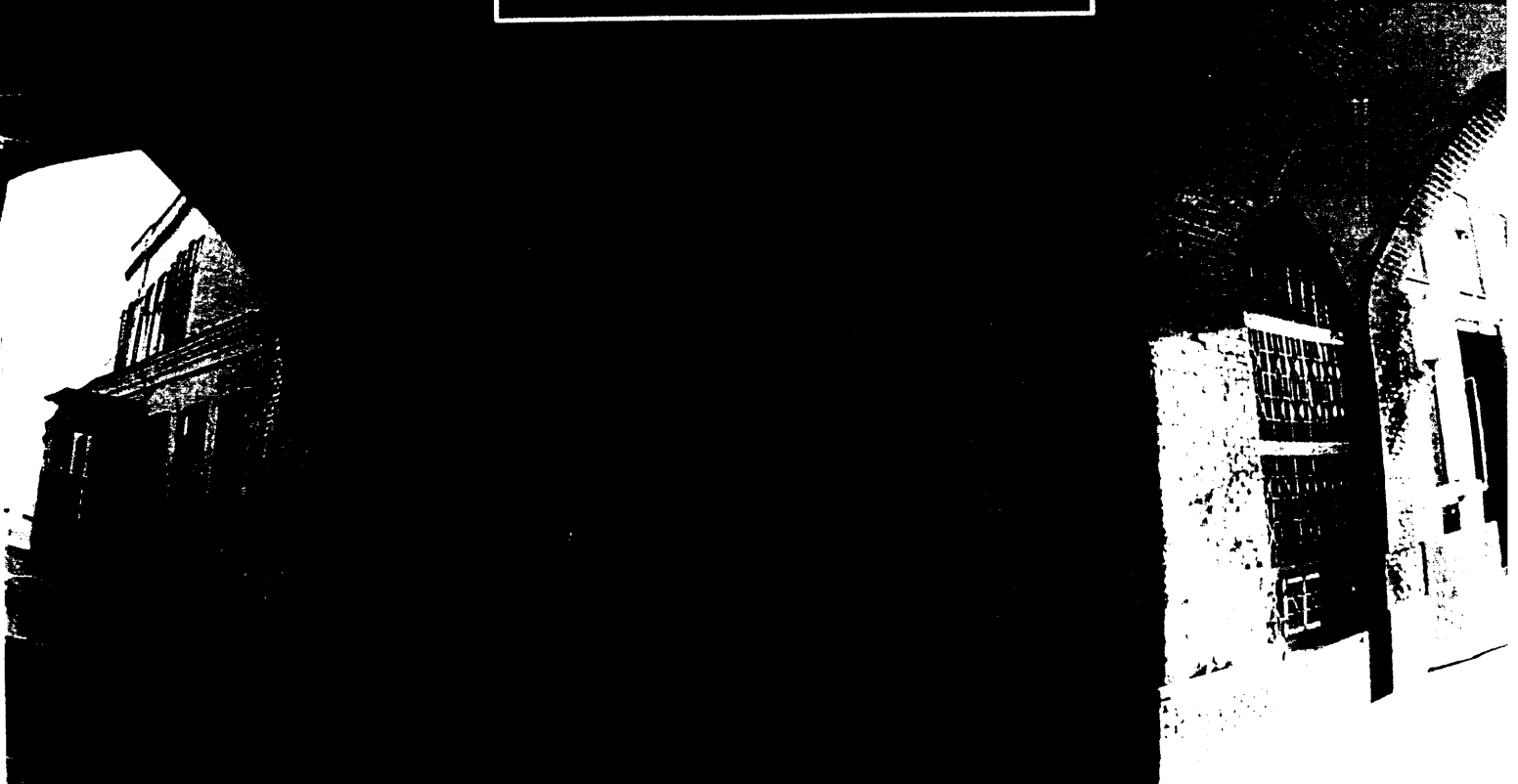
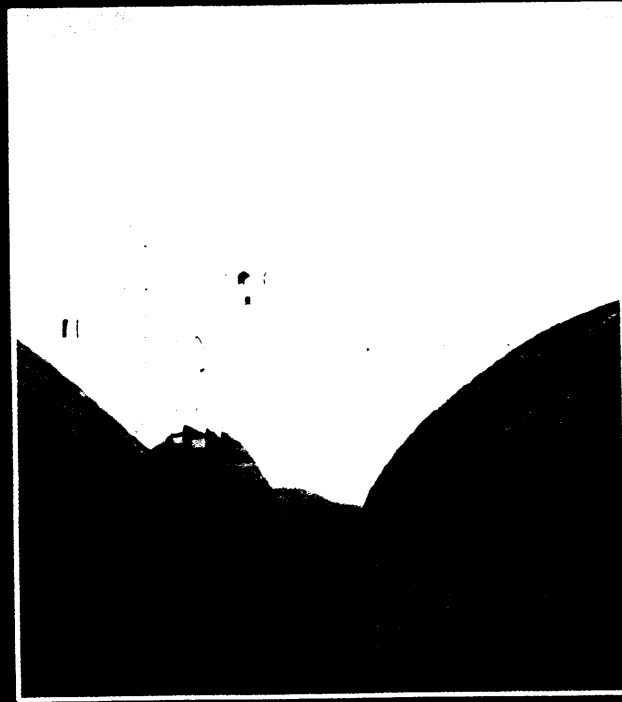


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Chess in ancient Afrasiab

These tiny white figures, tarnished with yellow, were discovered during archaeological excavations of the central cathedral mosque at the Afrasiab ancient settlement site - the ruins of pre-Mongolian Samarkand.

They were lying under the stairs of the southern entrance to the mosque — filled with rubble when the mosque was expanded — covered with a thick layer of carved stucco, which

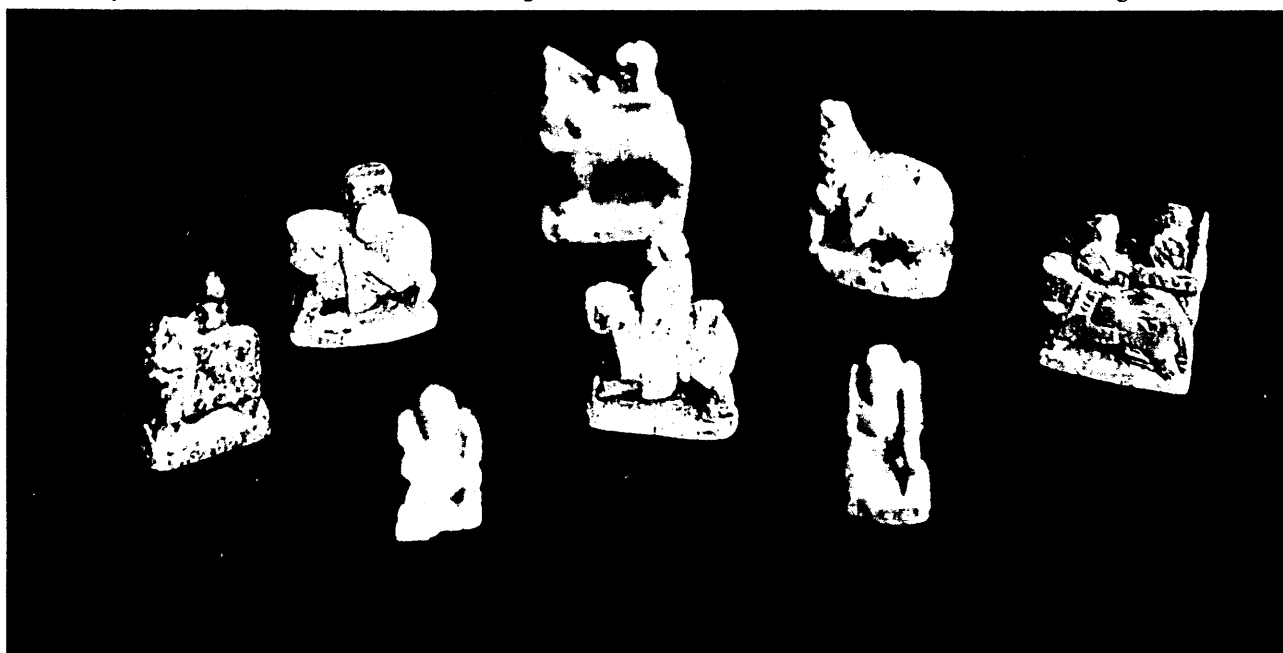
oval foundations that are heavily worn from frequent use, represent an ancient army.

Two pieces represent infantrymen kneeling down on their right knee, holding a short sword in their raised and slightly bent right arm and a round shield with a grooved boss in their left hand.

The third piece is an armed rider wearing a round, conical helmet with

Taq-i Bustan in Iran, one can see the same accoutrements - sheaths, quivers, bow holders, bucklers with a protruding boss, and chain mail covering a warrior and a horse's rump. Thus, here we can see a vivid representation of an early medieval Soghdian or Sassanian knight.

The fourth piece is quite amazing. It is also a rider, but a special one. It is a stout, massive figure with short



Chess set from Samarkand. 7 c.

once decorated the wall of the mihrab and the main entrance to the mosque. It appeared almost impossible to find any shape amid the broken mass of large, white stucco blocks. But after the layer had been properly cleared and all small fragments collected and glued together, a real masterpiece emerged from the debris - seven miniature ivory sculptures which represent a unique, and so far the most ancient, chess set, fortunately comprising all types of pieces. These tiny figurines, 2.5-4 cm high and 1.2-1.7 cm wide, mounted on short, flat

a grooved crown. In his right hand, he brandishes a short, curved sword — the same as that of the infantrymen; a shield in his left hand is decorated with an embossed rosette at the center. The rider's legs and the horse's rump are covered with cloth, or rather chain mail. Attached to his belt on the left side is a sheath, on the right there is a tube-like quiver, and behind his back a bow holder. If one compares this knight with the pictures of warriors painted on murals in the palace of the Soghdian ihshid at Afrasiab, or with the rock reliefs of

sword held straight upwards and a round shield with a protruding, eight-petal boss. Like the first rider, on the left side he wears a sheath attached to the belt, on the right a quiver, and at the back a bow holder. He is mounted on a strong, heavy animal that looks like a horse with a thick mane. Both rider and horse are covered with protective armor.

At first glance, it may seem that this chessman is similar to the horse-rider described earlier. But only until one takes a closer look. The top of his head is flat, and round eyes and a

broad nose are emphasized. A true lion's mask. The animal beneath the rider also has a round head and a lion's face. The lion-rider (1) looks more powerful than the horseman. Is this accidental?

The fifth piece is a massive elephant with its trunk hanging down to the ground and ending in a ring-like curve. Mounted on the elephant is an armed driver, or qarnaq. In his left hand there is an oval shield decorated with a protruding cruciform boss and pearls. His right arm is raised, but the end is missing: there should, apparently, have been a sword. Here, then, there is a chess piece that represents an elephant [equivalent to the chess piece known in the English-speaking world as the bishop].

A larger piece, number six, is very interesting. It consists of two warriors and a chariot. The chariot was probably drawn by three horses, of which the two wheel horses are shown clearly. Their heads are pictured as something in between the face of a horse and the face of a lion. Every detail of the harness, horse-cloth, hair or armor, manes and tails is meticulously painted. The first warrior is the chariot driver, mounted on a horse's back. He covers his left side with a shield. The right side of the figure is missing.

The other warrior is larger in size. He is sitting on a throne that looks like an armchair with a straight back and an oval edge decorated with a tree-like pattern in relief. The arms and back of the chair are adorned in relief with a string of pearls, the symbol of the solar disk. The warrior is also armed with a sword and a shield.

The seventh chessman is the largest of all. On a massive foundation decorated with a string of pearls in relief, there is the driver of three horses, whose heads are decorated with plumes. The driver is sitting on some kind of raised platform, the back of which has not survived (it may have

broken off while being made). This is the only unarmed piece: the left hand holds the reins, while the right hand holds a mace, which is, apparently, the symbol of regal power.

Thus, there is a complete (as it would appear) chess set, representing an Oriental army, which was immediately identified by scholars as the most ancient in the world. It was found in the cultural level of the 7th-8th centuries, but, to judge from the length of its use, it belongs to the 7th century.

The chess set from Samarkand has made a remarkable contribution to studies about the history of chess.

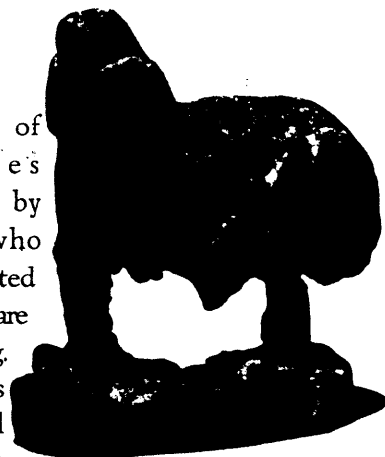
More than a hundred years have passed while scholars and chess historians all over the world have been trying to dispel the mystery of the game's origin - the origin of a game that is intellectual, deeply emotional and, at the same time, requiring cool, rational strategic thinking, a kind of a military commander's mind. Where was chess born, and what encouraged its development?

Traditionally, on the basis of written sources and pictorial material, chess is believed to have first appeared in the Orient. But there is no end to the debates as to whether chess owes its existence to fortune-telling based on the movement of the luminaries, or to the Oriental art of warfare. Those who argue in favor of the first hypothesis hold that chess originated in China, as Chinese sources of the 1st millennium BC provide a description of fortune-telling based on circles, mirrors and light and dark wooden bars. Throwing the bars and subsequently shaking them created various combinations of heavenly bodies, thus establishing whether one's fortune was good or bad, and, when used as a game, they indicated winning or losing, as shown by signs and symbols. The symbolism of cults traveled from country to country. The

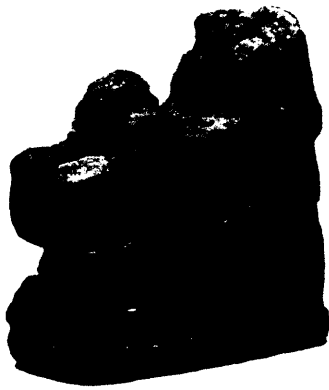
titles of articles written by those who transmitted the game are typical, e.g. «Chess as a symbol of the cosmos» by the Yugoslav historian Pavlo Bideva.

The idea that chess is linked with an army and military tactics, primarily those of India and Iran, is supported by myths, legends and tales. One of them is Firdousi's poem «Shakhsname». The poem tells of the internecine strife between two Indian princes, Gav and Talhand, that broke out when their father died. After his army had been defeated, Talhand died, and his grieving mother blamed her elder son for the murder of his brother. Wishing to clear his name, Gav summoned sages so as to have them explain to his mother what actually happened. One of the sages brought a board divided into squares, put the armies on it and reproduced the course of events. «Thus wishing to tell of Talhand, valorous Gav founded the game of chess» (2). Another legend, known from the Pehlevi «Book of Chatranga» tells of how one Indian rajah sent a diplomatic mission bearing the game of chatranga to the Sassanid shah Khosrov, suggesting that the Iranians should discover its rules. The

problem was solved by a wise vizier, Buzurmihir, and this caused chess to appear in Iran. The shah, in turn, sent another game-puzzle to the rajah, which was never solved. Whereas the first legend clearly identifies

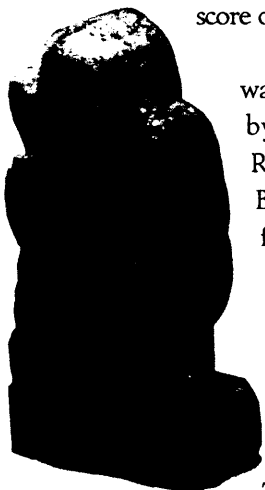


«Lion» 222



India as the homeland of chess, the truth contained in the second legend is harder to establish.

The point is that the game of chatranga was known in India. Pieces used in the game were the same as in chess, and the board of 64 squares was also the same. The pieces were divided into four armies, each consisting of a king, a *ruk* castle, an elephant, a knight and four pawns. The game was played by four people. Each piece had a particular value, and the game allowed for gambling — until all the pieces were destroyed, including the king. Importantly, however, the number of moves was determined by dicing, and dice were to be thrown by an independent onlooker; a player had to use a piece that corresponded to the score of the dice.



Chatranga was described by Abu Raikhān Beruni, a famous historian from Khorazm, in his history of India (3).

The game influenced the evolution of chess and even gave chess a similar name (in the medieval Orient, chess was known as «shetrang»).

However, the difference between the two games was dramatic. In chess, the four armies became two, and the two redundant kings started to play the role of the king's advisers, ministers or queens. Another important difference lay in the liberation of the player's power and will. Dice were never used, and the player could choose a piece himself, direct its moves and the entire game strategy, freeing himself from the need to abide by his *karma*.

But let us go back to the Samarkand finds. Unlike modern chess, here one can see, together with the king, knight, elephant [known in the English-speaking world as a bishop] and pawns, unknown pieces such as the chariot and the lion. The fact that the chariot carried two warriors ought to indicate its greater power in battle. To understand this better, one should look back to ancient history, when the game was evolving.

In the 2nd millennium BC, the territories of Iran and India were invaded by bellicose Aryan tribes whose victories were due mainly to cavalry used for ramming attacks, and especially to their swift and shattering battle chariots, which became the core of Oriental armies, including the armies of Iran and India. It is no accident that Indian verses in the Rig-Veda celebrate a solar deity, «flame-haired Surya», the god who can see from afar, who rides in a swift chariot, or *ratha*, who overcomes all obstacles and brings victory (4). The Iranians can hardly be beaten: the Zoroastrian hymns of the Avesta tell of the powerful warriors of the chief deity, Ahura Mazda, — the Rathashar who «ride in chariots» and are the masters of swift horses, fat cattle, vast pastures and fine wagons (5).

And their supreme god, Mithras, was also a guardian of warriors, a heavenly charioteer driving a magnificent golden chariot, drawn by four swift, white horses. Warriors

would appeal to him: «O Mithras, give us and our relays strength to defeat our enemies in a single blow.»

It was no accident that in India a game called ashtapada emerged. Two chariots raced on a squared board, and moves were determined by the number of points scored by dice throwing. The game spread across many Oriental countries and eventually grew into chatranga. Now it becomes clear not only why the chariot piece was included in the chess set, but also why it was so powerful. That is why, in the «Shakhsname», the heroine Ratha (who later turned into a *ruk* bird, rook or castle) is distinguished as the most powerful figure, even more powerful than the adviser-queen:

«The adviser goes near the shah in battle, And the move he can make is only one square. But no one is faster than *rukhs*. Their gift is to fly all the board through» (2, p. 146-147.).

Incidentally, talking about the queen or adviser. In our set, there is still one piece left, and that is the lion-rider. Was it there by accident? If one goes back to the sources, one sees that exactly the same piece is exhibited in the Oriental art display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The flattened head, the lion mask on the face, the shield with its protruding boss and the lion-like horse are decorated with solar symbols (pearls). All these features speak of the significance of the piece for the army.

The following period saw the rapid stylization of chess pieces, resulting from the Islamic taboo on portraying living beings. So, in order to find analogies, we should turn to regions where those images continued to live; for example, Siberia and Mongolia.

Indeed, research on the chess pieces of the Mongolian peoples who lived in the centuries that followed shows that the role of adviser was played by

the *arslan*, the lion. The chariot, incidentally, is also there, but, unknown to the late Mongolian army, it turns into a wagon, sometimes even drawn by bulls (6). They are apparently relics of the ancient chessmen that were brought there via the Great Silk Road. In the Middle East, the disappearance of the chariot from the battle ranks of armies led to its gradual replacement in the game. It is thought that it turned into a fabulous bird, called the *ruk*, and, judging by the finds in Ferghana, this chess piece represented a bird of prey pecking at a waterfowl. In the West, it turned into a castle or rook.

As mentioned earlier, in the Samarkand set the king is the largest of all the pieces and appears as a charioteer driving three horses. The status of this chessman is proved by the presence of the symbols of power and the complete absence of arms. But the study of chessmen from Oriental museums all over the world enable different interpretations of the king to be distinguished in different chess sets. Particularly interesting is a fragmented ivory sculpture from the Hermitage Museum. The exact provenance of the find is unknown, but it came from the collection of B. N. Kastal'skiy, an engineer from Turkistan. Taking into account the geographical scope of his operations, it can be assumed that the figurine originates from Afrasiab or Termez. Its size is comparable to our chessmen (4.5 x 3.0 x 1.5 cm), and it depicts a rather roughly painted figure of a man sitting on an ottoman on his right leg, with his left one half bent and extended. He is wearing a necklace and a head-dress with edges like those of a turban. His torso, which is narrower at the waist, is fastened with a belt. Judging by similar pictures in the monumental painting of Afrasiab or the representation of a warrior on a Soghdian shield, he is a member of

the rural Soghdian aristocracy. The piece was identified as a pawn. Although only part of the chess piece remains, the analysis of similar representations in earlier chess sets shows that the only unarmed piece was the king. Bearing in mind that the man is pictured as a nobleman, it seems wrong to identify this piece as a pawn. A chess piece kept at the Cabinet des Medales in France is very interesting in this respect. The piece is large (15.5 cm high) and represents an entire sculptural group centered around the king sitting on an elephant under an open, throne-like canopy. The king is surrounded by eight warriors on foot and four horsemen. According to descriptions found in literature, the elephant is supposed to be grabbing an acrobat with its trunk. But actually it is a real battle scene. Closer study of the chess piece directly at the museum proved that a driver, or qarnaq, who was probably killed in the battle, is hanging down from the elephant's head, and the elephant is pulling the enemy warrior out of the saddle. But let us turn to the figure of the king. His posture is relaxed, one leg is bent under him, and the other is slightly extended forward. His arm rests on his knee. He is wearing a crown and a massive necklace. One cannot help noticing that his posture and even details of his jewelry are similar to those of the piece from the Hermitage. However, the workmanship is significantly better, and that is not surprising: the piece belongs to the set (which did not survive) presented by Caliph Garun ar Rashid to the Emperor Charlemagne. It dates back to the period between the late 8th and 9th centuries, before the time of Akbar.

The later dating cannot be accepted because the stand of the piece bears an inscription, «Amala Yusuf al Bakhili», engraved in a writing style characteristic of the Samanid period

of the 9th-10th centuries (7). Ornamental details, such as those of the horse-cloth, harness, the elephant's chain mail and the pearls on the stand, date from the 7th-8th centuries. Here one can see a complete miniature sculptural group with all its carefully worked out elements.

The little figurine from the Hermitage, although costly, since it is made of ivory, is not so meticulously finished. However,



both pieces represent a king, but a king on an elephant rather than a horse. This is a more

«Indianized» interpretation of a chess king, which was, perhaps, not so popular in the Iranian and Central Asian world, where a shah, malik or ihshid was traditionally mounted on a horse. So we come full circle. Figurines found in Samarkand represent a set of the most ancient chess pieces in the East. Yet the question of the origin of chess remains open.

The most ancient games from which chess evolved — ashtapada and chatranga - originated in India. Some legends about the origin of chess are also connected with that country.

However, both ashtapada and chatranga amount to a



game of chance, in which the points a player scores depend on «the will of the gods».

It will be recalled that this dependence stems totally from the Buddhist teaching about the life of the spirit.

It is believed that chess is also the embodiment of a struggle between good and evil gods. But, when calling on the gods for help, a player must devise his victory himself to assist the good deity.

We believe that this way of thinking is linked rather with Zoroastrianism, which caused the development of new rules for the game. In this respect, a logical hypothesis would be that the game emerged in Zoroastrian areas of Iran and Central Asia. The large number of chess boards found in Samarkand, Termez, the Syrdarya River basin, Khulbuk, Talgar and along the route of the Great Silk Road can then be explained.

But still the doubts have not been dispelled. The Indian scholar S. Panduranga Bhatta has amassed data in favor of the Indian origin of chess (8). Ranta Syed, who discovered a Sanskrit manuscript, «The Mind's Delight», kept in the Institute of Indian Studies at the University of Munich, observed that, in one of the chapters of that manuscript, a medieval author describes, in verse, the rules of chess. The manuscript was known before, but nobody had paid attention to that particular chapter (9). As a result, the controversy over the land in which this amazing game originated has now been re-ignited.



Ivory chess piece presented by Garun ar-Rasbid to Charles the IX. 9 c. Cabinet des Medales, France.



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