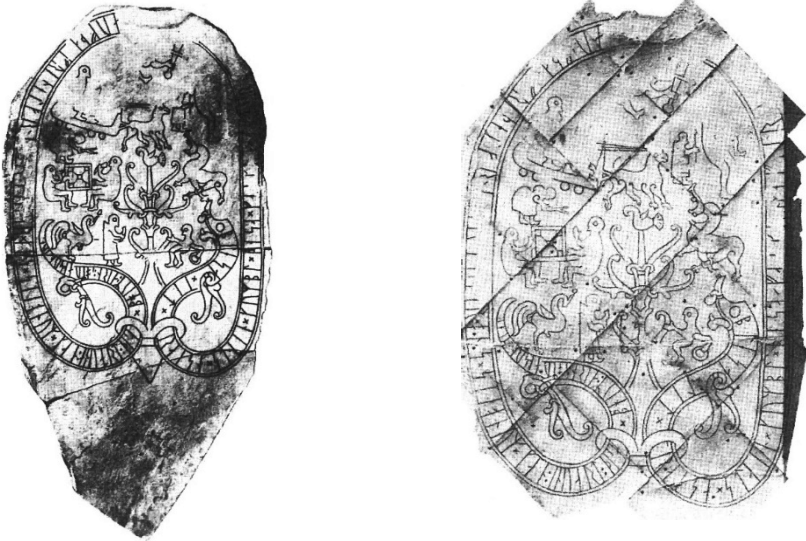


Figure 3: Ockelbo rune-stone, Gästrikland = GS 19, dating: late Viking Age (Source: K. Hj. Kempff 1887; carving reconstructed after Kempff's and Måhlén's blueprint from 1884; cf. Källström 2016: 23)

The scene in question depicts two men playing a board game and cheering to each other with a drinking horn. It has the same aura of balance and harmony as *Vǫlospá*, stanza 8 and 60–62. Ockelbo may be inspired by the golden gaming pieces, or belong to a related tradition, but this is hard to determine. In his discussion of the Ockelbo stone, Ploss (1966: 101) focused on the gaming scene and suggested that it might reflect a ceremonial drinking oath. As he put it, “[b]esonders gelungen ist die Spielszene am Spieltisch, die möglicherweise einen Schwurtrunk darstellt”; [‘the scene at the game board, which possibly reflects a drinking oath, is particularly well-done’]. I have already argued that this type of game board is typically a *hnefatafl*. There are, at any rate, abundant archaeological finds of similar boards, each of them displaying the same orthogonal symmetry with five fields marked off.





Figure 4: Two men playing *hnefatafl*? Detail of the pictorial rune-stone from Ockelbo (GS 19)<sup>24</sup>

## 6 The advent of chess in the North: the Lewis chessmen

So far we have been concerned with *hnefatafl*, for the most part, but we will turn now to the missing link in the history of chess in the North. The advent of chess is generally connected with the Lewis chessmen, a set of ninety-two, or ninety-three, pieces carved of walrus ivory, along with the belt-buckle of a bag that once contained them. The pieces were found in 1831, in a Hebridean sand dune exposed to the sea. The discovery of the hoard has spawned quite a number of tales and narratives, so that it is now difficult to distinguish between truth and myth.<sup>25</sup>

Seventy-eight of these pieces were chessmen. These have since received due scholarly attention. These miniature sculptures are 10 cm high, at the maximum, and the general dating is to the late 12th century.<sup>26</sup>

24 Picture credits: <[https://medievalboardgames.files.wordpress.com/2010/06/gs\\_19\\_ockelbo\\_game](https://medievalboardgames.files.wordpress.com/2010/06/gs_19_ockelbo_game)> (accessed Dec. 13, 2016).

25 Brown (2015: 202–16) duly stresses this issue and addresses the Hebridean tales and narratives that relate to the Lewis hoard. Among these tales are “The house of the black woman” and “The cow and the elves”.

26 See, e.g., Stratford (1997: 47); McLees (1990: 58–9).

The Lewis chessmen form part of four or five incomplete sets, and it was possible to put together two complete sets from the seventy-eight pieces of the four or five incomplete sets that were found. Caldwell et al. (2009), among others, concluded that all or most of the pieces were fabricated at *one* workshop, which had a production site with several skilled craftsmen. Arguments in favour of a Scandinavian origin of the Lewis hoard have been supported by the discovery of similar pieces (most often fragments) in Trondheim, Bergen, Lund and Sønder Nærå in Denmark (see Figure 5).<sup>27</sup> All these pieces reveal striking iconographic similarities, and they belong to the 12th or early 13th centuries. The piece from Bergen, an unfinished knight, is dated to the period between 1170 and 1200, on stratigraphic grounds (Müller 1998: 602).

In the ruins of St. Olav's Church in Trondheim, the fragment of a chesspiece, representing the head and single shoulder of a queen, came to light in the 1980s. As with the Lewis pieces, the queen is holding her hand to her head, a gesture that possibly symbolizes the act of counselling (see Figure 5). It has to be admitted, however, that too little is known about this iconographic symbolism to make any confident interpretations. In County Meath in Ireland, another queen came to light in the first half of the 19th century which is of the same type as the Lewis Queens (see Figure 5). Moreover, in Lund, a fragment of a knight, made of walrus ivory in a similar style, was discovered among waste items of antler and bone in what, at the end of the 12th century, was probably a comb-maker's workshop (Murray 1913: 559-60).<sup>28</sup> It has been argued that all or most of these pieces were crafted at the same workshop, for which Trondheim would have been a favourable location.<sup>29</sup> In addition, three pieces of a rook, a knight and a bishop, dated around AD 1200, were found at Vreta Abbey, Linköping, in Östergötland. The rook which is shaped with 'protuberances' at both sides and a central hole, has a direct counterpart in a piece from Kiev.

In terms of Nordic art history and iconography, these chess pieces clearly testify to a wide cultural network involving Lewis – County

27 On the finds of chess pieces from Lund, Bergen and Sønder Nærå, see Müller (1998: 602). The piece from Sønder Nærå is depicted in Lindahl (1980: 161) with illustration.

28 See also Ferm and Tegnér (2005: 32, 34).

29 See, e.g., Taylor 1991; also Nedoma (2014: 244), with a research summary.

Meath – Trondheim – Bergen – Lund – Sønder Nærå – Vreta Abbey – Kiev, and to an impressive degree of Viking mobility within that network.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the history of the Lewis chessmen encompasses the whole sphere of Viking influence at a time when the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea connected Norway, England, Shetland, Orkney, the Outer Hebrides, Scotland, Ireland, Iceland, Greenland and the Eastern World (see sections 7–9).

## 7 In search of production sites

The earliest interpreter of the Lewis chessmen was Frederic Madden, an avid antiquarian and manuscript keeper at the British Museum, who studied the pieces within a year of their discovery. Madden (1832: 271) believed the hoard was “of Norwegian or Icelandic workmanship”. As he argued, the Western Isles, the Isle of Lewis in particular, were a stop-over on the Icelanders’ trade route that ran through Orkney and Shetland on the way to Scandinavia. Moreover, Lewis was the House of the King of the Isles (Madden 1832: 269, 289–90). His main argument, though, was based on the representation of the rooks or ‘Warders’ “*biting their shields*” (Madden 1832: 271; his emphasis). In his view, “this was a characteristic of the Scandinavian *Berserkar* [sic], who were unarmed warriors subject to fits of madness on the eve of battle, under the influence of which they performed the most extraordinary feats” (Madden 1832: 271).<sup>31</sup>

Harold Murray later accepted Madden’s argument that “[t]he carving of the Rooks as warriors on foot *undoubtedly* points to Icelandic workmanship” (Murray 1913: 759; my emphasis). This ‘Icelandic theory’ was later revived by Fiske and a group of modern Icelanders, Guðmundur Þórarinnsson (2014), in particular. However, doubts about the ‘Icelandic theory’, or even the Scandinavian origin of the Lewis hoard, have been expressed by Caldwell at the National Museum of Scotland. As he stated in a radio interview, “There’s very little about the Lewis chessmen that

30 For further references, see Nedoma (2014: 255); also Müller 1998, with a focus on the continental evidence.

31 With several Old Icelandic references to *berserkr* and *berserksgangr*. Noreen (1932) lists the attestations of ON *berserkr* in the Old Norse – Old Icelandic literature.

you can pin down and say that's Scandinavian. What the Lewis chessmen are portraying is the contemporary kit" (Brown 2015: 199, 264).<sup>32</sup> I will return, at a later point, to the issue as to what a *contemporary kit* may involve (see section 11). One of the main alternatives to the 'Icelandic theory' is the 'Hebridean theory'. However, few scholars have championed the idea that the Western Isles of Scotland and the Outer Hebrides were the site of a production team with such skills. Yet, in view of the Norse settlement on the Isle of Lewis and the Western Isles more generally, I regard this as a strong possibility. As for the place-name evidence, roughly 80 percent of the villages, farmyards and farmsteads on the Isle of Lewis are Norse-derived. Those in the close vicinity of the original location of the hoard are almost all Norse-based, though Gaelicized, and hence, rendered in Gaelic orthography.<sup>33</sup> What is more, Jennings and Kruse (2009) have argued, in my view cogently, for a degree of Norse integration in the Scottish West and thus throw its status as a proper colony into question. The pottery finds pertaining to that time certainly support the notion of high-scale Norse presence and cultural integration on Lewis. As for the place-name evidence, *Mealasta*, for instance, stems from Old Norse *melr*, a 'sandy hill', or 'dune covered with bent grass', combined with the frequent place-name element *-staðir* (pl.), or 'homestead'.<sup>34</sup> Nearby is *Islavig*, from *Íslendingavík*, the 'Bay of the Icelanders', and *Mangersta*, from Old Norse *Mangarastaðir*, the 'Homestead of the merchants'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, it is in harmony with both the archaeological and linguistic evidence when Caldwell et al. (2009) propose that the Lewis chessmen were in fact in the possession of a Norse chieftain on Lewis, and that some pieces could have been used for games other than chess.

Advocates of the 'Norwegian theory', on the other hand, emphasize the evidence from Trondheim and Bergen which, as we have noted above, reveals striking similarities with the Lewis chessmen and the piece from County Meath, Ireland (see figure 5). New recent finds of 'abstract-Arabic' chess pieces from Tønsberg (made of antlers) add to this picture and

32 Caldwell, interviewed in Edinburgh, 16-11-2013.

33 On the Norse name evidence on the Western Isles, see in particular Oftedal 1954; Gammeltoft 2006; cf. also Kruse 2005; Cox 2007.

34 On the frequent sememe *melr*, see Hægstad and Torp (1997: 294).

35 Old Norse *mangari* is a 'small merchant, retailer', also in the negative sense 'haggler'; see Hægstad and Torp 1997: 286.

testify to the presence of earlier variants of chess in Scandinavia.<sup>36</sup> According to the Norwegian theory, it has been suggested that the Lewis hoard stems from the deposit of a Norwegian/Icelandic trader, or a ship sunk near the bay of Uig (Müller 1998: 602). As Murray (1913: 759, 762, note 8, with references) notes,

The tradition is to the effect that a shepherd employed by George Mor Mackenzie (who settled in Lewis, 1614–15) murdered a sailor, who had swum ashore from a wreck with the chessmen in a bag. The shepherd buried the bag in the sand, and never prospered afterwards.

One of the principle supports for a Norwegian origin of the Lewis chessmen is the fact that the Hebrides in the 12th century belonged to the kingdom of Norway. As we saw, it is a Norwegian Earl, Røgnvaldr, residing in the nearby Orkney Islands, that praised the nine skills – one of them being *tafl* (see section 2). However, if Trondheim was the major production site, it seems a bit odd that there is no further evidence than the two fragmentary pieces of a king, from Folkebibliotekstomten, and a queen, from St. Olav’s Church.

Nor can the possibility that Iceland is the origin be excluded. One basic argument is that Icelanders were engaging in ivory trade. After Madden (1832), the ‘Icelandic theory’ was supported, not least, by Williard Fiske, who crossed Iceland on horseback in 1879. Fiske, in his work, *Chess in Iceland*, collected numerous examples of the Icelanders’ fondness for chess from medieval Icelandic literature, as well as from letters written more recently (Fiske 1905: e.g. 33, 36, 42). In 1627/1628, for instance, Fiske reports, an Icelandic priest, the Reverend Magnús Ólafsson, wrote that he had dispatched a set of Icelandic chessmen, accompanied by two Latin stanzas, to the Danish antiquarian Olaus Worm (Ole Worm) (Fiske 1905: 33). Fiske’s now classic book, *Chess in Iceland*, was published posthumously, in 1905, but he never managed to present the second volume which was intended to contain, among other things, “notes on the carved chessmen and other chess objects found in the Museums of Scandinavia and England, commonly regarded as the productions of Icelandic workshops” (Fiske 1905: preface, p. VIII). Fiske (1905)

36 The recently found piece from Tønsberg is a knight; see <https://www.nrk.no/vestfold/kan-ha-tilhort-middelalderens-magnus-carlsen-1.13694032> (date of access: 20-09-2017).

makes no direct reference to the Lewis chessmen in the first volume. Recently, the Icelander Guðmundur Þórarinnsson (2014) revived the ‘Icelandic theory’ which, in addition to Frederic Madden and W. Fiske, had since been advocated by Harold Murray.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, very few scholars have ever advocated the notion of a British origin.<sup>38</sup> By way of conclusion, it seems uncontroversial to state that the Lewis chessmen are Norse by origin, but in view of the existence of credible arguments for several other points of origin, the attempt to pinpoint a definite production site remains a matter of conjecture, whether in Norway, Iceland, Great Britain or, more broadly speaking, somewhere in Scandinavia as a whole.



Figure 5: Chess-pieces in northern Europe: figural versus abstract<sup>39</sup>

37 On the Lewis chessmen, see Murray 1913: 758-61, with precise drawings.

38 But see Dalton (1909: 63-4) who ascribes the Lewis chessmen to the 12th century and identifies them as British carvings; see also Murray (1913: 759).

39 Picture credits: Müller (1998: 598). Ill. 1-7. Figural (non-abstract) chess-pieces. 1-4. Lewis chessmen: 1. a king, 2. a queen, 3. a bishop, 4. a knight (Murray 1913: 5-6). The Trondheim pieces: 5. King from Folkebibliotekstomten, 6. Queen from St.

## 8 Viking mobility and chess

It is reported that Knútr, King of England, Denmark and Norway, made a donation of two precious games of chess (in the Latin *duobus jocos scaccorum* ‘with two games of chess’) to the Abbey of Winchester where his relics were buried after his death (see Murray 1913: 404, 419; also 419, with note 5). This donation is presumably to be dated around 1016 AD whereas the Latin text only goes back to 1144 AD. On another occasion, chapter 75 of *Chronicon Abbatiae Ramesiensis*, or the *Ramsey Chronicle*, reports that King Knútr was in the habit of playing chess to relieve the weariness of long nights (Chronicon, ed. Macray 1886: 137):

Ipse [Aethericus episcopus; H.M.] [...] regem [Canutum; H.M.] adhuc tenerarum vel scaccorum ludo longioris taedia noctis relevantem invenit;

‘He [Bishop Aetheric; M.S.] [...] has found the King still relieving the tedium of a long night with a game of dice or chess.’

As Murray (1913: 419) notes, the composition of the *Ramsey Chronicle* is “certainly later than 1160, and probably [later] than 1170”. This means that the text lags about 150 years behind the reported event, with the result that we cannot set great store by this tradition, nor the one relating to King Haraldr harðráði. The donation of a walrus ivory chess set by Gunnar the Greenlander may be based on fiction or on fact.

Yet, as uncertain as these accounts may be, both these kings, as they appear in more reliable sources, exemplify the enormous mobility which characterised the Viking World at the time. King Haraldr, after having lost the battle of Stiklastaðir, took refuge in *Kænugarðr* or Kiev, and found protection with Jaroslav Vlastimirovič, called the Wise.<sup>40</sup> Haraldr then fled to Byzantium, Old Norse *Miklagarðr*, and, along with 500 attendants, he participated in raids on Sicily, Greece and North-Africa.<sup>41</sup>

Olav’s Church (McLees 1990). 7. King from Harbrough, Humberside, Graveyard St. Margret (Kluge-Pinsker 1995). — 8–11. Abstract chess-pieces from Aachen, Ambo Heinrichs II.: king, bishop, knight, rook (Kluge-Pinsker 1995). — 12–14. Other gaming-pieces from Trondheim, Folkebibliotekstomten (McLees 1990).

40 On King Harald’s biography, see Waßenhoven (2006: 202); Scheel (2015 I: 51–54 and 293–372 et passim).

41 On the literary sources, including the itineraries and the references in Old Norse sagas, see Scheel (2015 II: 1011–39 et passim).

In regard to the possibility of his familiarity with chess, it is noteworthy that Haraldr spent eight years in Byzantium, 1034–42 AD, and came back to Norway in 1045 AD. This was a perfect setting for direct or indirect contact with the chess game from the Muslim World, known to Vikings by the name of *Serkland* (*Særkland*).<sup>42</sup> Another possible path of transmission of chess is through Southern Italy since the Saracens dominated it until 1000 AD, while Sicily remained Muslim another sixty years or more.<sup>43</sup> King Haraldr, at any rate, finally returned to Norway via the Rus', came to power and fell in the battle of Stamford Bridge 1066 AD (Scheel 2015 I: 31, 300; and 2015 II: 1011–16). Given this background, it is indeed likely that King Haraldr had knowledge of chess by the time he returned to Norway.

King Knútr the Great is connected with chess in three literary passages, two of which have already been addressed above.<sup>44</sup> The question is whether these passages are founded on fact. As *Knýtlinga saga*, Ch. 17, reports, Knútr travelled to Rome at Easter 1027 and exchanged gifts with the Pope and the newly enthroned Emperor, Konrad II. (Waßenhoven 2006: 86–7 and 221–22). Waßenhoven (2006: 72) also lists some fifty-seven Scandinavians who travelled to Rome in the period 1000–1250 AD. Therefore, King Knútr and King Haraldr are both likely to have been agents through whom the game of chess was spread to the Northern World.

## 9 All roads lead to Rome – or rather Byzantium?

The accounts of pilgrims, crusaders, merchants and other travellers demonstrate that the established route system from Scandinavia included multiple routes by both sea and land to Rome and to the Holy Land. The itineraries of pilgrims and other wayfarers demonstrate that a full-fledged route system led more or less directly from northern Germany via the

42 On the runic evidence (at least six certain instances), see Peterson (2007: 321), under *Særkland*.

43 Possible intercultural contacts and contact zones between Europeans and Muslims are discussed by Murray (1913: 405).

44 See, e.g., Murray (1913: 404, 419 and 443).



Swiss Alps to Rome (Springer 1975: 350).<sup>45</sup> The sources often distinguish between *inn vestri leið* and *inn eystri leið*, as do, for instance, chapters 158–9 of *Brennu-Njáls saga*. In the present context, it suffices to say that the distinctions between eastern and western routes vary widely from source to source, but that they all involve continental Europe and hence must not be conflated with the Eastern Route or *Austrleið* which went by way of the Rus'.<sup>46</sup> A good example of the wide array of possible routes available at the time is found in the twelfth-century itinerary named *Leiðarvísir*, which depicts a road system with several alternative routes to Rome. As Waßenhoven (2006: 79) notes,

Der *Leiðarvísir* scheint nicht nur *einen* Weg zu beschreiben, der von vielen Romreisenden benutzt wurde, sondern lässt ein Wegenetz europäischen Ausmaßes erkennen.

['The *Leiðarvísir* seems to depict not only *one* road, which was used by many travellers to Rome, but rather a road system of European scale.']

What seems particularly striking is that pilgrims, whether bishops or other wayfarers, often had an average travel speed, or marching pace, of more than 30 kilometers per day. In the year 1225, for instance, the pilgrim, Ketill, travelled from Niðarós to Rome within 45 days, and covered the distance between Rostock and Rome, via the Brenner pass, roughly 1400 kilometers, within 33 days. Springer (1975: 371), based on the information of several itineraries, arrives at an average travel speed of 42 kilometers per day. In this estimate, Springer confirms the findings of Ludwig (1897), almost a century earlier. These observations demonstrate, not only the reliability of the routes by which the Viking World maintained contact with Italy and the Middle East, but the rapidity at which ideas and practices could spread along these routes, whether by land or sea.

Thus, having established that knowledge of chess was possible in the North at quite an early date, we now face the final question of how chess actually arrived there. Murray (1913: 404–5) wisely stressed that “[w]e have no means of determining the exact place or places where chess first

45 See also Waßenhoven (2006: 74–91), with illustrations.

46 See for example the *Rómavegr* sketched by Waßenhoven (2006: 79).

became a European game”. European chess, I would argue, must have been shaped, over time, by multilateral cultural encounters in the different zones of contact which were sustained by the complex road system discussed above.<sup>47</sup> This being the case, it will be methodologically important to consider the way that various forms of direct and indirect cultural contact, made possible by this infrastructure, led to the reshaping of the chess game in the North, during the Viking Age. In my view, Vikings must have played a key-role in this cultural *and* linguistic encounter.

There are at least *two* major route systems which brought chess to the North: the Eastern Route and the Southern Route. Linder has argued that the traders of the Kievan Rus’ had already transferred chess to Northern Europe in the 9th and 10th centuries (Linder 1975: 52, 55–60).<sup>48</sup>

On the whole, mainstream research stresses the importance of the continental route which led via Central Europe, i.e. the Iberian Peninsula and southern Italy, whereas it tones down the role that the Eastern Route might have played.<sup>49</sup> In my view, this continental European bias is partly due to the parsimony of *direct* archeological and literary evidence when it comes to the game of chess along the Eastern trade route. As a matter of fact, clear confirmatory evidence for the early introduction of chess in Russia is lacking before the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. As Eales (1985: 48) puts it, “[t]he onus of proof still rests on those who want to suggest additional areas of reception.” But the argument is by no means far-fetched since the Rus’ shared a cultural identity and a cultural memory with their Scandinavian homeland.<sup>50</sup> This sense of community was maintained, in part, through subsequent Rus-Viking intermarriages and the resulting Russian-Scandinavian pedigrees.<sup>51</sup> Characteristic items of elite Viking-age culture function as badges of identity and, I would add, as triggers of cultural memory. Compare the gaming gods in *Vǫluspá*, who enact

47 Among the plenitude of works on the history of chess in Medieval Europe see Golombek 1976, Eales 1985: 39–70, Vale 2001 and Wilkins 2002.

48 See also Müller (1998: 603).

49 See e.g. Eales 1985: 48, also Nedoma 2014. More positive about the Eastern route are, for instance, Holländer 1993: 392 and Plessow 2007: 19.

50 On the cultural memory of the Rus’, see Poole 2014. On the notion of Old Norse cultural memory see, e.g., Heslop 2014.

51 See, e.g., Scheel (2015 II: 1086–87), with reference to *Knýtlinga saga*, Ch. 88.

cultural memory (see section 4 above). As Duczko (2004: 228; my emphasis) notes,

The set of Danish pendants and the hoard of gold rings are testimony enough to the **living Norse culture** in Kiev. By contacts with the North the elite of Rus could obtain, and use, the main elements of the ideological and religious culture that was current in tenth century Scandinavia.

The Eastern Route, or *Austrleið*, ran via the Baltic Sea and the Volga trade route to Kiev and, from there, to Byzantium. The empire of the Rus', the Scandinavian settlement in Russia, was founded already 862 AD by Vikings from Svealand.<sup>52</sup> It must have been a matter of course for Vikings and Scandinavian rulers to follow this route system once it was established in the early Viking Age. At any rate, the great importance of the Eastern Route is evident in the abundance of references in the sagas and runic inscriptions to *Garðar*, *Garðaríki* (Rus'), *Holmgarðr* (Novgorod), *Kænugarðr* (Kiev), and related place-names.<sup>53</sup> Runic graffiti from the Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul confirm that Vikings probably from different parts of Scandinavia stayed in Byzantium (see Svärdström 1970, Larsson 1989, also Knirk 1999: 26). Recently, Russian epigraphists in search of Cyrillic inscriptions discovered one of these runic inscriptions containing the typical carver formula: *N.N. (Arinbárðr) reist rúnar þessar* (older: *þā(r)si*) 'N.N. carved these runes.' (for detail see Melnikova 2016).

A case in point is the famous Alstad stone from Østre Toten (siglum N61–62), which bears two inscriptions, one being slightly younger than the other one. The younger Alstad inscription reports on a voyage to *Garðaríki*. It tells us that Þóraldr died around 1050 AD on his way to the Rus' in Vitaholm, probably close to the vicinity of Kiev.

There is other evidence for the importance of the Eastern Route in the form of 'autobiography'. A catalogue of deeds is presented by King Haraldr harðráði in his *Gamanvísur* ('Jesting Verses') in which he narrates his expeditons of *c.* 1043–44 AD to the East.

52 On the cultural importance of the Rus', see Pritsak 1981; Androshchuk 2008; moreover Duczko 2004.

53 On the runic evidence, see e.g. Peterson (2007: 312, 314, 322, 324), under *Garðar* (*Garðaríki*), *Holmgarðr*, *Ustaholmr*, and *Vitaholmr*. On the references in the sagas, see e.g. Waßenhoven 2006 and Scheel 2015 II.

Fundr var þess, at Þrændir  
Þeir hófðu lið meira;  
varð, sú s vér of gerðum,  
víst errilig snerra.  
skilðumk ungr við ungan  
allvald í styr fallinn;  
Þó lætr Gerðr í Gørðum  
Gollhrings við mér skolla.

‘The encounter was such that Þrændir had more troops; the fight which we had was truly fierce. I parted, young, from the young overlord, fallen in battle; yet the Gerðr of the gold ring [lady] in Russia ridicules me.’ (Gade 2009: 35, 36).

This type of autobiographical discourse, often written in skaldic verse form, is a valuable source for the activities of the Rus’ far away from their homeland Scandinavia.<sup>54</sup> Further down this eastern road system from Novgorod and Kiev, by way of the Caspian Sea, was *Miklagarðr*, or Byzantium. Byzantium/Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, was regarded as the link between East and West and, throughout the Viking World, as the centre of all sciences. As Shepard (2008: 510) states,

Byzantium, rather than Rus, seems to have been proverbial for its wealth in the eleventh-century Scandinavian world, and sagas’ claims for the riches brought back by Haraldr from ‘Micklegarth’ echo those of Adam of Bremen.<sup>55</sup>

Byzantium, or Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, was the largest and wealthiest city in Europe from the mid-5th century to the early 13th century (cf. Pounds 1979: 124). This center functioned as a cultural and religious melting pot not least from the Vikings’ point of view (Scheel 2015). Shepard concludes that the politico-cultural order of the Rus’ “engendered conditions facilitating exchanges of goods, albeit through multiple transactions in Rus’, between the Nordic and Mediterranean worlds on a scale not seen before” (Shepard 2008: 511). Until the 11th century, the Scandinavian presence along the trade route Staraja

54 For an overview over this type of autobiography, see Poole 2014.

55 With reference to Adam of Bremen (2000: 394).

Ladoga – Novgorod – Kiev and further to Byzantium, is clearly demonstrated by the archeological evidence, including, but not limited to, the remains of Kievan sites where Norse carvings and jewellery were produced. Norse jewellers, both Norwegian and Danish, were involved in the production of jewellery art, and there are traces of wood carvers' workshops.<sup>56</sup> Many of these archaeological finds, e.g. golden armrings and brooches, testify to the presence of “the elite culture of Viking-age Scandinavia, provided with a whole ideology that concerned both social hierarchy as well as religious manifestations” (Duczko 2004: 228). Thus, it is far from unexpected that Norse chess pieces from the 12th century came to light in the region of Kiev, and elsewhere in Ukraine (Müller 1998: 606).

## 10 Journeymen to the East and oriental imports

Thus, it would appear that the accounts of famous Vikings such as Haraldr harðráði, Sigurðr Jórsalafari and his protégé Kali Kolsson from Agder, the future Earl Rognvaldr of Orkney travelling to Miklagarðr are, in principle, quite credible. As I have argued, Arabs and Scandinavians had far-reaching cultural and mercantile contacts both via the Mediterranean and the Eastern Route. The Eastern Route to *Miklagarðr* is not, as we have seen, the only way that chess could have been brought to the Viking North, since both Arabs and Scandinavians had, at the time, far-reaching cultural and mercantile contacts via the Mediterranean as well. Sicily, as I mentioned, was ruled by Muslims in the 10th century. In addition to the evidence discussed above, some of the earliest archeological evidence of these links exists in the form of coinage: Cufic coins from the 700s in southern Norway, and *dinars* from the Seine in France, in 858 AD made their way to Øvre Eiker in Buskerud (NIyR II: 132–37; see also Mikkelsen 2008: 546–47). The stream of coins into Scandinavia started at the end of the eighth century and lasted until *c.* 1015 AD (see Hovén 1981). Moreover, thousands of *dirhams*, Arab silver coins, and other related items, feature in Viking Age, and early medieval, material contexts discovered throughout Scandinavia and Northern Europe.

56 On the Kievan production sites, see e.g. Duczko (2004: 226–28) and Capelle (1998: 561–63).

Weight systems and other technological innovations are also among the artefacts from the Arab world reaching Scandinavia during the Viking Age (Mikkelsen 2008: 547). These ‘oriental imports’ are all potentially interpretable as expressions of trade and cultural transfer. King Haraldr harðráði, for instance, had coins with him from Byzantium which were, in turn, used as models for the production of Scandinavian coins (Scheel 2015 I: 354–55).

The Southern Route which leads to Rome and further to Byzantium has been addressed already. 11th- and 12th-century itineraries such as the Icelandic *Leiðarvísir* highlight the Alpine route via Germany to Italy. These sources describe a full-fledged route system based on the old *Rómavegr*. As far as the Mediterranean Route is concerned, the terminology associated with chess seems to support the idea that Latin played an important role in the transfer of chess to the North.

However, as Matras noted as early as 1962, the long vowels of Old Norse *mát* and *skák* could have been derived directly from Persian (*esh-shāh māt* ‘the King is dead’) or Middle Low German (*schāh und māt*).<sup>57</sup> The Middle High German equivalent of this phrase is *schāh unde mat*. The form *mát* ‘mate’ with its long root-vowel is well preserved in Modern Icelandic and Faroese as opposed to Middle Lat. *mattus* and Old French *mat*, French *échech et mat* (cf. also French *mater* ‘destroy, kill’).<sup>58</sup> Middle Low German is separated from Old Saxon by a period in which no Low German records survive, the first Middle Low German texts dating from the beginning of the thirteenth century. This rather late date suggests that the Old Norse forms *mát* and *skák* (including the derived *ōn-* and *ijan-*verbs *skáka*, *skækja* ‘to take one of the opponent’s pieces according to the rules of chess’) are likely to stem from Persian-Arabic more or less directly with the supportive influence of German-Norse language contact; cf. MHG *schāch*, OHG *scāh* ‘robbery, plunder’ and MLG *schāken* ‘to take one of the opponent’s pieces’ (ON *skáka*, *skækja*). In these cases, contamination is likely indeed.<sup>59</sup> But the long root-vowel

57 On this and related matters of linguistic transfer, see especially Nedoma 2014. De Vries (1962: 480) suggests a transfer from Persian via Italian *scacco* and Low German *schāb*, *schāk*.

58 See Ásgeir Bl. Magnússon 1995: 608, under *mát* (2), also De Vries 1962: 380, under *mát* (2).

59 Kluge (1995: 708), without mentioning ON *skák*, *mát*, rejects the Persian origin of G *Schach* and *matt* as a random resemblance (“zufällige Ähnlichkeit”); he relates

*ā* is virtually absent in Latin, Italian, Old French (cf. Latin *mactare* ‘to kill’, French *mater*) and in many varieties of German (cf. MHG *mat* and the prefix derivation *er-matten* ‘to exhaust, tire’).<sup>60</sup> Hence, it is by no means impossible that the Norse forms *mát* and *skák* with their long root-vowels are interlexemes due to direct Arabic-Viking contacts as Matras suggested some 60 years ago. Another possible Arabism in Old Norse is the term *brókr* (Modern Icel. *brókur*, Far. *rókur*) ‘rook’ which has been deployed by Kali in a pun (see section 3). Again, a short root vowel is met in Old French *roc(k)*, *roċ*, Italian *rocco*, Middle Latin *rochus*, from Latin *roculus*, Middle High German *roch*, and Middle Low German *roch*. The ultimate source of this lexeme is Persian *rukḥ*, *rokh*, the original meaning of which is ‘chariot’.<sup>61</sup>

Whatever the case, it seems to be certain that Vikings were a *primus motor* in the cultural and linguistic accommodation of chess in the West. The importance of Viking mobility via sea and land routes cannot be overrated, a conclusion which is supported by the fact that the Lewis chessmen are among the earliest figural (non-abstract) chess pieces that came to light in Europe, in contrast to the abstract-Arabic type (Müller 1998: 600–2, 605) (see Figure 5). However, this distinction between (earlier) Arabic non-figurative and (later) European figurative chess pieces is not an absolute one: early figurative Arabic pieces are in evidence, not least the famous chess set which until quite recently was known as ‘Charlemagne’s chessmen’ (the contemporary western emperor and King of the Franks who died in 814) which probably stem from Salerno and date to the 11<sup>th</sup> century (see Eales 1985: 20, 22).

## 11 Conclusion

While the exact origin of the Lewis chessman remains a debatable issue, Caldwell’s notion of a *contemporary kit* entails a shift of focus from workshop locations to the transfer and spread of technology through the

Modern German *Schach* directly to OFrench *eschac* ‘booty, robbery’ (cf. Middle High German *schāh* and Old High German *scāh* ‘robbery’).

60 See Kluge 1995: 545, under *matt*, and fn. 58–59.

61 See fn. 12 above. Cf. also OED 1610 [79], under *rook* (2), De Vries 1962: 259, under *brókr* (2).

Viking diaspora. As evidenced by the literary sources, a lot of Vikings, i.e. Norwegians, Icelanders, Danes, and Swedes, came to the *Austrvegr*, the regions southeast of the Baltic Sea. The Rus' obviously played an intermediary role in the transfer of chess to the North, much like continental Europe, Italy, Spain and Germany, in particular. It is therefore tempting to argue that, after the turn of the millennium, at least two basic European models of chess evolved which gradually interacted and merged: a *Norse* model, represented by the Lewis chessmen, and another model (or rather models), based on the mediation of chess through continental Europe: via Spain, Italy and Sicily, France, and Germany. Literary sources, such as the *Einsiedeln verses*, have already been mentioned. Judging both by the terminology used to describe the chessmen, and the shapes of the actual chess pieces, there were striking typological differences between these models.

The Old Norse variants of chess must have been largely influenced by their precursor, *hnefatafl*. Linguistically, there was at least one major difference between these two cultural zones: Old Norse culture was an orally-based memory culture, which accommodated Roman literacy in the wake of Christianization, c. 1050–1150 AD, whereas the Mediterranean and Central European cultures were ancient literate cultures, in which Latin was the *lingua franca*.<sup>62</sup> The Roman alphabet is introduced rather late in the North in comparison to continental Europe and Anglo-Saxon England. In Norway, for example, the alphabet was enlisted to record the vernacular around 1100 AD, a process which occurred still later in Iceland (Schulte 2015, 103). The lesser influence of Latin in the North is, evidently, the reason for the differences in the relevant terminology, noted above; the long vowels of Old Norse *mát* and *skák* are incompatible with late Latin *mattus* (Latin *mactare* 'to kill') and *scacc(h)us* (cf. also the appendix on chess terminology in section 12).

Thus, when we turn back to a young nobleman like Kali Kolsson, it seems more likely than not that when he is said by the *Orkneyinga saga* to have boasted of knowing *tafl*, among the nine skills, this does indeed mean chess. Certainly, the journey he is reported to have taken through Europe and the Mediterranean to the Holy Land would have presented him with the opportunity to indulge in this aristocratic pastime, a conclusion which would similarly apply to King Haraldr harðráði and Knútr

62 On Norse memory culture, see e.g. Hermann et al. 2014.



the Great in the eleventh century. While there are no firm grounds to deem the famous chess scenes in the sagas as ‘historical’, direct contact with the Byzantine Empire and the Muslim World in the tenth and eleventh centuries are key factors.

## 12 Appendix: Terminological equations between Persian-Arabic, Latin, German and Old Norse

Modern English equivalent	Persian-Arabic term	Pre-1200 Latin term	German terms	Nordic terms
<i>king</i>	<i>shāh</i> ‘king’	<i>rex</i> ‘king’	<i>König</i>	ON <i>konungr</i>
<i>queen</i>	<i>fīrz</i> , <i>fīrzan</i> ‘vizir’ or ‘wise man’	1 <i>regina</i> ‘queen’ 2 <i>femina</i> ‘lady’ 3 <i>ferzia</i> ‘queened pawn’	<i>Dame</i>	ON <i>dróttning</i>
<i>bishop</i>	( <i>al-</i> ) <i>fīl</i> ‘elephant’	1 <i>comes</i> ‘count’ or ‘companion’ 2 <i>senex, calvus</i> ‘old man’ or ‘counsellor’ 3 <i>Alphicus</i>	<i>Läufer</i>	ON <i>biskup(r)</i>
<i>knight</i>	<i>faras</i> ‘horse’	1 <i>eques</i> ‘rider, cavalry-man’ 2 <i>caballarius</i> ‘horseman’ 3 <i>miles</i> ‘knight’	<i>Springer</i>	ON <i>riddari</i> (earlier <i>riðari</i> )
<i>rook</i>	<i>rukh, rokh</i> ‘chariot’	1 <i>rochus</i> (MLat. <i>roccus</i> ‘rochet, ecclesiastical vestment’) 2 <i>marchio</i> ‘marquess’	<i>Turm</i>	ON <i>hrókr</i> (cf. fn. 12 above)
<i>pawn</i>	<i>baidaq</i> ‘foot-man’	<i>pedes</i> ‘foot-man’	<i>Bauer</i>	OIceI./Far. <i>peð</i>

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## Sammendrag

Forholdet mellom sjakkspillet og dets forløper *hnefatafl* er innfløkt, og vanligvis blir disse to brettspill i norrøne kilder omtalt med ett begrep: *tafl*. Eddadiktet *Völuspá* og den forholdsvis lite kjente Ockelborunesteinen fra Sverige (antakelig fra det 11. årh.) kaster lys over disse

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kulturhistoriske sammenhengene. Artikkelen tar utgangspunkt i Jarl Rognvalds velkjente strofe om hans ni ferdigheter, og det argumenteres for at jarlen faktisk mente *skáктаfl* da han refererte til *tafl*, og at tradisjonen for *skák* har vært rik på Jarl Rognvalds tid. Men først og fremst brukes sjakkbrikkene fra Lewis og andre funn i denne argumentasjonen for å belyse et velfungerende kontaktnettverk mellom Norden, Storbritannia, Sentraleuropa, Middelhavet, Russland og videre til Kiev og Det bysantinske riket (dvs. Østromerriket mellom 395 og 1453). Det virker rimelig at kjennskapen til sjakk har spredd seg nordover til Skandinavia både gjennom en Middelhavsroute via Den iberiske halvøya (Pyrenéhalvøya) og Sør-Italia/Sicilia nordover til Nordvesteuropa og samtidig gjennom en østlig rute fra Miklagard og nordover til Skandinavia gjennom Russland og Baltikum. Med andre ord, det fantes et omfattende veisystem som innbefattet både *Austrleið* og *Vestrleið*. I dette bidraget vektlegges den østlige veien ikke minst på grunn av selve sjakkterminologien: gno. *mát* og *skák* kan tolkes som arabismer uten direkte latinsk formidling.

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