

Tâb



Tâb is a war game from the middle east. Historically it was played a across the Islamic world, from West Africa to Iran in the east, and from Turkey in the north to Anjouan in the south.

Featured in A Book of Historic Board Games

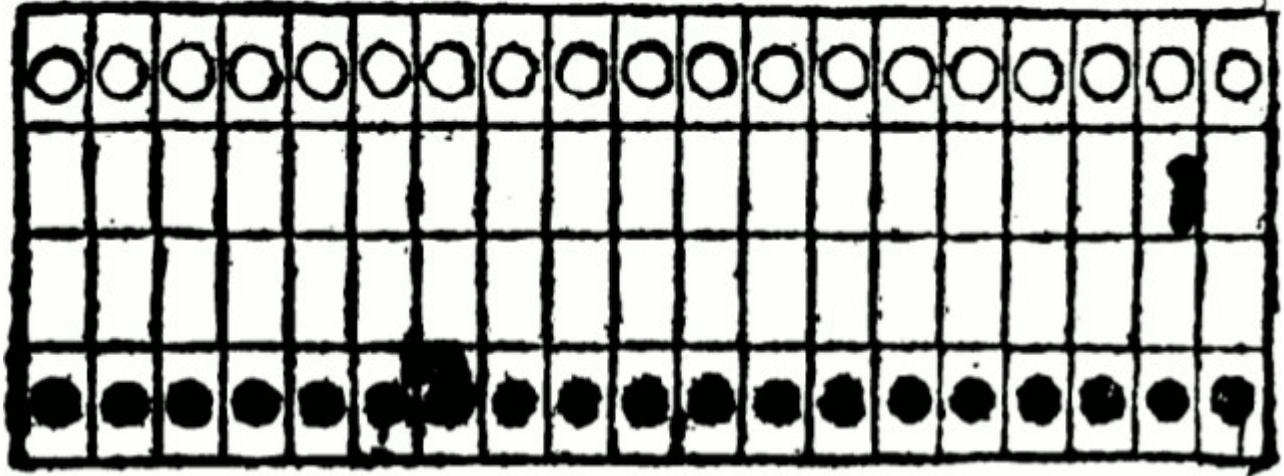
This game is featured in *A Book of Historic Board Games*, by Damian Gareth Walker. That volume, available as a [hardback](#) or [paperback](#), covers twelve games in depth. For each game there is an entertaining history, full rules, and a discussion of strategy, all in more detail than you'll see on this site.

The game is played by two on a board of four rows of (typically) nine squares. Each player has nine pieces which move around the board as if it were a track, according to the throws of four casting sticks. Pieces do not strive to reach the end, but circle round and round, trying to capture their enemies till only one side remains on the board.

History of Tâb

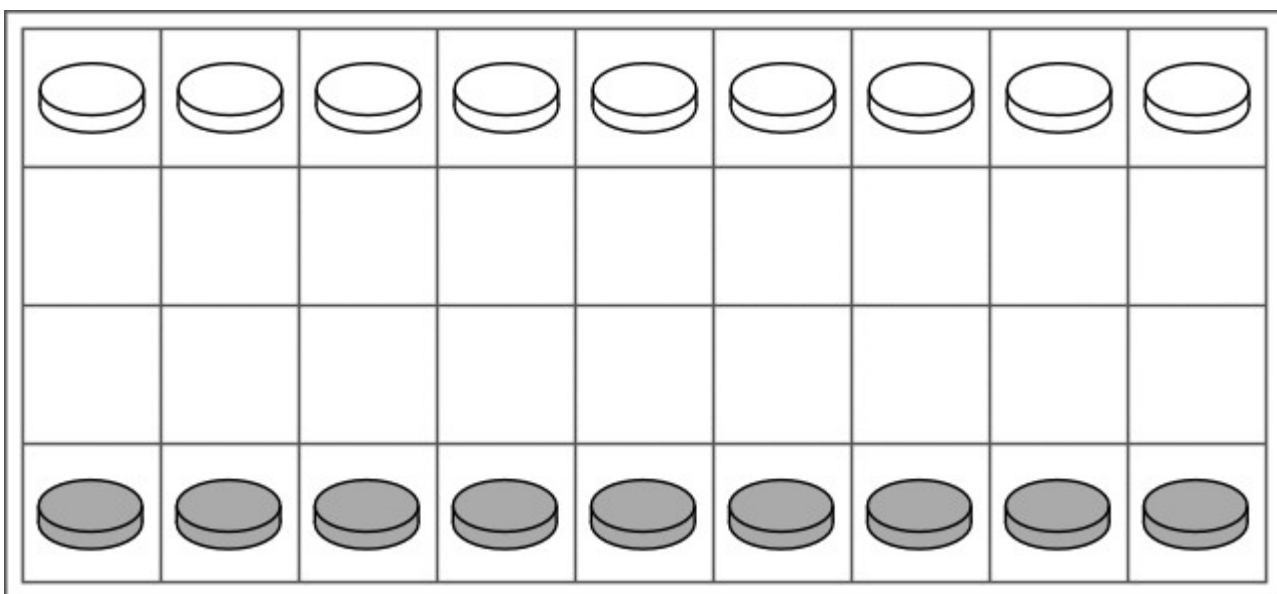
The origins of tâb are obscure. It was first mentioned in 1310, and some of the words used for the game (tâb, the throwing sticks; seega, the board) appear to be of Eastern origin. Variations of the game were spread through much of the Islamic world from West Africa to India.

The game was described by Western scholars from the late seventeenth century till the early nineteenth: Hyde, Niebuhr and Lane. But only in specific areas of Norway, Denmark and Lapland did related games become popular, possibly brought back by travellers.



Tâb was the game popular with the poorer class of people in Egypt. It was last noted in the 1820s by Lane, an English traveller. It is from the account of Lane that the game has started to become more popular, appearing in the books of Murray, Bell and Parlett in the late twentieth century.

Rules for Tâb



The rules for tâb appear lengthy, but the complexity of the game is much less than that of chess. The greatest difficulty is that one must remember whether certain pieces have moved, and where they have travelled, in the course of the game. For this purpose, those of poor memory might like to use tokens of some sort to mark the pieces that have not moved, and the pieces which have travelled to the fourth row.

1. Tâb is played on a board of four rows of squares, with nine squares per row.
2. Two players take part. They sit opposite one another, each by one of the longer edges of the board. The row of squares nearest to a player is his home row.
3. Each player has nine pieces, of his chosen colour, these begin on his home row as illustrated in the diagram, and are given the status of Christians.
4. Four casting sticks control the moves of the pieces. These are marked on one side and blank on the other, and are scored as follows: 1 side marked = 1, and another throw (called a tâb); 2 sides marked = 2; 3 sides marked = 3; 4 sides marked = 4, and another throw; no sides marked = 6, and another throw.
5. Players decide at random or by agreement who makes the first throw. Players then throw the casting sticks alternately, until one of the players throws a tâb. That player then continues to throw as in rule 6, including the tâb as his first throw.

6. The player whose turn it is throws the casting sticks, noting down the values obtained, until a 2 or 3 is thrown. These values, including the last 2 or 3, will be used to move the pieces.
7. Pieces are moved after all throws are made. The throws can be taken in any order. Multiple throws can be used for a single piece, or may be allocated to several pieces. A single throw cannot be divided between two or more pieces, however.
8. Pieces move to the right on a player's first and third rows, and left on the second and fourth.
9. A Christian can only be moved on the throw of a tâb, and only the rightmost Christian may be moved. Doing so converts it to a Muslim, after which it is not subject to this limitation.
10. If a player throws a tâb and has Christians left in play, then the throw must be used to convert the Christian otherwise it may be used to move any piece.
11. A Muslim can be moved on any throw. This includes a piece converted by with tâb during the same turn of play.
12. A piece passing the end of row 1 moves to row 2; a piece passing the end of row 2 moves to row 3.
13. A piece at the end of row 3 may choose to go back to row 2, circulating clockwise around those two rows as long as its owner pleases.
14. A piece at the end of row 3 may instead advance to row 4, the opponents home row, subject to the both of the following conditions: (a) it has not been there before, and (b) there are enemy pieces remaining on that row.
15. A piece on the opponents home row may only be moved further if: (a) the player concerned has no pieces left on his own home row, and (b) the piece is not stacked (see rule 16), unless (c) the player concerned has no unstacked pieces remaining.
16. A piece may land on a friendly piece, in which case both are stacked. Stacks may contain any number of pieces.
17. A stack is moved along a row in the same manner as a single piece, and may grow by landing on other friendly pieces or stacks.
18. A stack may be split on the throw of a tâb, such a throw allowing the player to remove the top piece from the stack and advance it to the next square as an individual piece.
19. A stack may advance to the next row in the same manner as a single piece.
20. A stack returning to a previous row will be reduced to a single piece, the extra pieces being lost and removed from the game.
21. A player can refuse to use a throw that would break up a stack as in rule 20.
22. An opponents piece (or stack) can be captured by landing on it with an exact throw; the opponents piece or pieces being removed from the game.
23. Throws are used separately, even when used to move the same piece, so a piece may capture more than one enemy in a single turn.
24. The game ends when all of a player's pieces have been lost. The surviving player is the winner.

Strategy in Tâb

Tâb is more oriented towards tactical play than long term strategy. The main useful tactic in a game of tâb is in learning where to position one's pieces to be safe from capture, as well as positioning them in the place where they are best placed to attack.

The end of the first row is very safe in the early stages of the game, and is a good place from which to launch an ambush; enemy pieces must pass this point as they circulate between the second and third rows, and a few pieces in the right-most spaces of the first row have a good chance of leaping

out on passers-by.

The fourth row is even safer, if one takes care not to position one's pieces ahead of unconverted Christians who, when converted to Muslims, are sure to pounce on the intruder. Your fourth row is your enemy's home row, to which their pieces may not return once they are on the move. This makes it very safe later in the game, and an ambush can be set up at the furthest end of the row - similar to that described above. Travel through here with care, though, as a piece having passed through the fourth row cannot return there.

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