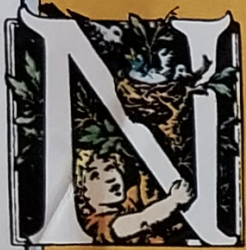


The Traditional Game of



INE



EN'S



MORRIS

Nine Men's Morris is an ancient game and has enjoyed a world-wide distribution. The earliest known board was discovered cut into one of the great stone roofing slabs of the Egyptian temple at Kurna on the western bank of the Nile at Thebes, now known as Luxor. The building was begun by Rameses I (1400–1366 B.C.) and completed by Seti I (1366–1333 B.C.). The morris board is one of several gaming boards which were probably cut by the masons who were shaping the slabs in the quarries before they were placed in their final positions, for three different games' diagrams were partly cut away in trimming the edges of the slabs to make an accurate fit into their final position.

Two similar boards have been found cut on the great flight of steps up the hill at Mihimitali in Ceylon, and others on the rock near Lankarama dagaba. These were made not later than the first century A.D. A board is inscribed on a flat stone in a burial site of the late Stone or early Bronze Age at Bray in County Wicklow, Ireland; while the Gokstad ship of the Viking Age, c. 900 A.D. contained part of a wooden gaming board for Hnefatafl on one side and Nine Men's Morris on the other.

Many cathedrals of monastic origin have cloister seats carved with these boards; silent reminders of the tedious hours spent by the monks in devotion; there is a board scratched into the steps of the Chapter House at Furness Abbey; and others in Norwich, Dover and Scarborough castles and on stones built into several churches, including one at Kirby Underdale in Yorkshire. Two boards have been found at Pilgrims' Castle, Atlit, Palestine, built by the Crusaders between 1217 and 1291.

The game is carefully described in an illuminated manuscript known as the *Libro de juegos* prepared at the command of Alphonso X, King of Spain, in 1283. There are two illustrations of Nine Men's Morris boards in the work. The first shows two players sitting cross-legged in traditional Moorish fashion, with the board up-ended to permit the reader to see it clearly. In the second illustration two young Spanish noblemen sit at the sides of an upright board and behind them two friends hold their spears. They are using dice, a method of play which seems to have been confined to Spain. This interesting variant of Nine Men's Morris is described in the manuscript where it is called *Alquerque de nueve*; and

required the use of three six-sided dice with the faces numbered one to six. While entering pieces onto the board in the first phase of the game the players threw all the dice with the introduction of each piece onto the board and throws of 6 : 5 : 4, 6 : 3 : 3, 5 : 2 : 2 or 4 : 1 : 1, permitted the caster to break into an opposing mill and capture one of his opponent's pieces. If he made a mill of his own on the same turn of play he made another capture, thus removing two of his opponent's pieces. Other throws of the dice were disregarded and the player entered a piece onto the board in the usual way. These hand-painted illustrations in several colours are minor works of art in their own right.

Fourteenth-century writers refer to Nine Men's Morris as enjoying widespread popularity, while Shakespeare in the sixteenth century introduced the game into his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Titania, the queen of the fairies, speaking to Oberon, says:

"The Nine Men's Morris is filled up with mud,
and the quaint mazes in the wanton green
For lack of tread are indistinguishable."

Rules of Nine Men's Morris

1. First move is decided by one player taking a piece and putting it behind his back and then bringing both hands forward in front of his body with the palms closed and his opponent has to guess which contains the counter. If he guesses correctly he starts the game.
2. Each player has nine pieces of his own colour and enters them one at a time by alternate turns of play on any vacant point.
3. Each time a player forms a row of three pieces, known as a *mill*, he removes one of his opponent's pieces from the board, but not one that is in a mill.
4. When all the pieces have been entered on the board play continues by moving a piece to an adjacent vacant point along a line, with the object of making a mill and capturing an enemy piece.
5. If a player blocks all his opponent's pieces so that they cannot move, or reduces them to two pieces, when they can no longer make a mill, he wins the game.
6. Your own mill can be made or broken at will; an opponent's piece being captured each time that a mill is constructed.
7. If a player has only three pieces left and these are in a mill, but it is his turn to move, he must do so, even if this means losing a piece and the game at his opponent's next move.

Optional Rules

Unlike chess, draughts, backgammon and other major board games, the rules of Nine Men's Morris are not standardized. The following three rules are recognized by some but not all players.

- A. A mill formed during the first stage of the game does not entitle the player to the capture of an opposing piece. When all the pieces are on the board such a mill must be broken and remade before an opponent's piece can be removed.
- B. When either player has been reduced to three pieces, these are allowed to *hop*. The player need not move a piece to the next adjacent point but can hop to a vacant point anywhere on the board. When "hopping" is allowed the game ends when one player is reduced to two pieces and cannot make a mill.
- C. In some districts a local rule allows a player to capture an enemy piece by jumping over it onto an immediate vacant point beyond. This method of capture appears to have been borrowed from draughts, or the older alquerque.

When hopping is permitted be sure your own pieces are well placed to make successive mills before reducing your opponent to the critical three pieces. The construction of a see-saw or double mill usually results in winning the game.