

ALEA EVANGELII

by Damian Walker

FURTHER INFORMATION

The following books give information about alea evangelii and other forms of hnefatafl.

Bell, R. C. *Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations*, pp. 79-91. New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1979.

Bell, R. C. *Games to Play*, p. 24. London: Michael Joseph Limited, 1988.

Botermans, J. et al. *The World of Games*, pp. 119-120. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1989.

Murray, H. J. R. *A History of Board-Games Other Than Chess*, pp. 55-64. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952.

Parlett, D. *The Oxford History of Board Games*, pp. 196-204. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

In preparing these rules, I also consulted the following less accessible books:

Linnaeus, C. *Lachesis Lapponica*, vol. 2, pp. 55-58. London: White & Cochrane, 1811.

Robinson, J. A. *The Times of St. Dunstan*, pp. 70-71. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1923.

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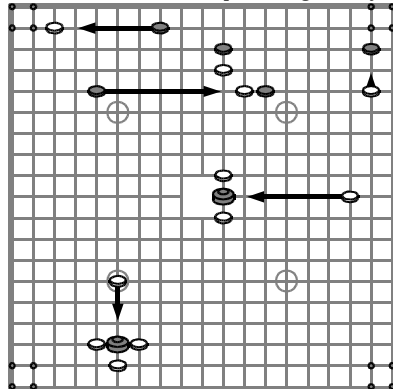
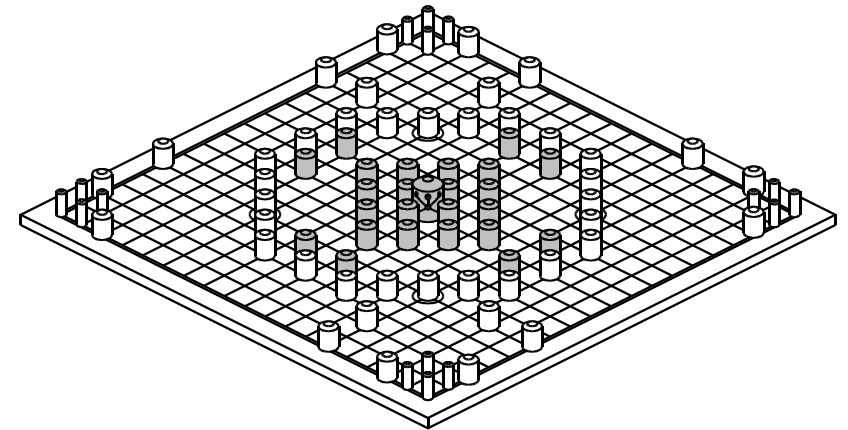


Illustration 3: some capturing moves. Note captures against the central square and the fixed corner men, and the multiple capture above the middle of the board.



INTRODUCTION & HISTORY

Corpus Christ College, Cambridge, owns an interesting manuscript dating to 1140. One of the things that makes it interesting is that it depicts a board game which, the manuscript says, was played in the court of king Athelstan 200 years earlier. It calls the game *alea evangelii*, the game of the gospels.

The game features a king in the centre of the board, and a large number of men around him. This is a kind of *hnefatafl*, a game brought to the British Isles by Norse invaders who settled mainly in the northern areas. In *hnefatafl*, a king in the centre must escape from the

board with the help of his guards, while twice their number of attackers attempt to capture them. In *alea evangelii*, the numbers are 24 defenders and 48 attackers, making this the largest *hnefatafl* game known.

Hnefatafl was popular in the British Isles until the coming of chess, and was last recorded being played in Wales in 1587. *Alea evangelii* itself is not recorded outside the Corpus Christi manuscript, but this a board of 15 squares by 15 found at York suggests an English preference for large versions of *hnefatafl*.

HOW TO PLAY

Alea Evangelii is played by two people on the intersections of a square board. The board has 19 lines in each direction. Sixteen points in the corners are marked with fixed men who belong to neither side but prevent others from landing there. A gap in the lines is the king's space, or

castle, and four other points are marked with a circle to aid the setting up of the pieces. One player has a king and 24 faithful *dukes*, while the other has 48 rebellious *counts*.

Beginning the Game

1. The game begins with the pieces set out as in

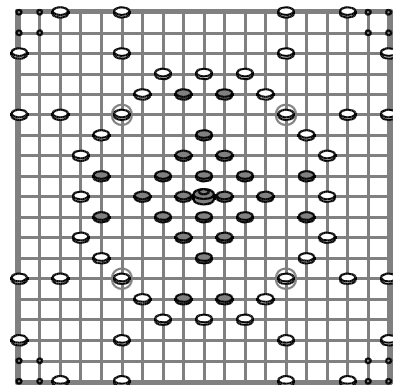


Illustration 1: *alea evangelii* set out for play.

Illustration 1.

2. The king's side takes the first move, play then alternating between players.

Moving the Pieces

3. In his turn a player moves one of his pieces along a straight line, horizontally or vertically as shown in Illustration 2.

4. No piece may land on another, nor is there any jumping.

5. Only the king can land on the central space, though other pieces can pass through it.

6. Only the king may move to the spaces occupied by the fixed men: see rule 11.

Capturing Enemies

7. The king is captured by surrounding him on all four sides by counts. If he is next to the central square or the edge of the board, he may be captured

by surrounding him on the other three sides (see Illustration 3 for various examples of capture).

8. Dukes and counts are captured by surrounding them with enemies on two opposite sides, horizontally or vertically. Two or three men may be captured simultaneously if each falls between the moving piece and another enemy.

9. The fixed men in the corners may be used to capture pieces by either player.

10. A piece may come to rest voluntarily between two others, without being captured.

Ending the Game

11. If the king moves to one of the squares occupied by the fixed men, he has escaped the board and wins the game.

12. If the king is captured by his opponents, then he has lost the game.

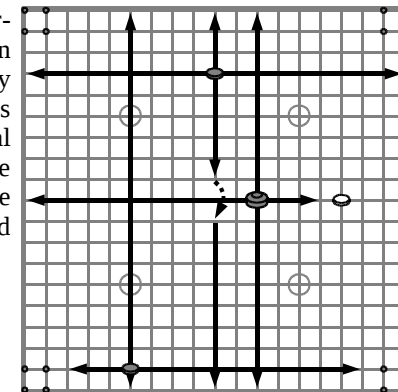


Illustration 2: the moves of the pieces, showing how they are blocked by the fixed men and other pieces, and how a piece other than the king may not land on the central space.