Jiri Jakl
Yudhiṣṭhira the chessplayer? *Caturaṅga* game of the Old Javanese *Wirāṭāparwa*[1]

It is accepted by majority of scholars that chess originated in north India sometime before 640 AD, and spread from there to other parts of the world (Mark 2007:155). While the developments of chess in the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe are now relatively well understood, its early history in Southeast Asia remains obscure. Murray was the first to realize that the paucity of early evidence for chess in this region stands in a sharp contrast to the alleged pre-Islamic introduction of this board game into Southeast Asia (1913:96). The claim that chess was introduced to maritime Southeast Asia some time before the arrival of Islamic influences is based on the fact that the name of the game in some local languages, such as Malay, Javanese and Khmer, derives in different ways from the Sanskrit word *caturaṅga*.[2]

Writing on the origins of chess in the region, Murray has used only a scornful of 16th century Portuguese sources. Apart from that, he has made use of the *Sejarah Melayu*, a Malay chronicle which attests only to the fact that some form of chess was known and played in the region of the Melaka Straits. However, the oldest extant recension of the *Sejarah Melayu* dates only to around 1536, though it can not be ruled out that an earlier version appeared already in 1436 (Braginsky 2004:187). Murray's opinion was thus based mainly on European sources, which prove the fact that chess was known in the Melaka Straits region and some other parts of maritime Southeast Asia by the time the first Portuguese arrived there. The earliest of these relations reports on the first Portuguese expedition to Melaka in 1509. Upon arrival of the Iberians to the port city, Diego Lopez, commander of the fleet, was playing chess aboard his ship with a Melakan Javanese. Before they started to play, however, they had to discuss the rules of the game, and forms of chessmen used, as there were apparently some slight differences between the two chess variants (Barros 1563 II, iv: 407). Later, the *Undang-undang Melaka*, yet another Malay text, was used by Reid in his discussion of chess developments in early-modern Southeast Asia. This Malay law code was composed sometime during the 15th century, and chess is listed here among the games played for stakes (Reid 1988:197). It is clear that none of the sources used so far to elucidate the beginnings of chess in maritime Southeast Asia predates the 15th century, a period when Islamic influences were already quite strong in some parts of this region. Still, Murray has delved to speculate that chess reached maritime Southeast Asia from South India before Islamic influences reached the region (1963:7).

The developments of chess on Java are even less clear than those in the Malay peninsula. There are virtually no European sources on Javanese chess predating the 18th century, and Javanese texts have not been used so far by chess historians. The most important source remains Raffles's detailed description of the game as known on Java in the early 19th century (1817:349-350). Based on this account, Murray has noted that in contrast to Malay chess terminology, Javanese nomenclature

---

1   This article is an expanded version of a paper prepared for the 14th Colloquium of Board Games Studies held in Brugge, Belgium, between 4th -7th May 2011. Helen Creese and Andrea Acri were kind enough to read the article, and provided some valuable suggestions for improvements of the text.

2   The word *caturaṅga*, used to denote a form of chess, is attested for the first time in the Bāṇa's court epic *Harṣacarita*, composed around 630 AD in Northern India (Syed 2001:9). The word itself is much older, and was used commonly in Sanskrit literature to designate a traditional concept of an army, which according to *śāstric* literature consists of four parts: chariots, elephants, cavalry and foot soldiers. This Indian concept of an army structure was also well-known in pre-Islamic Java, and the word *caturaṅga*, designating an army, is attested in several Old Javanese texts. The earliest occurrence seems to be found in the Old Javanese *Bhīṣmaparwa* 35.9, a prose text composed in the late 10th century.

retains only a few Sanskrit-derived terms,[3] and he has also suggested that extensive modifications have been made to the rules of the game as a result of Portuguese and Dutch influences since 1500 AD (1913:107). In addition to European sources, chess is mentioned under its modern name *catur* in two Middle Javanese texts, in the *Kidung Harṣa Wijaya* and in the *Malat*. Both of these texts were composed on Bali, not earlier than in the 16th century, and cannot be thus induced as a proof of pre-Islamic introduction of the game. For the *Kidung Harṣa Wijaya*, Robson has suggested a date around 1600 (2000:245).

It is generally accepted that a Javanese word *catur* derives from Sanskrit *caturaṅga*. This word is attested in several Old Javanese Parwa and Kakawin as a Sanskrit loanword, used there in its original meaning 'army consisting of the four units'. However, in the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa*, a prose text composed in the late 10th century, *caturaṅga* is also used to denote a kind of board game.[4] The Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* is a shortened prose rendering of its Sanskrit original, 'localized' in a creative way to suit the Javanese setting. The context in which *caturaṅga* game is mentioned is the same in both the Old Javanese and Sanskrit version. During the Pāṇḍawas' last-year of exile Yudhiṣṭhira lives in disguise as a brahmin Kaṅka, a gaming partner of the king of Matsya. But while in the Sanskrit original he is a master in throwing dice, in the corresponding Old Javanese passages Yudhiṣṭhira is said to be a master in playing a *caturaṅga* game.

In the past, several scholars interpreted the *caturaṅga* game of the *Wirāṭaparwa* as a form of chess. Van der Tuuk listed the word *caturaṅga* in his Old Javanese-Balinese-Dutch dictionary only as a source word of a modern Balinese *catur,* but from his entry on *santĕn* pieces used in the game it seems that he considered *caturaṅga* to be a kind of chess (1897:619).[5] Fokker was careful not to offer any interpretation of the game and in his partial edition of the *Wirāṭaparwa* he translated *caturaṅga* as 'game of *caturangga*' (1938:48). He has also suggested that *santĕn* in the text is an Old Javanese rendering of Sanskrit *akṣa* (dice), and in the commentary Fokker cast doubts on van der Tuuk's interpretation of *santĕn* as a sort of chessmen.[6] Zoetmulder was also careful to interpret *caturaṅga* as a variant of chess game, and in the section on the *Wirāṭaparwa* in his *Kalangwan* (1974) he has glossed this term as 'game of *caturangga*' (1974:72). But later, in his Old Javanese-English dictionary, he has interpreted the game listed under the heading *nita caturaṅga* as 'a type of chess' (1982:313). Most recently, in an English edition of the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa*, Phalgunadi has translated *caturaṅga* variously as 'chess' (1992:31), and as 'a game of dice' (1992:45)

If we accept the idea that the *caturaṅga* of the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* is a variety of chess, it would make it the earliest evidence of this board game being known in Southeast Asia, and also one of a few known occurrences of the word *caturaṅga*, used to denote the game of chess, that predates 1000 AD. So far, the earliest evidence that chess was played in Southeast Asia may be a 12th century relief from Angkor Wat, where a game resembling chess is depicted. Uniquely, pieces of different shapes are clearly seen arranged on a board, which is placed between two players (Ellinghoven 2003:112). For the maritime Southeast Asia the earliest evidence of chess remains to be one passage in the *Undang-undang Melaka*, where chess is mentioned together with *jogar* as played for stakes by high-standing members of the Malay society (Liaw Yock Fang 1976:167). To understand better the nature of the Javanese *caturaṅga* game, I will first discuss the two relevant passages in which the game is mentioned, and then analyze some additional data on the *caturaṅga*

---

3   The names used in the early 19th century for Javanese chess pieces, as given by Raffles, were: *ratu* (king), *pateh* (queen), *mantri* (bishop), *jaran* (horse), *prahu* (rook) and *bidak* (pion).
4   The *caturaṅga* game is actually mentioned in two other Old Javanese texts, in the *Abhimanyuwiwāha*, a court poem composed in 1778, and in the *Wirāṭawijaya*. Both of these Balinese Kakawin are partially based on the *Wirāṭaparwa*, and the passages in which *caturaṅga* game is mentioned are renderings of the original Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* passages.
5   He has glossed *santĕn manimaya*, part of the paraphernalia of the game and what seems to have been gaming pieces, as 'juweelen stukken v. 't schaakspel' (van der Tuuk III 1901:134).
6   Fokker seems to have been well-aware of the fact that neither 'chessmen' nor 'dice' is a correct translation of *santĕn* in the context of the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa*. In his commentary he says: 'et is misschien niet overbodig op te merken, dat de weergave van *santĕn* (*akṣa*) met »dobbelsteen« evenmin geheel juist is als met »schaakstuk«' (1938: 85).

gaming pieces mentioned at several other places of the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa*. From a detailed analysis of the game it is to be clear that we could refute the possibility that the *caturaṅga* game described in the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* was a variety of chess. In place of that, another interpretation of the game in question is offered; the *caturaṅga* is interpreted as one of the so-called 'race-type' board games, of which the modern backgammon is by far the most well-known example.

Caturaṅga and its gaming pieces

The game is first mentioned in a passage where Arjuna asks his brother Yudhiṣṭhira what would be his occupation at the court of the Wirāṭa king. Yudhiṣṭhira answers him:[7]

> *Antĕnku sang Arjjuna! Kumwâ karmmarasa wawan i nghulun, ri hiḍĕp ni nghulun, atĕmahana brâhmaṇa nghulun, makanâma dwija Kangka, makaguṇa ng ṇita caturangga, umarâ ri pasabhân ira sang prabhu. Atĕhĕr mawwata sântĕn maṇimaya waidûryya râjawarttaprawala.*[8]

> Arjuna, my brother! This will be my intention what to do. I will pose as a brahmin by the name of Kaṅka, one who is skilled at playing the *caturaṅga* game. I will enter the meeting-hall of the king, bringing along jeweled gaming pieces made of beryl and of lapis lazuli.

The second time the game is explicitly mentioned is in a passage where Yudhiṣṭhira explains his new skills to the king of Wirāṭa. Here, *caturaṅga* is actually a rendering of the Sanskrit plural *akṣān* (dice), a word which is a part of a Sanskrit quotation that precedes its Old Javanese rendering:

> „*Akṣân prayoktuṁ kuçalo 'smi dewitâ. Kawidagdhan mami nita caturangga. Nâmnâ 'smi Kangketi. Nâhan matang yan dwija Kangkâran mami*"[9]

> „*Akṣân prayoktuṁ ̓kuśalo 'smi dewitā*, my skill is to play a *caturaṅga* game. *Nâmnâ 'smi Kangketi*, that is why I am called brahmin Kaṅka"[10]

Now, the use of the word *santĕn* in the first passage points to the fact that the game in question was indeed a kind of a board game. *Santĕn* is an Old Javanese honorific variation of the Sanskrit word *sāri*, which Monier-Williams' dictionary defines rather too narrowly as 'a chessman, piece at backgammon' (1899:1209). *Santĕn* denoting gaming pieces is a rare lexical item in Old Javanese, found only in the *Wirāṭaparwa* and in the two late Balinese Kakawin based on this prose text, exactly in the passages where *caturaṅga* game is mentioned. The definition provided for the word *santĕn* in Zoetmulder's Old Javanese-English dictionary is rather ambiguous, as 'dice' is included among the meanings of this word (1982:1655).

In both of these passages the word *caturaṅga* is preceded by a word *nita*, which is probably derived from Sanskrit *paṇita*, a word meaning 'bet, stake' (Gonda 1973:393). In the Old Javanese context *nita* indeed designates any game played for stakes, and the word is attested in two *parwa* and several Kakawin. It seems that originally the Old Javanese *nita* was used to designate any game played for stakes. In the *Wirāṭaparwa* 31.13, and also in the *Āśramawāsanaparwa*, the word is used

---

7   The Old Javanese quotations are taken from Juynboll's diplomatic edition (1912), including his orthography. Translations are mine. I use Sanskrit orthography only in those cases where a wider textual *Mahābhārata* context is discussed, otherwise I prefer to use Juynboll's orthography.
8   Juynboll 1912:10.
9   Juynboll 1912:17. The Sanskrit citation is corrupted here, and the relevant passage of the Sanskrit *Virāṭaparvan* runs: 'skilled among gamblers at casting dice [...] my name is Kanka' (*akṣān prayoktuṃ kuśalo 'smi devināṃ [...] kanketi nāmnāsmi*).
10   Translation of the Sanskrit part of this passage: 'I am able to play at dice. My name is Kanka'. It is clear that the Old Javanese rendering is rather free here, and the Javanese author possibly makes here a connection between the *caturaṅga* game and Yudhiṣṭhira's new adopted name. Kanka means 'heron' in Sanskrit, and in the *Mahābhārata* textual tradition this bird alludes to Yudhiṣṭhira's father, god Dharma, who has appeared to the Pāṇḍavas at the end of the *Vanaparvan* in the form of a *yakṣa* heron. He promised them that they would remain unrecognized during their year in disguise (Garbut 2006:484).

in a compound *dyūtanita*. The first segment *dyūta* is yet another gaming term taken from Sanskrit where *dyūta* means 'play, gaming, gambling' (Monier-Williams 1899:500). However, in the Old Javanese context the word *dyūta* is used more specifically to denote a fraudulent aspect of gambling. The word correlates strongly with a dice game between Śakuni and Yudhiṣṭhira, in which, according to a Javanese tradition, Śakuni won by cheating, a fact actually not supported by the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* evidence. *Nita caturaṅga* should thus be understood as '*caturaṅga* game played for stakes'. Chess is typically not connected with gambling, even though at certain places and in certain periods chess used to be played for stakes. In fact, there are several textual sources attesting that chess was indeed played for stakes in some parts of Southeast Asia. The earliest of these sources, the *Undang-Undang Melaka*, explicitly states that chess was played for money by high-ranking officials, and debts incurred by playing chess could have been apparently very high (Liauw Yock Fang 1976:167).

In the second passage cited above *nita caturaṅga* is used to gloss a preceding Sanskrit quotation segment *akṣān prayoktum,* meaning 'dicing'. The usual Old Javanese term for 'dicing' is *dyūta*, and this suggests that the original Indian dice game of this episode was interpreted differently in the Javanese context. It is important to realize that in India itself dicing techniques were not the same all the time, and new varieties of games using dice continued to appear over a long period of time.[11] As part of this process, so-called 'race-type' board games played with dice were introduced. As a rule, gamesters are supposed to move their playing pieces along some delineated track, according to the throw of dice. It seems that in India especially the board games related to backgammon have been connected with elite gaming. Only recently has Soar collected a corpus of data showing how important early varieties of backgammon used to be in pre-Islamic India, at least in the religious setting. Since the Gupta period well until the 12th century, board games related to backgammon feature quite often on temple reliefs (Soar 2007:225). The introduction of new games and their localization by an accepting milieu was often connected with a shift in the meaning of gaming vocabulary, and the meaning of some words became unclear in the course of time. Dicing scenes in the Sanskrit *Virāṭaparvan* are no exception to this, and the passage in which Yudhiṣṭhira proposes to be a brahmin gamester has its share of difficult words. Editors of the Sanskrit text have interpreted this part quite differently. Van Buitenen has interpreted the phrase *phalair jyotīrasaiḥ* as 'the phosporescent nuts', while Garbutt's translation has here 'a gemstone gaming board'. As this particular passage is important as a possible source text of the Old Javanese rendering, it is worth quoting here the two translations:

> Here ye, scions of Kuru, what work I shall do! When I come to King Virāṭa, that bull among men, I shall be the Royal Dicing Master of the great-spirited king, and pose as a brahmin by the name of Kanka, one who knows the dice and is an ardent gambler. I shall roll out the fascinating dice, those made of beryl and gold and ivory, the phosporescent nuts, and the black and red dice![12]

> Listen to what I will do, bull-like descendants of the Kurus, once I have reached King Virāṭa. I will become "Kanka", a brahmin fond of gambling and reveling in dice, and I will be the the high-hearted king's games-playing courtier. I will set down cat's-eye gem, gold and ivory game pieces on a gemstone gaming board, and cast beautiful black and red dice.[13]

Van Buitenen has interpreted the dice game alluded in this passage as an ancient *vibhītaka* game, played originally with a multitude of small *vibhītaka* nuts, grasped from a store of them and counted upon a throw. In notes to his translation van Buitenen explains that *phalair jyotīrasaiḥ* of the *Virāṭaparvan* were 'the *vibhītaka* nuts used at dicing, here artificial and apparently carved from

---

11 Lüders has shown convincingly that an original *vibhītaka* game, played with a multitude of *vibhītaka* nuts, was supplanted later by a more complicated *pāśaka* dice game (1907:17). Here, three rectangular dice were used, and after each throw their numerical value was counted.
12 Van Buitenen 1978:28.
13 Garbutt 2006:29.

precious stones' (1978:533). Garbutt has interpreted this game as an unspecified board game, complete with its gaming pieces and dice.

In a situation when even the interpretation of the Sanskrit original presents a problem, it is possible that the author of the Old Javanese version went his own way in handling this passage and he has chosen to interpret the game played by Yudhiṣṭhira and king Wirāṭa in terms of elite gambling of his own place and time, introducing the *caturaṅga* board game into the text.[14] His description actually deviates from the Sanskrit dicing episode at two other places, and these passages help us to understand better the nature of the *caturaṅga* game.

Caturaṅga, a race-type board game played with the dice

The first case of textual deviation could be found in a passage where Yudhiṣṭhira introduces himself to the king Wirāṭa. He is accepted as a royal gaming partner, and in the Old Javanese version the king urges him to promote the *caturaṅga* game in the Wirāṭa country. This suggests that the game was perceived as a new, attractive game of chance. In the Sanskrit version Yudhiṣṭhira is actually introduced as a brahman skilled in dicing, while the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* makes explicitly clear that Yudhiṣṭhira is an expert in a particular game, when the king says: 'I am very fond of gambling, so do make this game known in all Wirāṭa country'.[15] Another point where the Old Javanese description of the game differs from its Sanskrit original is in a passage where the king calls Yudhiṣṭhira to play with him for stakes in order to celebrate a victory of his son over enemies. In the Sanskrit *Virāṭaparvan* the king urges Śairindrī, who is actually Pāṇḍawas' wife Draupadī in disguise, to bring dice used in the game first:

> After dispatching his army, maidens, and well-adorned courtesans, the sagacious great king
> said cheerfully, "Fetch the dice, chambermaid, and let the game begin, Kanka!" The Pāṇḍava
> looked at him when he said this and replied, "One should not play, we have heard, with an
> excited gambler. I should not properly play with you now that you are so happy![16]

In the Old Javanese version, however, Sairindrī is allotted a more important task than just bringing the dice into an assembly-hall where the king will gamble with Yudhiṣṭhira and his courtiers. Sairindrī is ordered by the king to participate on the game by casting a dice:

> *Tĕlas lunghâ sakweh nikang manungsungi sang râjaputra, mahârâja Wirâṭâsyang anita ri sang*
> *dwija Kangka. Sang Sairindhrî kinon irâpariha, tan anggâ sira ri pasyang mahârâja*
> *Matsyapati, magawe parihâra wicitrawâkya: „Sājñâ haji! Tan yogya kĕtâ kadi rahadyan*
> *sanghulun sakta ring nita, bheda sangka ring lâlanamâtra [...]‟*[17]

> All who came to meet the king's son had already departed, and the king Wirāṭa called brahman
> Kaṅka [to come] to dice [for stakes]. Sairindrī was ordered to cast the dice. [Kaṅka] was unwilling to
> accept a challenge from the king of Matsya, and tried to dissuade him, skilled in speech: "Your Majesty!
> It is not proper for someone like you to indulge in playing for stakes, except for amusement[...]"

A crucial word here is *parih*, translated by Zoetmulder as 'falling of the dice, decision in a contest; the person who casts the dice or gives the decision' (1982:1298). *Parih* seems to be primarily a technical term denoting fall of the dice or any other scoring device. From several Old Javanese Kakawin it is clear that a fall of dice was awaited by contestants with a high degree of mental concentration. The importance ascribed to this fact could be due to the method of scoring used. In

14 Another piece of evidence that elite gambling was connected on pre-Islamic Java with board games is represented by backgammon scene depicted on one of Borobudur reliefs (Krom 1927:461).
15 The Old Javanese text runs: "*makaswabhâwa râga ring nita nghulun, matang yan sang brâhmaṇa toh marahana riking nita ring sawirâṭa!*" (Juynboll 1912:17).
16 Van Buitenen 1978:123.
17 Juynboll 1912:86.

the 11th century *Arjunawiwāha* 30.3 two heavenly *apsara* are observed by Arjuna while they are playing a game in which *parih* is awaited:

> So, there is Suprabhā playing a game, see how she has Tilottamā as her opponent,
> The way she requests the fall of the dice in the contest is not with a raised voice.[18]

As dice was used here, it is possible that Mpu Kaṇwa, the author of the *Arjunawiwāha*, is referring to some kind of board game played for stakes. There are several other descriptions of *parih* in Old Javanese Kakawin. Emotions were expected to be controlled when awaiting *parih*, and in the *Bhomāntaka* 64.7 an anonymous author uses the image of a gamester's impassive face when he describes a young woman courted by her lover. At the moment when he enters her room, she is found playing some kind of board game with her mother, using a *parih* dice. The girl does her best to control her feelings, when the lover unexpectedly appears on the scene. The poet alludes here to the fact that the girl only pretends to keep a serene face, a mental setting expected from someone awaiting a fall of dice:

> At the time when she was playing at dice with her mother I came upon her wearing
>   flowers in her hair.
> She noticed my coming, seeking a secret means for asking for whatever she liked,
>   and then looked at me.
> She recognized the glances of deep pleasure and drew my looks toward her breasts-
> Her wish was to keep silent, so she controlled her inner feelings, with the pretext of
>   awaiting the fall of the dice.[19]

In fact, the *Wirāṭaparwa* is the earliest text where the word *parih* is attested, and it occurs here only once in the passage cited above. It seems that Sairindhrī was ordered to cast a dice for the Wirāṭa king, as she was possibly believed to bring him luck by her felicitous throws. A technical term *parih* used here suggests that one or more dice were used in the *caturaṅga* game. To be sure, there is also attested a four-handed variety of chess, played by four participants, in which dice were used. However, this variety is known only from India, and it did not appear earlier than around AD 1000 (Mark 2007:150). Apart from the fact that the word *parih* in the *Wirāṭaparwa* suggests that some scoring device was used in the *caturaṅga* game, dice are indeed explicitly mentioned in three other passages of the text. They are among Yudhiṣṭhira's paraphernalia carried by him at the moment when he for the first time enters the assembly-hall:

> *Sakaton mahârâja Wirâṭa de nira, masö ta sira makapawwat ikang sântĕn waidûryya maṇimâya, saha lâwan pasaginya nâgadanta.*[20]

> When [Yudhiṣṭhira] saw king Wirāṭa, he entered, bringing as his gift jeweled gaming pieces made of beryl, and ivory dice.[21]

The word *pasagi*, translated here as dice, is used in Old Javanese to designate a certain category of rectangular objects, such as gaming boards, dice and square boxes. In India, rectangular *pāśaka* dice, with four sides for scoring, were known from since at least the first century AD (Soar 2007:177), and in Java cube dice are depicted in the late 8th century Borobudur gambling scene (Soar 2007:196). A modern Javanese word for dice is *dadu*, which derives from the Portuguese *dado* and denotes typically a square dice with six scoring sides. Contrary, a traditional Indian dice

---

18 Robson 2008:129.
19 The translation is taken from Teeuw and Robson 2005:377.
20 Juynboll 1912:16.
21 A corresponding passage in the Sanskrit *Virāṭaparvan* runs: 'On his way to King Virāṭa, enthroned / In his hall, the king first fastened his dice, / The golden and beryl-colored, beneath / His armpit, and drew his cloak around,' // (van Buitenen 1978:34).

used to be a prismatic device with four scoring sides. Reid supposes that some form of dicing was known in Southeast Asia prior to the early-modern period, but he suggests that dicing became popular in maritime Southeast Asia only when new forms of games using dice were introduced by the Portuguese in the 16th century (1988:196).

In another passage where *pasagi* is mentioned, it is used by an enraged king Wirāṭa to strike Yudhiṣṭhira in the course of a game session. In this well-known part of the story Yudhiṣṭhira protests against his lord's unjustified praise of Uttara, the king's son, who has just returned from a war campaign. When Yudhiṣṭhira continues laughing at Uttara's lack of bravery, Wirāṭa turns red with anger, abuses him, and throws a die which hits Yudhiṣṭhira's face:

> *An mangkana pangupahâsa sang dwija Kangka, krodha ta manah mahârâja Matsyapati, abâng ikang muka, arĕngû ikang alis, pinaṇḍĕs*[22] *nira tĕṇḍas sang dwija Kangka ring pasagi. Atĕhĕr anudingi kiwân panguman-uman ring çabda wâkpâruṣya, ndân sang dinaṇḍa tinibân âçâpih, humĕnĕng juga tar asĕnghit, tuhun tangan ira kâlih pwa ya tumukup kanin ikang rahi, apan nâgatân katampuheng lĕmah ilî nikang râh.*[23]

> Brahmin Kaṅka mocked [the king] in that way. In a fit of anger, his face red and his eyebrows stretched, king Matsyapati threw a dice and hit brahmin Kaṅka's head. At the same time, pointing his left finger at him threateningly, he addressed Kaṅka with abusive words. However, the one who was hit by a stick [dice] remained silent, and felt no anger. He only covered his wounded forehead with both hands, apprehensive that the trickle of blood would fall down on the earth.

Reading this passage carefully, it seems that a rectangular, stick-like dice has been used by the king to strike Yudhiṣṭhira's face. Zoetmulder has not been able to differentiate between a gaming board and a dice in this episode, and his glossing of the word *pasagi* in his Old Javanese-English dictionary seems to suggest that both 'dice' and 'board' could be considered possible translations here (1982:1310).

While it is completely clear that in the Sanskrit *Virāṭaparvan* it is dice that were used as a tool of avenge by king Matsya,[24] we cannot be so sure which implement the king uses to strike Yudhiṣṭhira's face in the Old Javanese version. *Pasagi* cannot be clearly identified in any Old Javanese text with a game board, and in the only textual record of some kind of gaming board known to me, in the Balinese *Wirāṭawijaya*, the implement is called *papan,* not *pasagi.*[25] However, boards are depicted in the Borobudur gaming scene and in the 14th century gambling scene from Candi Jago. Here, a famous dicing game between Śakuni and Yudhiṣṭhira is depicted on a relief which is a part of a sequence illustrating the Old Javanese court epic *Pārthayajña*. Both gamesters are seated over a rectangular board or gaming table in the *pĕṇḍopo* pavilion, each of them backed by his own relatives. Van Stein Callenfels has interpreted the gaming board shown here as possibly an early example of a chessboard (1919:371). He has also suggested that the gaming table (*speeltafeltje*), of which the chessboard is a part, is depicted here in the process of being overthrown by Śakuni (1919:371). However, this interpretation is not supported by any textual evidence, both in the Sanskrit and Old Javanese sources. The board itself is executed on too small a scale to permit any exactness of detail behind the fact that several round objects are distributed across its surface. It is interesting to notice that Śakuni uses his left hand to move the pieces, and in the *Pārthayajña* an anonymous author alludes several times to the fact that Śakuni has won over Yudhiṣṭhira by the use

---

22 Amended by Zoetmulder to '*pinaṇḍĕm*' (1982:1252).
23 Juynboll 1912:87.
24 A corresponding Sanskrit passage runs: 'In a fit of anger the king hit Yudhiṣṭhira in the face with a die, shouting irately, "I will not have it!" So powerfully was Yudhiṣṭhira struck that the blood streamed from his nose, and Pārtha caught it in his hand before it trickled to the floor' (van Buitenen 1978:123).
25 An author of this Balinese *kakawin* substituted the *pasagi* dice used by the king to strike Yudhiṣṭhira by the *papan* gaming board. It is possible that he was influenced here by the Sanskrit *Harivaṃśa*, a late addition of the *Mahābhārata*, where in one of its gaming scenes Balarāma seizes a large golden game board and strikes Rukminī with it to the ground.

of cheating and tricks. It is also of some interest here, that below this scene two *panakawan* clown figures parody the elite-style gambling by some sort of unidentified, presumably simple game of chance.

The anonymous author of the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* has added one more interesting detail, which helps us to understand better the nature of the *caturaṅga*. In one passage the game is compared to a battle (*lumaga-laga ing nita*), which possibly alludes to the fact that a piece on a game board could have been knocked off the square it occupied, and made to start the journey again, as is usual, for example, in the backgammon. This interesting detail is found in a passage in which Yudhiṣṭhira refrains from playing for stakes with king Wirāṭa to celebrate the unjustified victory of his son over the Korawa enemies, and he explains to the king that it is proper for him to play only for fun, not for stakes:

> *ling sang dwija kangka mangkana atĕhĕr lumaga-lageng nita śrî matsyapati mogha wineh*
> *nirâlaha juga śarîra nira harṣa tângĕn-angĕn mahârâja matsyapati garjitojar i sang dwija*
> *kangka paśya putreṇa me yuddhe tâdṛśâh kurawo jitâh[26]*

> Such were the words of brahmin Kaṅka. Then he faced the Matsya king in a game of war,
> playing for stakes. It came about that [Kaṅka] deliberately chose to be defeated, and
> the Matsya king was pleased, telling the brahmin: "Look, my son has defeated men such
> as the Kurus in the battle!"

To summarize and contextualize the data on the *caturaṅga* game of the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* given so far it will be useful to list the particular features of this game that were extrapolated from the text so far:

- The game was played by two persons, here by the king Wirāṭa and Yudhiṣṭhira.
- The game was played for stakes.
- Gaming pieces (*santĕn*) were used, suggesting that *caturaṅga* was a board game.
- Gaming pieces were moved according to the throw of a rectangular dice (*pasagi*), suggesting that *caturaṅga* was a kind of race-type board game.
- Killing opponent's men was one of the tasks of the game.

From all this evidence it is clear that *caturaṅga* of the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* was not a variety of chess, but some form of a race-type board game. Here it is useful to come back to a Murray's original idea that the early developments of chess were connected with a race-type board game played on a 8×8 grid. Murray uses the name 'ashtapada' for this game, as it was played on a board called *aṣṭapāda* in Sanskrit sources. He says about this game and its relations to chess (1953:129, 130):

> The board contains 8×8 cells. It was on this board that the inventor of chess arranged his
> game, and the Indian chessboard to this day preserves the crosscut cells of the *ashtapada*
> board although they play no part in chess, and they have even survived the chequering of
> the board.

> The invention of chess did not interfere with the practice of the older race-game and both
> games continued to be played on the same board. But the term *ashtapada* passed out of use
> and in southern India both games were known as *chaturanga*, 'chess'. In the later literature
> we can only tell which game is intended from the context; if the men are called *sari*, we know
> that the race-game is meant. Finally, *chaturanga* was only used for the race-game, and it
> became necessary to invent a new name for chess.

Murray admits that we do not know exactly how *aṣṭapada/chaturaṅga* was played, and he has

---

26 Juynboll 1912:86.

suggested that the game was similar to modern south Asian race-type games such as Ceylonese *gavalata* and *saturankam* (1913:42). All these games are played on boards that contain a number of cross-cut, or otherwise marked cells. From some of these cells men are born, others serve as cells of entry, and men occupying these cross-cut cells are generally immune from capture. These cross-marked cells are until our days an integral part of traditional chess boards still used in some parts of Southeast Asia. As this cell marking is redundant in modern chess and its function in pre-modern varieties of chess remains to be unknown, it could be taken as yet another proof of the fact that when chess appeared for the first time in Southeast Asia, it used to be already played on a board which had some cells cross-marked. There are two possibilities then how to explain this phenomenon. The first one is that chess board reached Southeast Asia with some of its cells already cross-marked. The other is that chess was proceeded in the region by another board game of the race-type, in which cell marking was a functional feature of the game, and the same board was adopted for a new game of chess. In this context, it is interesting to note that in South Sulawesi the *gala* board game closely related to chess used to be played on a board of 7×7 grid, with some of its cells crossed-marked.

Now, it is tempting to connect the Javanese *caturaṅga* with the game of the same name attested from south India, and considered by Murray to be a descendant of an *aṣṭapada* race-type game constructed on the 8×8 grid plan. However, the description of the game provided in the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* does not allow us to go beyond the statement that the Javanese *caturaṅga* was a race-type board game, played with the *pasagi* dice, and its *santĕn* pieces were moved on a board in an unknown way according to the throw of the dice.

Conclusion

From a careful reading of the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* it is clear that *caturaṅga* was not a variety of chess, as supposed by some scholars, but a sort of a race-type board game played with dice used as a scoring device . It derived probably from some Indian race-type board game based on the 8×8 grid, and it could have been similar to some present-day south Asian board games such as *gavalata* and *saturankam*. From several passages in the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* where the game is mentioned, it seems that *caturaṅga* was played by two players, who were moving *santĕn* gaming pieces according to the throw of the *pasagi* dice. There is no evidence for differentiated playing power of individual *santĕn* pieces as in chess, neither is there any textual evidence for the shape of the board used. It is tempting to speculate that a board used in the *caturaṅga* had already several cells crossed, a common feature on later Javanese chess boards.

While the fact that there is no extant description of chess from Java predating the 15th century does not rule out an earlier origin of the game on the island, it neither supports a traditional view that chess was introduced into Java before the Islamic period, a view based on the predominantly Sanskrit terminology of the game.

There remains still one question unanswered. It is clear that the author of the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* tried to elaborate on the topic of dicing between Yudhiṣṭira and king Wirāṭa, narrated in the Sanskrit *Virāṭaparvan*. His descriptions of particular *caturaṅga* sessions are richer in details than in the original Sanskrit narration, and he adds here and there several important plots to the story, as in the passage where Sairindrī casts dice on behalf of the king, a plot unattested in the Sanskrit text. *Caturaṅga* of the Old Javanese *Wirāṭaparwa* is represented not just as a board game played for pleasure and stakes, its meaning seems to be more serious here. As described by the author of the Old Javanese text, all the pieces used in the game have been made from costly materials such as precious stones and ivory. One set of *santĕn* pieces was made from beryl, and the other from the *rājawarta* stone, regarded in Sanskrit epical tradition to be a kind of diamond or other gem coming from the country of Wirāṭa and bringing luck to its possessor (Monier-Williams 1899:). As it is stated in the Old Javanese text that Kaṅka was bringing with him to the court of king Wirāṭa the implements used in the *caturaṅga* game, he was thus in some sense bringing luck to the whole kingdom, at least by his possession of *santĕn* pieces made from *rājawarta* stones. Van der

Molen has suggested that Javanese king Dharmawaṅsa commissioned the *Wirāṭaparwa* in order to provide him with references to the concept of *cakrawarti*, a world-ruler (2010:17). After Dharmawaṅśa had consolidated his power in East Java, he conquered Bali and started to prepare a campaign against Sumatra. Victory over Sumatran Śrīwijaya would bring him the elevated status of *cakrawarti*. In 996, when the work was composed, he had not yet achieved that status and he needed the magical power of the new text to add to his pool of spiritual energy (Molen van der 2010:17). Now, *caturaṅga* game is mentioned for the first time exactly in the passage where the concept of *cakrawarti* is first elaborated. It is possible that particularly in the elite setting of the Javanese royal court the game was perceived as an auspicious, and costly gaming pieces were considered to be luck-bringing objects.

References

Barros, J. De
1563   *Da Asia*. 4 Decades in nine vols. Lisbon: Regia Officina, 1777. Reprinted
            Lisbon 1973.

Braginsky, V.
2004   *The heritage of traditional Malay literature; a historical survey of genres, writings
            and literary views*. Leiden: KITLV Press. [Verhandelingen 214.]

Buitenen, J.A.B. Van
1978   *The Mahābhārata. Volume III. 4. The Book of Virāṭa; 5. The Book of Effort*. Chicago:
            University Press.

Ellinghoven, B. and Ch. Gruber
2003   'Kambodschach; Work in Progress zur Geschichte des Schachspiels
             in Kambodscha', *Kambodschanische Kultur* 8:90-126.

Fokker, A.A.
1938   *Wirāṭaparwa; Opnieuw uitgegeven, vertaald en toegelicht. I*. 's-Gravenhage: Nijhoff.

Garbutt
2006   *Mahabharata. Book Four. Virata*. New York: New York University Press & JJC
            Foundation. [Clay Sanskrit Library.]

Gonda, J.
1973   *Sanskrit in Indonesia*. Second edition. New Delhi: International Institute of Indian
            Culture.

Juynboll, H.H.
1912   *Wirāṭaparwa; Oudjavaansch prozageschrift*. 's-Gravenhage: Nijhoff.

Krom, N.J.
1927   *Barabuḍur. Archeological Description*. 2 vols. The Hague: Nijhoff.

Liaw Yock Fang
1976   *Undang-undang Melaka; A critical edition*. 's Gravenhage: Nijhoff. [KITLV,
            Bibliotheca Indonesica 13.]

Lüders, H.

1907 *Würfelspiel im alten Indien*. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung. [Abhandlungen der Köninglichen Gesselschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. Philologisch-Historische Klasse. Neue Folge Band 9, Nr. 2.]

Mark, M.
2007 'The Beginnings of Chess', in: I.L. Finkel (ed.), *Ancient Board Games in perspective; Papers from the 1990 British Museum colloquium, with additional contributions*, pp. 138-157. London: The British Museum Press.

Molen, W. van der
2010 *Darmawangsa's heritage. One the appreciation of the Old Javanese Mahabarata*. Orasi Ilmiah sebagai Adjunct Professor. Depok, 15 Juni 2010.

Monier-Williams, M.
1899 *A Sanskrit-English dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Murray, H.J.R.
1913 *A history of Chess*. Oxford.

Murray, H.J.R.
1952 *A History of Board-Games other than Chess*. London: Oxford Clarendon Press.

Murray, H.J.R.
1963 *A Short History of Chess; With chapters by B. Goulding Brown and H. Golombek*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Phalgunadi, I Gusti Putu
1992 *The Indonesian Mahābhārata; Virāṭaparva-The Fourth Book*. New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan.

Pigeaud, Theodore G.Th.
1962 *Java in the 14th century; A study in cultural history: The Nagara-Kertagama by Rakawi, prapanca of Majapahit, 1365 AD. Part 4: Commentaries and Recapitulation*. The Hague: Nijhoff. [KITLV, Translation Series 4, 4.]

Raffles, T.S.
1817 *History of Java*. London: Black, Parbury and Allen. Two vols.

Reid, A.
1988 *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce; 1450-1680*; vol. 1. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Robson, S.
2000 'The Force of Destiny, or the Kidung Harsa-Wijaya Reread', *Indonesia and the Malay World* 28:243-254.

Robson, S.
2008 *Arjunawiwāha; The marriage of Arjuna of Mpu Kaṇwa*. Leiden: KITLV Press. [Bibliotheca Indonesica 34.]

Soar, M.
2007 'Board Games and Backgammon in Ancient Indian Sculpture', in: I.L. Finkel (ed.),

Ancient Board Games in perspective; Papers from the 1990 British Museum colloquium, with additional contributions, pp. 177-231. London: The British Museum Press.

Stein Callenfels, P.V, and R. Ng. Purbatjaraka
1919   'Verklaring van basreliëf-serie A. De Bubukṣah-serie aan het pendapa-terras te Panataran', *Tijdschrift van het Bataaviasch Genootschap* 58, 348-390.

Syed, R.
2001   *Kanauj, die Maukharis und das Caturanga. Der Ursprungs des Schachspiels und sein Weg von Indien nach Persien*. Kelkheim.

Teeuw, A. et al.
1969   *Śiwarātrikalpa of mpu Tanakung; An Old Javanese poem, its Indian source and Balinese illustrations*. Leiden: KITLV Press. [Bibliotheca Indonesica 3.]

Teeuw, A., and S.O. Robson
2005   *Bhomāntaka; The death of Bhoma*. Leiden: KITLV Press. [KITLV, Bibliotheca Indonesica 32.]

Tuuk, H.N. van der
1897-1912   *Kawi-Balineesch-Nederlandsch woordenboek*. Batavia: Landsdrukkerij. Four vols.

de Voogt, A.J. (ed.)
1995   *New Approaches to Board Games Research: Asian Origins and Future Perspectives*. IIAS Working Papers Series 3. Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies.

Zoetmulder, P.J.
1974   *Kalangwan; A survey of Old Javanese literature*. The Hague: Nijhoff. [KITLV, Translation Series 16.]

Zoetmulder, P.J.
1982   *Old Javanese-English dictionary*. With the collaboration of S.O. Robson. 's-Gravenhage: Nijhoff. Two vols. [KITLV.]

JIRI JAKL is a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland. He obtained his MA at Leiden University. His main academic interests include Old Javanese *kakawin* literature and warfare in pre-modern Southeast Asia. He is the author of 'Trees and *langö* in the Old Javanese poems', *Pandanus; Nature in Literature, Art, Myth and Ritual* 8.1, 2008, and 'The Buffalo and wild cattle in Old Javanese *kakawin* literature', *Pandanus; Nature in Literature, Art, Myth and Ritual* 11.1, 2011. Jiri Jakl may be contacted at jiri.jakl@uqconnect.edu.au.