

# The history of the medieval game Nine Men's Morris

Nine Men's Morris has been challenging and amusing people for over 2000 years. Boards have been found across medieval Europe and in Ireland at Glendalough. The Romans called the game 'Tria' and loved to gamble on the game's outcome.

The game usually leaves no trace as the board was often scratched into the ground and pebbles were used as pieces. Archaeologists have discovered more permanent boards in sentry posts and church cloisters. It was an ideal pastime for bored sentries and monks with time on their hands.

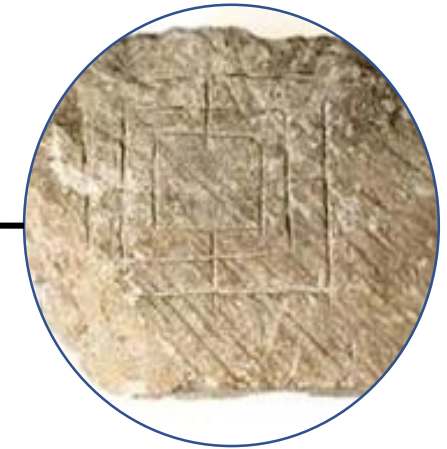
The game peaked in popularity in medieval England where boards have been found scratched onto seats in cathedrals at Canterbury, Salisbury and Westminster Abbey. The idea of the game is likely to have arrived in the monastic city at Glendalough with a travelling monk, as Glendalough had many connections with Christian communities across the Western Europe.



This is one of a number of boards that are scratched into the floor at the Church of the Madonna Della Libera, south of Rome.



The book '**Libro de Los Juegos**', written in 1283 at the court of Alfonso X of Spain. It contains drawings of medieval game boards along with their rules. This illustration from the book shows a board for playing Nine Men's Morris. Alfonso X saw board games as the ultimate conflict between skill and chance. He compiled these games in an attempt to learn how to play the game of life a little bit better.



This medieval English board was found in Norwich Cathedral, England.

# Popular Culture adopts the game Nine Men's Morris

## Nine Men's Morris

was also known as Mulino, Merrills, Merels, Mill, Mühlespiel and Jeu du moulin.

In Shakespeare's *A Midsummers Night Dream*, the fairy queen Titania remarks:

*'The nine men's morris is filled up with mud,  
And the quaint mazes in the wanton green  
For lack of tread are undistinguishable.'*

This is understood to be a reference to the unseasonably wet summer of 1594, when crops across England were spoilt by the rain. It also dates the writing of the play to within a year of this weather event that was part of popular conversation at that time.

Nine Men's Morris also makes an appearance in *Assassin's Creed*, an open-world action adventure video game.



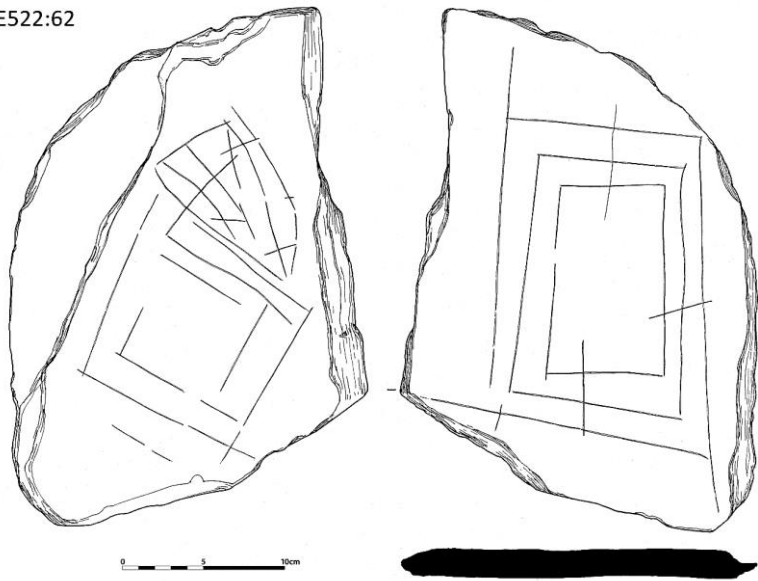
In the video adventure, the player enters a tavern and is challenged to a game of Nine Men's Morris by a stranger. The stranger is a strong player and in order to progress, the player needs to beat him.

# Medieval Monks at Glendalough play Nine Men's Morris

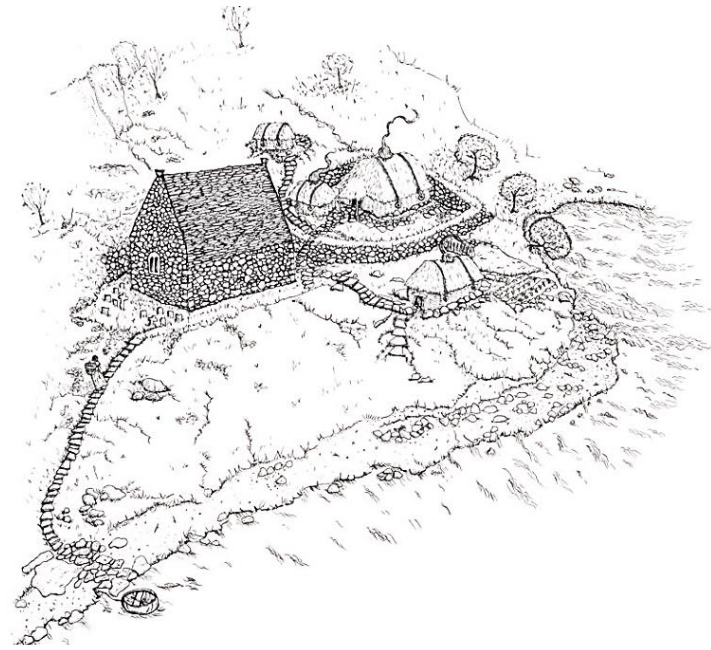
Archaeological evidence suggests that Nine Men's Morris was played by the monks and those on retreat at the monastery in Glendalough, Co Wicklow. A game board was found scratched into a flat piece of Mica Schist slate when the church at Temple-na-Skellig was excavated in the 1950's by Françoise Henry.

The church and settlement at Temple-na-Skellig are the furthest west from the monastic city. They were used in the 13<sup>th</sup> century as a place of retreat, as it's isolated site can only be reached by boat.

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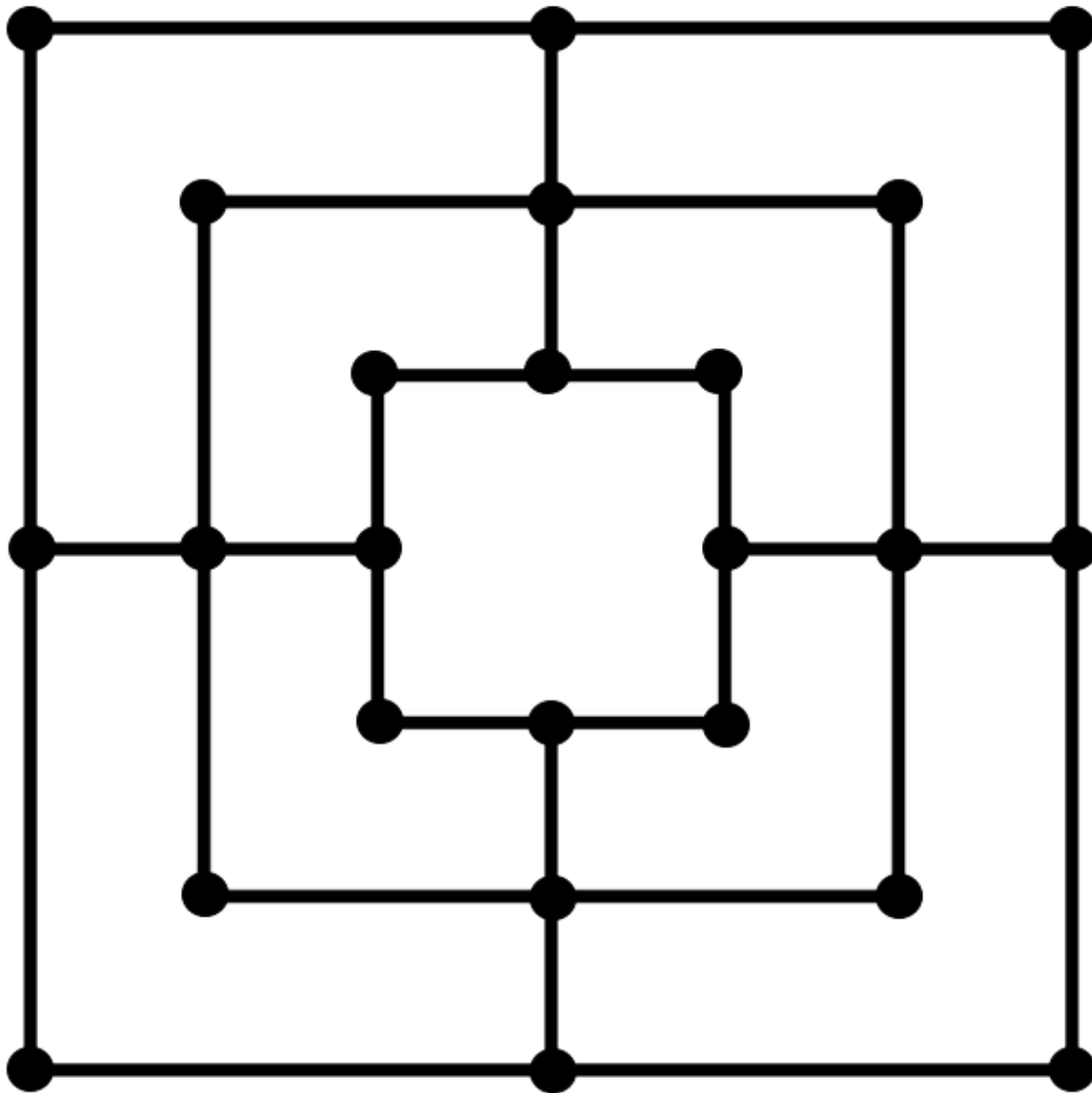
This is a drawing of both sides of the Nine Men's Morris board found at Temple-na-Skellig, Glendalough. Image courtesy of Ursula Mattenberger, UCD School of Archaeology



This is an artist's sketch of what the settlement at Temple-na-Skellig probably looked like in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Image courtesy of Aoife Patterson (2018), an archaeological illustrator based in Co Wicklow.

People have always played games; to hone strategies that could be used in war, to be victorious over their opponents and to strengthen the social ties in a community.

# Nine Men's Morris: the board and the players



**The Board** This is the board layout. You can print this off or redraw it onto a larger piece of cardboard

**The Players** You will need two sets of 9 players each.  
You can use pebbles, beads, buttons, plastic counters or make your own cardboard counters.

Here are some examples:



Glass beads

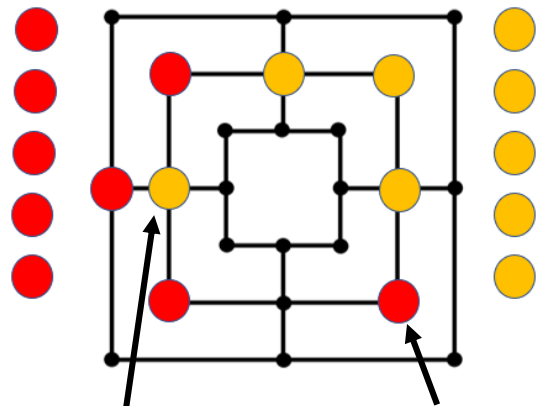


Pebbles and shells

# There are three phases of play in the game of Nine Men's Morris

## Phase 1

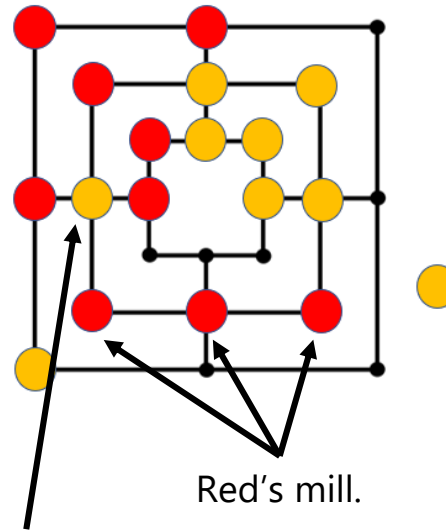
The players take turns placing their pieces on the spots on the board. The idea is to form 'mills' which are three pieces in a straight row along the lines of the board. In this example Red goes next.



In this example Red goes next. If he puts his piece here, he will block Yellow's mill.

If Yellow then goes here, she will block Red's mill.

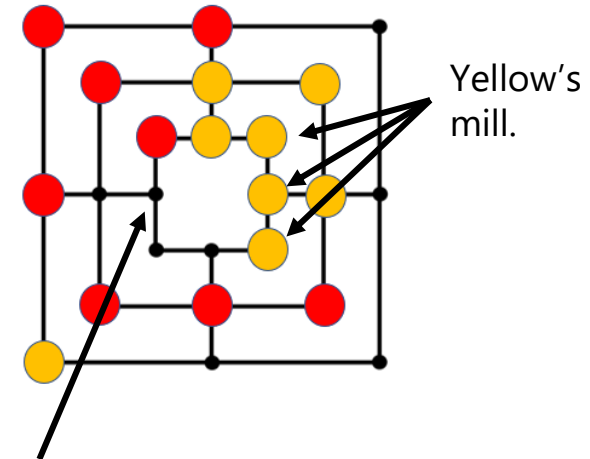
As soon as a player has 3 pieces in a mill, they can then remove one of their opponents pieces from play. They cannot remove a piece that is already part of a mill. Here the red player has 3 pieces in a mill or straight line and removes one of the yellow pieces.



Red's mill.

Red can remove Yellow's piece. Red chooses to remove this piece as it open up new mills.

Now in Yellow's turn, she completes a mill and is able to remove one of Red's pieces.



Yellow's mill.

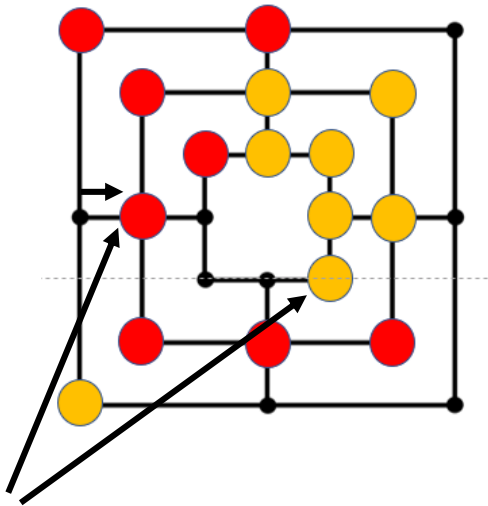
Yellow has removed one of Red's pieces from here. Yellow hopes to frustrate Red's attempt to create a mill here.

Note: If all of the opponent's pieces are in mills, then and only then can you remove a piece from an opponent's mill from play

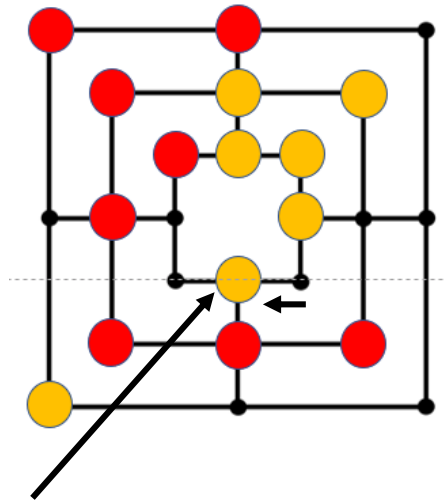
# Now the players are in Phase 2 of Nine Men's Morris. They need work hard to control the board.

## Phase 2

With all pieces on the board now, each player takes turns moving one piece at a time along the lines to the next spot. They cannot jump over other pieces. Players continue to form mills and remove their opponents pieces from the board.

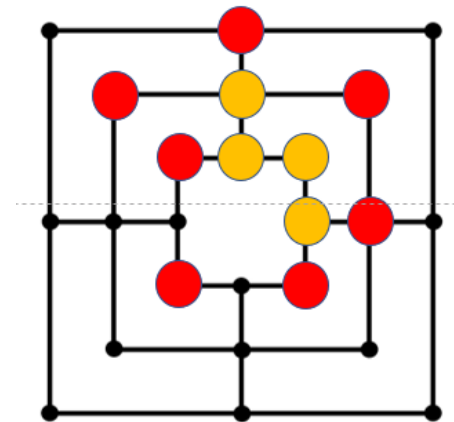


Red has moved this piece into a mill and he can now remove one of Yellow's pieces.



Yellow moves to the left. The idea is that on the next turn that piece can be moved to the right and form a mill.

Play continues in this way until one player is unable to move because they are blocked in or a player is reduced to three pieces.



In this example, Yellow is unable to move because Red has blocked all their moves.

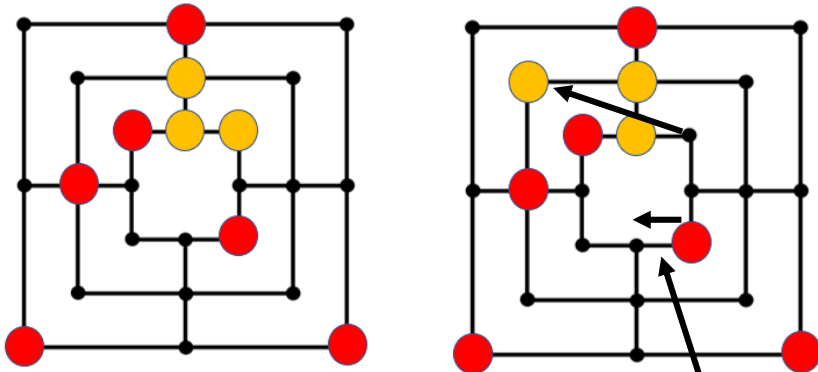
**Red wins.**

Some strategists suggest that you should try to win the game before phase 3 by blocking all the opponent's moves, rather than focusing on taking their pieces. The ability of one player to fly pieces in phase 3 makes it difficult for the other player to defeat him.



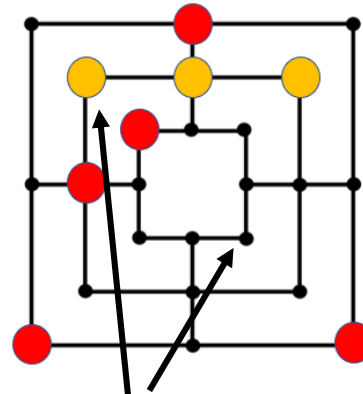
## Phase 3

When one player has been reduced to three pieces, the game enters phase 3. The player with three pieces remaining is now able to fly his piece to any spot on the board. This makes that player difficult to defeat.

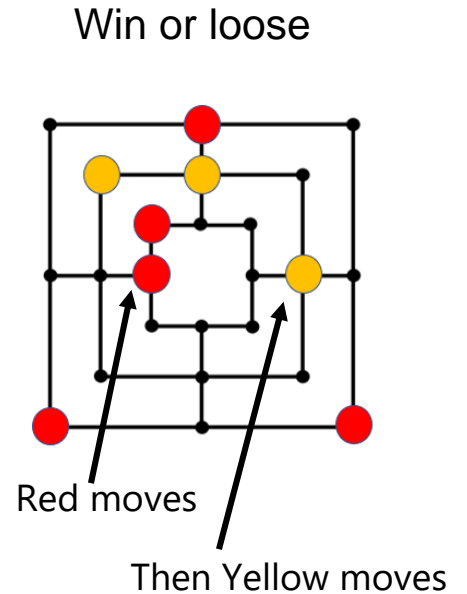


Here Yellow flies one piece out to get in line with another Yellow

Red sees that Yellow will form a mill on the next turn, but can do nothing about it. Red tries to form his own mill by moving a Red left, but it is going to take 2 more turns

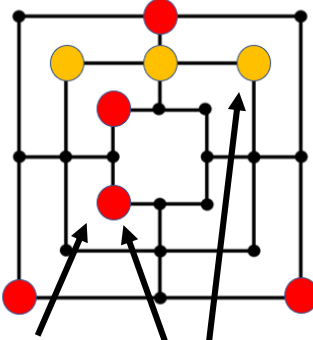


Yellow flies again, forms a mill and removes a Red piece



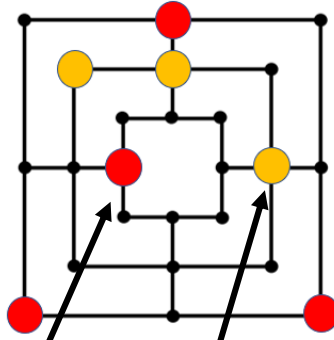
See if you can figure out how Yellow wins. The solution is on the next page.

# Solution: the road to victory for Yellow



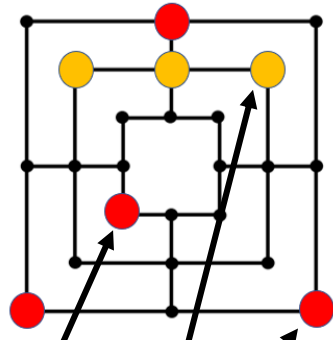
Red moves

Yellow moves, forms a mill and removes a Red piece



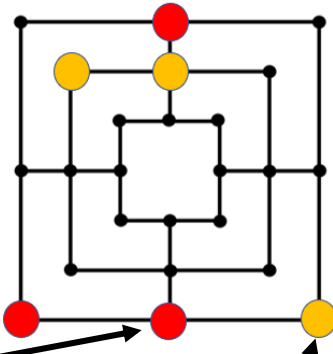
Red moves

Yellow moves,



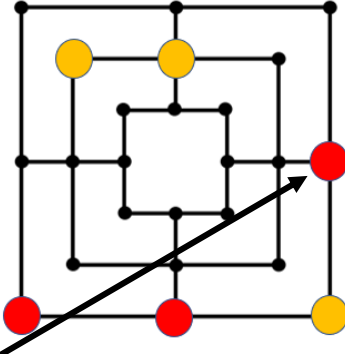
Red moves

Yellow moves, forms a mill and removes a Red piece

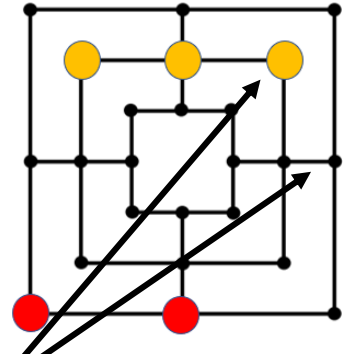


Red has only 3 pieces left and can fly a piece

Yellow responds by blocking Red's mill



Red has to move but is unable to form a mill



Yellow flies back into her mill and removes a Red Piece.

Yellow reduces Red to 2 pieces and wins!