MILITARY LATRUNCULI

Latrunculi was the premiere intellectual game of the Roman Republic & Empire. There have been many efforts made to reconstruct it, but most of these efforts failed to explicitly take account of the existence of 2 forms of Latrunculi. The older form, deriving from the Greek game of Poleis had only 1 type of piece, while the newer form had 2 types of pieces. Most of the evidence for the newer form comes from military settings and areas on the edge of the empire, so I have given it the name of 'Military Latrunculi' and for contrast will call the older game 'Civil Latrunculi'.

There are 5 different types of evidence we can use to reconstruct Military Latrunculi:

1. Archaeological finds
2. A passage in the Shah-Namah
3. Games that may descend from Military Latrunculi
4. Evidence for its antecedent games of Civil Latrunculi and Poleis
5. Inherent logic of games

ARCHAEOLOGY The most important find is a tomb in Colchester which shows a game being played on an 8x12 board. White & Black pieces are lined up each long side of the board. Apparently White has advanced a man from C1 to C2, while Black has advanced C8 to C6 and D8 to D7. There marked pieces at G4 (a small white piece) and K7 (a blue piece upside-down?). Other finds show a variety of boards, 7x7, 7x8, 8x8, 9x10, 10x13. Another find has 21 black, 5 white and 2 blue pieces.

SHAH-NAMAH In Firdawsi's great poem, a story dealing with the origin of chess contains the following passage

"He arranged an army similar to that of chess, he placed the 2 sides in order of battle and distributed the troops, ready for battle and for the assault of the town, among 8 houses. The field was black, the battle-field square, and there were 2 powerful kings of good disposition who should both move without ever receiving injury. Each has at his side an army in its arrangements, collected at the head of the field and ready for the fray. The 2 kings advanced upon the field of battle, their troops moved on all sides around them, each trying to outdo the other, now they fought on the heights, now on the plains; when 2 on 1 side has surprised a man by himself, he was lost to his side, and the 2 armies remained face to face until it was seen who was beaten."

DESCENDANT GAMES There are 6 families of games that may claim relationship to Military Lantrunculi. All of these families can be found in Zillions

1. TAFL These games were played in the British isles and Scandinavia. It is interesting to note that much of the evidence for Military Latrunculi comes from Britain, and that the name Tafl comes from the Latin 'Tabula' (lit. Table be used to mean a board game).

2. CHESS The passage in the Shah-Namah connects chess to a Latrunculi-type game. The earliest reference to Chess is in the Babylonian Talmud (ca. 300, the same time as the Firdawsi poem). I theorize that chess was created from Latrunculi by further differentiating the pieces from Military Latrunculi.

3. EUROPEAN FOX GAMES These games were orginally found throughout Western Europe. They may derive from Tafl or separately from Latrunculi

4. SOUTH ASIAN TIGER GAMES A group of unequal force games from South Asia. In Zillions, the Game Cows & Leopards is in the Fox & Geese section

5. EAST ASIAN REBEL GAMES A group of unequal force games from China & Japan (also in Zillions under Fox & Geese). Although this seems far afield from the Roman Empire geographically, other games were transmitted across Asia (such as Chess).

6. SEEGA/HIGH JUMP These 2 games (from Egypt & Somalia) probably are related to Military Latrunculi's ancestors, and may well be similar to the Greek "Poleis" which was explicitly stated to be of Egyptian origin. They can't be considered descendants of Military Latrunculi.

CIVIL LATRUNCULI & POLEIS As these games are in themselves poorly understood, they are not very useful for understanding Military Latrunculi. Civil Latrunculi had some sort of "trapping", where a piece could be immobilized

without being taken. There is no sign of this Military Latrunculi. Schaedler interprets a passage in Ovid as indicating that jumps were allowed over pieces. This seems likely in Military Latrunculi.

GAME LOGIC In a game with custodian capture, the pieces must start interspersed, or a way of jumping across enemy lines must exist. Otherwise, you would never be able to get a piece to the opposite side of the enemy, and no captures would be possible.

TERMINOLOGY The Romans referred to the regular pieces as soldiers. The name of the special piece is unknown but as the special piece was called a King in Tafl & Chess I will use modern chess terminology.

SETUP The Colchester find makes it clear that the soldiers were deployed in 1 row along the back rank. The deployment of the King is unclear, so I follow chess and place the Kings just to the right of the centerline.

MOVEMENT The rules for movement represent the most problematic part of the reconstruction. To summarize the evidence:

Source	Pawn	King
Colchester Tomb	It could be either way, but a looks like a single orthogonal step	Could be rook move, but could also be a free placement of the king
Firdawsi	No real information	No real information
Tafl	Rook Move	Rook Move
Chess	In the earliest form of Chinese chess, pawns move 1 square orthogonally forward or sideways. The earliest Middle-Eastern forms already distinguish between movement & capture, which can't be done in a custodian capture game	1 space orthogonally or diagonally in the Middle-Eastern forms, 1 space orthogonally in Chinese chess.
European Fox	1 space along inscribed lines.	1 space along inscribed lines plus jumping capture.
South Asian Tiger	1 space along inscribed lines	1 space in some versions, any number in others along an inscribed line. Jumping capture.
East Asian Rebel	1 space along inscribed lines	1 space along inscribed lines. Jumping capture in some.

Clearly both a 1 space orthogonal move or a rook move is defensible. My theory is that the usual play was a 1 space orthogonal move, with the rook move being a common variant that gave rise to the Tafl games. I give the pieces the power of jumping over other pieces, based upon game logic and the jumping moves found in some other games. In particular I view the leap of the Horse & Elephant in chess as deriving from the jump of Latrunculi. Note that it even with an extended move a jump may have been possible, like the Chinese Cannon.

(Perhaps the Cannon derived from a piece that could move like a rook or hop an adjacent piece. Combining the actions creates the Cannon.)

CAPTURE There is no reason to think that capture was anything other than a simple Custodian capture.

VICTORY My theory is that the object of the game was to get the King to other side of the board, with the loss of the King being loss of the game. My evidence for this is:

1. In the Firdawsi poem it states " advanced upon the field of battle, their troops moved on all sides around them". This is consistent with the idea of the King having to cross the board. " should both move without ever receiving injury" could be interpreted to mean, that losing the King loses the game.

2. This is analogous to the victory conditions of Tafl.

3. In the earliest Indian form of chess, victory can be attained by moving to the enemy King's starting square. This could have derived from an original victory condition of moving the King to the far end of the board.

4. This is equivalent to the victory condition of the European Fox games.

5. It works.

LATRUNCULI TO CHESS My theory was that Latrunculi was the ancestor of chess. My idea is that the Latrunculi transformed into chess as follows:

1. Instead of deploying the King on the second rank, the practice arose of deploying the King on the first rank with the soldiers in front.

2. The empty spaces on the first rank now beckoned to those who would improve the game. Initially they were filled with 1 single piece type which I call a "Guard". To give guards greater power than regular soldiers they were given the power of diagonal movement or unlimited orthogonal movement.

3. With a piece density of 50%, custodian capture is too difficult too achieve. So someone in Persia or India came up with the idea of replacement capture.

4. The final step was made in India. The back rank pieces were differentiated, along the lines of the 4 arms of the Indian army: Infantry, Cavalry, Chariotry and Elephants. The details were:

    1. The soldiers lost their power of jumping and the ability to move backward

    2. The King lost its power of jumping, but retained diagonal movement

    3. The ability to jump inspired the 2 leaping only pieces, the horse & the elephant

    4. The chariot was given the unlimited orthogonal move found in some forms of Latrunculi.

    5. The remaining piece lost the power of jumping and orthogonal movement.

5. This proto-chess evolved into Shatranj & Chaturanga by modifying the pawn move and gradually abolishing victory by moving the King forward. My guess is that there was intermediate stage in pawn evolution where the pawn moved & captured forward, orthogonally or diagonally (somewhat analogous to the Gold general of Shogi). The ability to win by moving the King forward was limited to only the opposing King's starting square (with victory by Bare King added).

My reconstruction is by no means definitive, and my version of its evolution into chess is highly speculative. It should be noted that there was probably no definitive version of Latrunculi (just as today there is no definitive version of draughts/checkers). The uncertainty about the movement rule probably reflects that both adjacent and rook movement were used. Middle-eastern chess, Chinese chess, Tafl, the Fox games and the Rebel games drew upon different forms of Latrunculi (as well as incorporating ideas from the Alquerque/Checkers group of games).

I have included in my ZRF only the line of games leading to chess but some other forms probably existed.

1. Soldiers & the King moving like a Rook (and still hopping adjacent pieces). This would be ancestral to Tafl but also influenced Chinese chess.

2. A semi-Latrunculi were 1 side had only Soldiers and the other just a King. A probable ancestor to the Fox games and the Rebel games.

3.   A proto-checkers where Custodian captures were replaced with jumping captures. This converged with the Alquerque game to create the checkers/draughts family. Winning by getting the King to the last rank was transformed into getting a King by getting a Soldier to the last rank.

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