

31. A unique piece of ivory carving – the oldest known chessman

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On 16 July 1981 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth opened an exhibition entitled 'Sri Lanka – Ancient Arts' in the Commonwealth Institute, London. The smallest object which was on display is the subject of this paper. At the request of the Government of Sri Lanka I collected the material for this show from various museums, monasteries and archaeological sites in the island and subsequently wrote the catalogue of the exhibition (van Lohuizen, 1981). While searching for suitable objects in the Archaeological Museum at Anurādhapura I came across a tiny ivory (Fig. 31.1; *Idem*: 80, no. 30; Museum no. 67) which immediately drew my attention, not only because I have always been deeply interested in ivory work but also on account of the object's small size and its delicate carving (van Lohuizen, 1959). It is 1.7 cm high and represents a chariot drawn by four sturdy little horses together resembling a Roman quadriga. According to the Museum's register it was discovered at Māntai or Māntorā, the site of the ancient Mahātittha. This town, situated on the north-west coast, was the most important harbour of Sri Lanka and, apart from the capital Anurādhapura, the only other walled city (Ray, 1959–60). It is already mentioned in the second century

BC and maintained its eminent position for at least fourteen centuries, if not longer (*Idem*: 161 and pt. II: p. 626).

During the early centuries of our era Sri Lanka was in close contact with the Roman empire and a Sinhalese embassy even visited the court in Rome during the reign of the emperor Augustus (*Idem*, pt. 1: 225). That these relations were based on trade is proved by archaeological evidence such as Roman coins, cameos and pieces of glass imported from the West and discovered all over the island, but especially along the coast. As Mahātittha was Sri Lanka's most important harbour for many centuries, the town undoubtedly occupied a pre-eminent place in this international trade (Wheeler, 1954: 138 and fig. 16). It is probably for this reason, and on account of its resemblance to a Roman quadriga, that the Museum authorities consider the ivory chariot discovered at that site to be a Roman import from the West (Boisselier, 1979: 117). However, ivory is a typical South Asian material and quadrigas were also known in ancient India from at least as early as the second century BC, as for example at Bhājā (Coomaraswamy, 1927: Pl. VII, Fig. 24), Bhārhut (Coomaraswamy, 1956: Pl. XXX, Fig. 83) and Bodh Gayā (Coomaraswamy, 1935: Pl. LIII, 2). If this ivory carving was indeed made in the Mediterranean world, then we would have to assume that a piece of raw ivory was first exported from South Asia to the Roman empire, then carved there into a quadriga, after which it was re-exported to Sri Lanka. Although this is not entirely impossible, it is certainly an extremely complicated explanation; all the more so as ivory carving was and still is a typical South Asian skill and, in addition, the examples of Indian ivories discovered in the West prove that ivory was not imported there in the form of raw material but as carved objects.¹ In view of all this it seems more than likely that the chariot under discussion was made in South Asia, the area which in ancient days was the source of ivory and from where carved ivories were regularly exported, as proved by the famous treasure of Begrām (Hackin, 19543: Figs. 1–239).

On taking the object out of the showcase in the Anurādhapura Museum and placing it on the palm of my hand to study it more closely, I immediately noticed its



Fig. 31.1. Chariot from Māntai, ivory, h. 1.7 cm, Arch. Mus. Anurādhapura, Mus. no. 67 (copyright Arch. Dept. Sri Lanka).

smooth base. Turning it upside down it was apparent from the marks on the surface of the base that the object had been pushed around frequently, as is the case with game pieces. Now the most important board game which India gave to the world is chess (Murray, 1962: 27), and as we know that one of the chessmen in ancient India was the chariot, the ivory from Māntai is almost certainly a chess piece. This supports our view that the object was not a Roman import, for the game of chess remained unknown in the West till the mediaeval period.

When discussing the products of India in the middle of the tenth century, al-Mas'ūdī informs us that: 'by far the most frequent use of ivory is for the manufacture of men for chess and nard. Several of the chessmen are figures of men or animals, a span high and big, or even more' (*Idem*: 37). This statement further supports our view that the chariot from Māntai was not an imported Roman piece of ivory carving. However, as chess was introduced to Sri Lanka from India and, as the piece in question was discovered at the site of Sri Lanka's most important harbour, it may well have been imported from India.

The ancient Indian game was called *caturanga*, because its elements represented the four divisions of an Indian army: elephants, horses, chariots and footmen. It probably developed from *astapada* – a racing game with dice which could be played with two or four partners – into the war-game known as *caturanga* or chess. Both forms of game continued to exist alongside one another for a long time (*Idem*: 42). They are mentioned in ancient Indian literature as early as the fifth century BC (*Idem*: 34), and the oldest representation of a chessboard can be found in a relief on the stūpa railing at Bhārhut dating from the second half of the second century BC (Fig. 31.2). Although the chariot eventually became the tower, it was still used in South Italy in the late eleventh century, as appears from an ivory war chariot drawn by four horses, now in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (Fig. 31.3).

By the seventh century the game had become known in Iran and around the year 1000 it was transferred by the Muslims to the Christian world. Until recently the oldest known chessman was the famous piece from the Trésor de St Denis, now in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (Fig. 31.4). It was traditionally supposed to have been a present from Harun al-Rashīd to Charlemagne. In view of its Arabic inscription it is now usually considered to be a Muslim copy of an Indian example (Wichmann, 1960: 281). However, its stylistic details, its material and Mas'ūdī's remark quoted above seem to indicate that the piece was carved in India, more specially in the north-west as its style is clearly related to that of early Sāhi sculpture, which would date it roughly between the late seventh and the ninth centuries and not in the fifteenth as

Barrett believed.² In my opinion the Arabic inscription was simply added later on, after the object had been exported. The twelfth-century chessman in the Museo Nazionale, Florence (Fig. 31.5) shares a few details with the ivory from the Trésor de St Denis (Fig. 31.4) but in this case I would suggest that the object is indeed a Muslim copy of an Indian example.

In 1965 Härtel bought an ivory chess piece for the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin (Museum no. I.10001). It is slightly smaller and shows less details than the famous, so-called chessman of Charlemagne, but in view of its stylistic peculiarities it would seem to be of roughly the same date, i.e. the late seventh to ninth centuries (Fig. 31.6). An even smaller ivory chess piece which appeared recently on the London market should probably be attributed to about the same period (Fig. 31.7). Finally, in 1977 Buryakov discovered at the fortified settlement of Afrasiab a group of ivory chessmen which he published in 1980 (Buryakov, 1980: 171–2). He dates them not later than the seventh century. In some respects these ivories resemble the chessmen discussed above, though they show less detail, probably because they seem to be much smaller.

Let us now return to the ivory chariot discovered at Māntai (Fig. 31.1). Its shape is slightly different from that of the chariots often depicted in early Indian art in that the banister is straight and does not show three lobes.³ In this respect the ivory partly resembles a Roman chariot, which also has a straight banister in front though it slopes on either side. However, we have seen that there are too many arguments against a Roman provenance for the



Fig. 31.2. A game of chess, Bhārhut, second half second century BC (copyright Coomaraswamy, 1956: Pl. XLVIII, Fig. 223).

piece and so the ivory probably represents a type of Indian chariot unknown so far. For, apart from the type usually represented in early Indian art, there seem to have been many other types of chariot. Some had banisters sloping on either side, others had no banister on the front and only on both sides and again others had no banister at all (Marshall, 1951: vol. II, 452, nos. 58–60: 602–3, nos. 390–1; vol. III, Pls. 134 and 185).

With regard to the date of the ivory from Māntai, it is obvious that it is a very early piece. Chariots are known to have been used in India from the Aryan invasion down to the second or third century AD, after which the evidence suggests that their use declined steadily (Allchin, 1958: 154). Quadrigas drawn by four horses are mentioned in the Rāmāyana (VI.110.9) and are depicted in early Indian art from the second century BC onwards

(Coomaraswamy, *loc. cit.*). Stylistically, the sturdy horses of the Māntai ivory with their bulging chests and their flat hindquarters are reminiscent of the horses at such early sites as Bodh Gayā (Coomaraswamy, 1935: Pl. LIII, 2), Jaggayyapeta (Coomaraswamy, 1929: Pl. 2), Mathura (Vogel, 1930: Pl. VIII b; XX b) and Nāgārjunakonda (Longhurst, 1938: Pl. IX a, c; XXVIII c; XXV b (toy)). Their nearest parallel is, however, the famous little terracotta horse excavated at Kondāpur, Hyderābād (Fig. 31.8), which so far has been wrongly believed to be a toy.⁴ This site is located in what was once the ancient Satavahana realm. The close religious, cultural and political relations between this part of India and Sri Lanka are well known and our ivory chessman may consequently have been imported from Āndhra Pradesh. The date of the little horse from Kondāpur is generally accepted to be the second or third century (Ashton, 1950: 33, no. 79). Later on horses become more elegant, with slim bodies and long legs. For various reasons, especially



Fig. 31.3. Chessman, south Italy, late eleventh century, ivory, h. 12.6 cm, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (copyright Wichmann, 1960: Pl. 27).



Fig. 31.4. Chessman, north-west India, late seventh to ninth century, ivory, h. 15.6 cm, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (copyright Wichmann: Pl. 37).

the close parallel between the terracotta from Kondāpur and the ivory from Māntai, we would therefore be inclined to attribute the latter to the second or third century AD. In view of this early date we should from now on be more alert with regard to the possible occurrence of game pieces among the small elephants and horses which have come to light at various early Indian sites and which have hitherto been interpreted as toys. As the Māntai chessman is roughly five centuries earlier than the other ivories discussed in this article, the charming little chariot from Sri Lanka would seem to be – at least for the time being – the oldest known chess piece in the world.

NOTES

1. For instance the ivory discovered at Pompeii (see Wheeler, 1954: Pl. XIX, or During Caspers, 1981: 342).
2. Barrett, 1955: 51. However, comparison of the so-called Charlemagne chessman with the ivory diptych from Kansu, which Barrett correctly dated in the late seventh or eighth century (Barrett, 1967: 14, Pl. II, Fig. 1a), and which is clearly related in style, confirms the date suggested by us.
3. It should be pointed out that the front of the banister is not always semicircular but occasionally tends to be straight (Sivaramamurti, 1942: Pl. X, 13) as in early China and the ancient Near East.
4. Sastri, 1957: 705. See, however, my forthcoming article,

'What was the purpose of the terracotta animal figurines discovered at Kondāpur?' to appear in the volume in honour of Dr C. Sivaramamurti.

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Fig. 31.5. Chesspiece, Arabia, twelfth century, ivory, h. 6.9 cm, Museo Naz., Florence (copyright Wichmann: Pl. 37).



Fig. 31.6. Chessman, north-west India, late seventh to ninth century, ivory, h. 10 cm, Mus. für Indische Kunst, Berlin.



Fig. 31.7. Chesspiece, north-west India, late seventh to ninth century, ivory, h. 5 cm (copyright Spink and Son Ltd., London).



Fig. 31.8. Horse, Kondāpur, second to third century AD, terracotta, h. 6.7 cm, Govt. Mus. Hyderabad (copyright Ashton, 1950: Pl. 23, Fig. 79).