

Some Facts to Think About

by Ricardo Calvo, Madrid, 1996

Fact 1: Indian literature has no early mentions of chess but Persian literature does. The first unmistakable reference in Sanskrit writings is in the "*Harschascharita*" by the court poet Bana, written between 625 and 640. On the other hand, pre-islamic documents have solidly connected chess with the last period of the Sassanid rulers in Persia (VI-VII century). The "*Karnamak*", an epical treatise about the founder of this dynasty, mentions the game of chatrang as one of the accomplishments of the legendary hero. It has a proving force that a game under this name was popular in the period of redaction of the text, supposedly the end of the 6th century or the beginning of the 7th. Closely related is a shorter poem from about the same period entitled in Pahlevi "*Chatrang-namak*", dealing with the introduction of chess in Persia. Firdawsi wrote also about it in the 11th century, but his sources are solid and form a continuous chain of witnesses going back to the middle of the 6th. century in Persia.

Fact 2 : India has no early chess pieces but Persia does. The presence of carved chess men in Persian domains contrasts with the absence of such items in India. There are no chess men there from early times, and only in the 10th century appears an indirect mention from al-Masudi: "*The use of ivory (in India) is mainly directed to the carving of chess and nard pieces*". Some experts believe that old Indian chess pieces may be discovered one day. So far, this is mere speculation. The three oldest sets of chess pieces closely identified as such belong to Persian domains, not to India. The most important are the Afrasiab pieces. They were found 1977 in Afrasiab, near Samarkand, and have been dated by its Russian discoverers as early as the 7th-8th century. Western experts accept at least the year 761 because a coin so dated belongs to the same layer. This seven ivory men, questionable as all "idols" may be, are Persian, even if the territory was under Islamic rule since 712. Next group of chess pieces, (three chessmen) comes also from the Persian area. The so-called Fergana pieces include a "Rukh" in form of a geant bird, and its antiquity should be not too distant from the Afrasiab lot. In the Persian city of Nishapur another ivory set was discovered though belonging to later times, 9th or 10th century. These are not idols anymore and are carved following the abstract pattern which has been characterized as "Arabic".

Fact 3 : The Arabs introduced chess in India after taking "Chatrang" from Persia. Games upon the "ashtapada" board of 8x8, with dice and with two or more players may have served as "protochess", but the two types of games already differ too strongly in their nature and

philosophy to make the evolution of "Chaturanga" into "Shatransh" a simple question of direct parantage via the Persian "Chatrang". Arab writers stated quite frequently that they took the game of "shatransh" from the Persians, who called it "chatrang". This happens in the middle of a political-cultural revolution, which has been analyzed in historical texts. The ruling Ummayad dynasty was thrown out after a fierce civil war by a certain Abul Abbas, who initiated a new era, founding Bagdad around the year 750 and translating there from Damascus the Islamic political center. The Abbasid dynasty was ethnically and culturally of Persian origin. So Persian influences became clearly dominant in the cultural renaissance which took place inside the Arabic trunk. A lot of the previous knowledge from classical Greece, Byzantium, early Egyptian and Middle East civilizations and even "from the country of Hind" was compiled and re-translated into Arabic and absorbed in a scientific body which followed its further path towards the West. Chess was only a part of this knowledge, packaged together with earlier mathematical, astronomical, philosophical or medical achievements.

Fact 4 : Etymology is unclear. The roots of several chess terms may go further to India, but the fact is that the Sanskrit word "Chaturanga" means only "army", and it is unclear whether it referred to our chess, to a possible form of "protochess" with four players, or to some strategical exercise with pieces over a board with military purposes. In any case, to be on safer ground, we must remember the earliest solid evidences about the board game called chess belong to Persia. The Pahlevi word "Chatrang" means, even to-day, the mandrake plant, which has a root in form of a human figure. So, there is a good case in favor of a different etymological interpretation: Any game played with pieces representing figures may be compared with the "shatrang" plant. Another hint is the nomenclature of the pieces, persistently related to different sorts of animals rather than to components of an army: In the "Grande Acedrex" of King Alfonso of Castile (1283) lions, crocodiles, giraffes etc. play over a board of 12x12 cases with peculiar jumping moves, and the invention of it is connected to the same remote period in India as normal chess. They are very atypical in any context referring to India. (See the reference "Hasb"(War) in "The Encyclopaedia of Islam", De Gruyter, Leyden-New York 1967). On the other hand, elephants are not at all exclusive from Indian origin (Sir William Gowers, "African Elephants and Ancient Authors", African Affairs, 47 (1948) p.173 ff. Also Frank W. Walbank, "Die Hellenistische Welt", DTV 1983 p. 205-6), not even in military campaigns: The Persian army had also cavalry, foot-soldiers, chariots and elephants as well as river ships. In Egypt, the Ptolemaic Kings obtained elephants regularly from Somalia. Strabo (16,4,5) mentions the foundation of several cities in Africa with the main purpose of hunting elephants. The hunters have even written dedications to Ptolemaios IV Philopator (221-204 BC). Polybios describes a battle with elephants between Ptolomaios IV and Antiochos III in 217 BC. Pyrrhus and Hannibal used it in the West. Modern research has confirmed all the details.