

The Games of Chess and Backgammon in Sasanian Persia

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فکربردن بودت ، عقل تویی بنیاداست
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Board games were played in many parts of the ancient world and so it is very difficult to attribute the origin of any board game to a particular region or culture. Board games have been found in ancient Mesopotamia, the oldest from the city of Ur, but one must also mention the game of *Senet* in ancient Egypt.¹ Often board games were placed in the tombs of the Pharaohs and sometimes the dead are shown playing with the gods, for example one scene shows Rameses III (c. 1270 B.C.) playing with Isis to gain access to the nether world. The importance of this fact is we can see that early on some board games had cosmological and religious significance and were not just games played for pleasure. Reference to board games in Persia can be found as early as the Achaemenid period, where according to Plutarch a board game with dice was played by Artaxerxes.² There is also a reference to a board game being played in

¹For the Egyptian game of *Senet* see E. B. Pusch, *Das Senet-Brettspiel im alten Aegypten*, Muenchner aegyptologische Studien, Heft 38, Muenchen, Berlin, Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1979; W. Decker, *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992. I would like to thank A. Loprieno for the information.

²Plutarch, *Lives*, Translated by J. Dryden, The Modern Library, New York, 1864, xvii.

the Parthian period by king Demetrius, albeit in a later source, in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.³

The earliest historical reference to the game of chess occurs in India where it existed as early as the time of the great Indian grammarian Pāṇini around 500 BCE.⁴ The game is also mentioned in the great Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata*, where in an episode the great sage Vyāsa explains the rules of the game (Sanskrit) *caturanga* ; (Middle Persian) *čātrang* ; (Persian & Arabic) *šātrang/ šātranj* to the great Pāṇḍava prince Yudhiṣṭhira. Vyāsa exclaims that the board game has four groups: *hasty-aśva-nauka-padāta* “elephant, horse, ship, foot soldiers.” Thus the meaning of the name of the game, (Sanskrit) *caturanga* is not that it has four limbs but rather “army consisting of four divisions,” referring to the division of the Indian army, where according to the *Amarakośa*, by the sixth century CE, *nauka* was replaced by *ratha*, thus: *hasty-aśva-ratha-padāta* “elephant, horse,

³B. Gheiby, *Guzāreš-e Šātranj*, Edited and Translated by Nemudar Publications, Bielefeld, 2001, p. 12; G. Chaucer, “The Pardoners Tald,” *The Canterbury Tales*, Wordsworth Poetry Library, Hertfordshire, 1995, p. 281:

Loke eek that, to the kyng Demetrius
The king of Parthes, as the book seith us,
Sente him a paire of dees of gold in scorn
For he hadde used hasard ther-biforn
For which he heeld his glorie or his renoun
At no value or reputacioun

“Look at King Demetrius
the King of Parthia, as the book tells us,
He sent a pair of golden dies in scorn
For he had dice-played (gambled) beforehand
For which he held his glory and renown
Without value or reputation.”

⁴P. Thieme, “Chess and Backgammon (Tric-Trac) in Sanskrit Literature,” *Indological Studies in Honor of W. Norman Brown*, ed. E. Bender, New Haven Connecticut, 1962, pp. 215, reprint in his *Kleine Schriften*, teil 2, Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, Wiesbaden, 1971, p. 424.

chariot, foot soldiers,” accompanying the king and the counselor.⁵ There are references to the game also by Patañjali (second century BCE), Bāṇā and Daṇḍin (seventh century CE) and Ratnākara (ninth century CE).⁶

As for the game of backgammon, again one has to look to India as its place of origin. The earliest mention of backgammon in India occurs in Bhartr̥hari’s *Vairāgyaśataka* (39) composed around the late sixth or early seventh century A.D.⁷ Thus, what we have is a general stream of Indian knowledge, including board games into Persia in late antiquity during the Sasanian period. The use of dice for both games, is another indication of its Indic origin, since dice and gambling were a favorite pastime in India.

This essay attempts to review the history of the games of Chess and Backgammon in Persia and to demonstrate their significance in the Persian society. The earliest text on the game of Chess and Backgammon is found in Persia, which is known as *Wizārišn ī Čatrang ud Nihišn ī Nēw-Ardaxšīr*⁸ (The explanation of Chess and the Invention of Backgammon) which although its date

⁵E. Falkner, *Games of Ancient and Oriental and How to Play them Being the Games of the Ancient Egyptians, the Hiera Gramme of the Greeks, the Ludus Latruncolorum of the Romans and the Oriental Games of Chess, Draughts, Backgammon and Magic Squares*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1892, p. 125; B. Utas, “Chess I. The History of Chess in Persia,” *Encycopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, Vol. V, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, 1992, p. 395.

⁶It appears that playing the game of chess without dice is a later development, A. van der Linde, “Geschichte und Literatur des Schachspiels I,” 1874, p. 78ff *apud* Thieme, p. 424.

⁷Thieme, *op. cit.*, pp. 423-424.

⁸C.J. Brunner, “The Middle Persian Explanation of Chess and Invention of Backgammon,” *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University*, Vol. 10, 1978, pp. 43-51; A. Panaino, *La Novella degli Sacchi e della Tavola Reale, Testo pahlavi, traduzione e commento al Wizārišn ī Čatrang ud nēw-ardaxšīr*, Mimesis, Milan, 1999; J. Curtis & I. Finkel, “Game Boards and Other Incised Graffiti at Persepolis,” *Iran*, Vol. XXXVII, 1999, pp. 45-48.

of composition is unclear, based on the text points to the sixth century CE during the reign of Xusrō I (530-571 CE), known as *anōšag-ruwān* (immortal soul). The authenticity of the narrative of the story has been questioned and it has been pointed out that due to the literary nature of this Middle Persian text we cannot establish its historicity. But what is important is that both the Indic and Middle Persian sources point to personages mentioned in the sixth century CE. Before looking at the text we should discuss the function of chess and backgammon as it appears in other Middle Persian sources in the society of ancient Persia. Three other Middle Persian texts mention the game of chess and backgammon in a context that makes it clear that it was part of princely or courtly education. In acquiring (Middle Persian) *frahang* > (Persian) *farhang* which is equivalent to Greek *Paideia* and best can be translated as “culture,” it appears that it was required that those of nobility learn several arts including board games. These sciences were acquired in *frahangestān* “education schools” for the nobility as there were *hērbdestān* and *mowestān* the “priestly schools” established to train priests.⁹

The first Middle Persian text is named *Xusrō ud Rēdag* “Xusrō and the page,” which according to the story takes place at the court of King Xusrō I.¹⁰ The Page, who is from a noble line and whose parents have passed away, asks the king to look after him. Regard to his virtues, which he learned as the text mentions, include being most diligent in acquiring *frahang* while attending the

⁹For a study of the requirements for king and princes in ancient Persia see W. Knauth, *Das altiranische Fürstenideal von Xeneophon bis Ferdousi*, nach d. antiken u. einheim. Quellen dargest., Franz Steiner, Wiesbaden, 1975.

¹⁰D. Monchi-Zadeh, “Xusrōv ī Kavātān ut Rētak, Pahlavi Text, Transcription and Translation,” *Monumentum Georg Morgenstierne*, Vol. II, Acta Iranica 22, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1982, pp. 47-91.

frahangestān, in memorizing the sacred utterances, in scribeship, calligraphy, horsemanship, jousting, polo, playing musical instruments, singing, poetry, dancing, astrology and finally being master of the following board games (Pahlavi Texts, ed. Jamasp-Asana 29.10-11):

ud čatrang ud nēw-ardaxšīr ud haštpāy¹¹
kardan az hamahlān frāztar hēm

“And in playing chess and backgammon
and *haštpāy*, I am ahead of (my) peers.”

Thus based on this text we can gain an insight into the conceptual view of acquiring culture in Persia in Late Antiquity. Further, *frahang* did not mean that a person who was to become a well-rounded person had to show not only prowess in physical training, but also of the mind as well as the body. This idea is also echoed in Greek civilization, which may have influenced the Persian world at large, but certain elements were native to Persia. This is contingent upon believing Herodotus and in more detail Strabo’s account in regard to the Achaemenid Persians. While Herodotus (1.136) states that Persian youth were required “to ride a horse, use the bow, and speak the truth,” Strabo (15.3.18) states that the youth were not only trained in the use of bow and javelin and riding, but were also given training by wise men in learning mythical elements and to rehearse songs about the deeds of gods (religion) and the noblest men (history). They were also to learn planting of trees and gathering of roots which gave them wider knowledge of the physical world. Thus, this ancient Persian tradition had its root before the conquest of Alexander.

¹¹Sanskrit *aṣṭāpada* < Persian *haštpāy* is similar to the chessboard and has 64 squares, 8 rows of 8 squares, Murry, *idem.*, p. 33.

The second Middle Persian text where these games are mentioned is the *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* (The Book of the Deeds of Ardaxšīr, son of Pāpag.) The text is about Ardaxšīr I's (A.D. 224-240) rise to power and his foundation of the Sāsānian dynasty and the unification of Persia. The text, however, appears to be a late compilation and its last redaction has been assigned to the seventh century A.D., probably during the reign of Xusrō II (A.D. 590-628).¹² In a part of the text where the virtues which made Ardaxšīr supersede other princes is discussed, the games of chess and backgammon are mentioned along with other sports as part of acquiring *frahang* (II.12):

pad yazdān ayyārīh pad čōbēgān ud aswārīh ud
čtrang ud nēw-ardaxšīr ud abārīg frahang az
awēšān hamōyēn čēr ud nibardag būd

“With the aid of the gods he (Ardaxšīr) was (more) victorious and experienced than all of them in polo and horsemanship and chess and backgammon and other *frahangs*.”

The last Middle Persian text mentions the game of backgammon in a negative sense. In the *Andarz ī Ōšnar ī Dānāg* (The Councils of the Wise Ōšnar), the path of moderation, (Middle Persian) *paymān* is emphasized, where four things in excess leads to harm for man (33):

pad ēn 4 čiš rāy mard ziyānkārtar bawēd was
xwardan ī may ud waranīg pad zanān ud was
kardan ī nēw-ardaxšīr (ud) naxčīr nē pad paymānagīh

¹²O.M. Chukanova, *Kniga deianii Ardashira syna Papaka*, Pamiatniki Pis'mennosti Vostoka, Moscow, 1987, p. 162; the method used by Chukanova for dating the last redaction of the text has been criticized by A. Panaino, “The Two Astrological Reports of the *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* (III, 4-7; IV,6-7),” *Die Sprache*, Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft, Band 36, 1994, pp. 181-198.

“With these four things man becomes more destructive:
Drinking a lot of wine, and lusting after women, and
playing a lot of backgammon, and hunting without moderation.”¹³

Because of the late date of all the Middle Persian texts we can only state that by the time of Xusrō I these games along with a variety of works were introduced to Persia from India which were transmitted in the sixth century CE. These include such texts as the *Pañcatantra* which according to tradition was translated into Middle Persian by a physician named Burzoe. This Middle Persian work is unfortunately lost. However, a Syriac translation of it was made in CE 570 under the name of *Kalīlag wa Damnaḡ*, this being the name of the two main players “jackals,” in the Sanskrit text, *Karataka u Damanaka*. This story was also translated from Middle Persian into Arabic by ‘Abdullāh ibn al-Muqaffa’ in the eighth century CE, also known in Persian as the *Dāstānhāy-e Bīdpāy* (The Fables of Pilpay). The Persian version of the *Dāstānhāy-e Bīdpāy* which we have today is the version which was first translated from Sanskrit into Middle Persian and then to Arabic and then into Persian.¹⁴ It was through this transmission of Sanskrit literature that the Buddhist *Jātaka* stories came to Persia, later being translated into Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, which was to bring about the *Aesop's Fables* in Byzantium, the *Sandbād-nāme*, and the *Arabian Nights*.¹⁵

These stories were taken from another Indian text called the *Hitopadeśa* (Book of Good Counsel). This book was part of the Indian genre known as *nītiśāstra* "Mirror for Princes," which also existed in Persia, and in Middle

¹³ For the text and the latest translation see, I.M. Nāzerī, *Andarz ī Ōšnar ī Dānā*, Hermand Publishers, Tehran, 1373, pp. 22-23.

¹⁴ *Dāstānhāy-e Bīdpāy*, translated by Muḡammad b. Abdallāh al-Bukhārī, ed. P.N. Khānlarī and M. Roshan, Khārazmī Publishers, Tehran, 1369.

¹⁵ A. Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism*, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1994, p. 200.

Persian was known as *ēwēn-nāmag* > (Persian) *āyīn-nāme* “Book of Manners,” which in the Middle Persian text on chess and backgammon is also mentioned to be part of this genre.¹⁶ These books of manners or more commonly known as “Mirror for princes” is common in Arabic / Persian as well, being known as *Siyār al-mulūk* or *Naṣīḥat ‘al-mulūk*. The reason for which this body of texts were known as mirrors (Middle Persian) *ēwēnag* is best explained in *Dēnkard VI*:

awēšān ēniz ōwōn dāšt ku pad āmōzišn ī ōy ī did ān¹⁷
 čišē ēn weh ka xēm ī xwēš be wirāyēd ud xwēštan
 ēwēnag be kunēd ud pēš ī ōy ī did dārēd ud ōy ī
 did andar nigerēd ud wēnēd ud az-iš abar hammōzēd.

“They held this too: In teaching one's fellow this one thing is best: That a man discipline his character, make a mirror of himself and hold it in front of his fellows. The other man looks at it, sees it and learns from it.”

According to *Wizārišn ī Čatrang ud Nihišn ī Nēw-Ardaxšīr*, there are four major personages; Dēwišarm/Sačidarm, the Indian king and his minister, Taxtrītos. On the Persian side, Xusrō I and his Minister, Wuzurgmihr are represented. In relation to the people mentioned in the Middle Persian text on chess and backgammon, it has been claimed that the Indian king is not a historical figure. However, not only in this text on chess, but also in the *Stories of Bēdpāy* we come across this name for an Indian king (in the Bēdpāy, his name is written as Dabšalīm). Herzfeld believed that the story of the invention of Chess was transferred from

¹⁶A. Tafazzolī, “Āyīn-nāme,” *Encyclopaedia of Iran and Islam*, ed. E. Yarshater, The Royal Institute of Translation and Publication, Tehran, 1978, p. 266.

¹⁷Shaked omits, *Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages, Dēnkard VI*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1979, passage 223 pp. 86-87.

Ardaxšīr I's time to that of Xusrō I,¹⁸ but it appears that indeed not only the Ardaxšīr romance (*The Deeds of Ardaxšīr, son of Pābag*), but also the game was brought during the reign of Xusrō I. The name of the Indian king is Dēwišarm, (Persian and Arabic Dabšalīm), thus may be from Sanskrit *Devaśarman* "God's joy," which appears in the *Hitopadeśa* "Book of Good Counsel."¹⁹ Another suggestion is also possible which may place the king in the sixth century CE. Markwart tried to show the historicity of this king, connecting Dabšalīm to the Indian king Yaśōdharman who was the contemporary of Xusrō I.²⁰

The name of the Indian messenger has also been thought to be connected with other famous figures who may have been the product of popular imagination. Herzfeld conjectured the name *t'tlytus* (Taxtrītos) is the corrupt form of the name Aristotle²¹ which is unlikely. According to the Middle Persian text, Taxtrītos was sent to Persia with 32 chess pieces made of emerald and red ruby to test the intelligence of the Persians. A letter was sent to Xusrō I via Taxtrītos by Dēwišarm asking if he could solve the riddle or rationale of this game. The reason that Dēwišarm had done this was if Xusrō I was a greater king than that of his Indian

¹⁸E. Herzfeld, *Zoroaster and His World*, Vol. II, Octagon Books, New York, 1974, p. 628.

¹⁹T. Nöldeke, "Persische Studien," *Sitzungsberichte der K. Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien*, Phil.-hist. Klasse, Vienna, Kl. 126, Abh. 12, 1892, pp. 21-23.

²⁰J. Markwart and de Groot, J.J.M. "Das Reich Zābul und der Gott Zūn," *Eduard Sachau-Festschrift*, 1915, p. 257.

counterpart, the sages who were in his realm must have been wiser as well. This of course is nothing more than Sāsānian propaganda, exalting the Sāsānian court and the king among the empires of Late Antiquity. Xusrō I asks for three days to explain the rationale and rules behind the game of chess, but early on no one in the court is able to solve the riddle of the game. It is only on the third day that one of the sages by the name of Wuzurgmihr rises and attempts to explain how the game must be played. In so doing, he uses the analogy of battle between two armies²² in explaining the rules of the game which reminds us of the episode in the *Mahābhārata*. Wuzurgmihr who finds out the logic of the game gives the following analogy (WC.10):

u-š homōnāg 2 sar-xwadāy kard šāh *[mādayārān ō raxw
 *ī]²³ hōyag ud dašnag homānāg frazēn ō artēštārān-sālār
 homānāg pīl ō puštībānān-sālār homānāg
 ud asb ō aswārān-sālār homānāg payādag ō ān
 ham-payādag homānāg pēš-razm

“He made the king like the two overlords, the rook (on) the left and right flank, the minister like the commander of the warriors, the elephant is like the commander of the bodyguards, and the horse is like the commander of the cavalry, the foot-soldier like the same pawn, that is at front of the battle(field).”

Taxtrītos is astonished when he hears the explanation, because it is exactly the rule that was devised by Indian sages with much toil, but now Wuzurgmihr had solved the riddle rather easily. The story attempts to drive several points to

²¹E. Herzfeld, *idem.*, p. 628.

²²*Mojma'al Tawārīkh* also supplies a short version of the Middle Persian version, where Buzugmihr / Wuzurgmihr describes the game of chess to *harb* “war,” and the game of backgammon to *falak* “cosmos,” ed. M-Š Bahār, Tehran, 1334, p. 75.

²³The text reads *šāh ō mādayārān ō hōyag*, but I follow Panaino’s emendations, *La Novella, op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

the audience. One is that not only the King of Kings of Persia is greater than others, but also *Ērān* (the Sāsānian Persian Empire) is the greatest empire. Secondly, Wuzurgmihr is not only the greatest of the Persian sages, but of all the sages in the world. He is also able to defeat the Indian sage three times in the game of chess which was invented by the Indians. The message of the story is simple: Persia is the greatest empire during the Late Antiquity, its king is the greatest king, and its minister or sage is the wisest in the *oikumene*.

Wuzurgmihr in return constructs the game of backgammon and goes to India and gives the same challenge as the Indian king had given them, but no one can solve the riddle and the rationale behind it. According to the Middle Persian text, the name which Wuzurgmihr gives the game of backgammon is *Nēw-Ardaxšīr* “Noble is Ardaxšīr” in memory of Ardaxšīr I (A.D. 224-240) the founder of the Sāsānian empire. (Middle Persian) *Nēw-ardaxšīr* > (Persian) *nard* or *nardašīr* (especially in Arabic texts) / also found in (Babylonian Talmud) *nrdšyr* has had popular etymologies among Arab lexicographers. The common one is that (Arabic) *nardšīr* was composed of *nard* and *šīr* which is a *Volksetemologie* accepted by some scholars.²⁴

The invention of backgammon gives Wuzurgmihr even more prestige and enables him to extract more tribute and make himself more famous in the realm.

²⁴F. Rosenthal, “Nard,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. VII, Fas. 129-139, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1992, p. 963; H.J.R. Murry also accepted the false etymology of *šīr* for “lion,” *A History of Board-Games other than Chess*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1952, p. 114.

This act and others have made Wuzurgmihr famous in Persian literature where he has become a semi-legendary and semi-historical person, known as Buzurjmihr.²⁵

The Cosmological Significance of Backgammon:

The story of Wuzurgmihr's invention of the game of backgammon is most probably fictitious and the game must have come from India and was part of the great age of scientific and artistic transmission of knowledge to Persia from India during Late Antiquity.²⁶ The works which came from India were on such subjects as (Middle Persian) *tark*; (Sanskrit) *tarka* "logic," *kōṣak*; (Sanskrit) *kośa* and (Middle Persian) *āwyākrn*; (Sanskrit) *vyākaraṇa* "rhetoric."²⁷ From the Greek world, works on (Middle Persian) *zamīg-paymānīh* "geometry," and Ptolemaios' (Middle Persian) *mgstyg* are known as well.²⁸ The transmission of scientific knowledge from India and Byzantium was current in the Sāsānian period, especially works on astronomy and astrology to which the game of backgammon

²⁵In regard to his fictional nature and lack of historicity see T. Nöldeke, "Burzōes Einleitung zum Buche Kalila we Dimna," *Schriften der Wissenschaft Ges. in Strassburg*, Vol. 12, 1912, p. 104f; for proponents of his historicity and his identification with Burzōe see, A. Christensen, "La légende du sage Buzurjmihr," *Acta Orientalia*, Vol. 8, 1929, pp. 81-127; For the influence of Xusrō I and Wuzurgmihr in the post-Sasanian period see R.D. Marcotte, "Anīshīrvān and Buzurgmihr - the Just Ruler and the Wise Counselor: Two figures of Persian Traditional Moral Literature," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, LI, 2, 1998, pp. 69-90.

²⁶A. Panaino has suggested that the game was in fact originally a game which existed in the West known as *ludus duodecim scriptorum*, *alea tabula*, *La Novella*, p. 197.

²⁷H.W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1943; P. de Menasce, "Notes Iraniennes," *Journal Asiatique*, 1949, pp. 1-2; M. Boyce, "Middle Persian Literature," *Handbuch der Orientalistik, Iranistik*, Literatur, Lieferung 1, Leiden / Köln, E.J. Brill, 1968, pp. 36-37.

²⁸Bailey, *ibid.*, p. 86; Boyce, *ibid.*, pp. 36-37; For a review of all the material in Persian see H. Reza'ī Bāghbīdī, "Vāže Gozīnī dar Aṣr-e Sāsānī va Ta'sīr ān dar Fārsī-ye Darī," *Nāme-ye Farhangestān*, vol. 5, no.3, 1998[2000], pp. 144-158.

is related. The importance which the Sāsānians gave to these sciences is evident from a number of names which exist for the practitioners of these sciences. The “astrologer” (Middle Persian) *axtarmār*; *starōšmār*, and “soothsayer” (Middle Persian) *murw-nīš*; *kēd*; *kundāg*, “zodiac-teller” (Middle Persian) *12-star-gōwišn*, “star-reckoner” (Middle Persian) *stārhangār*, and “time-knower” (Middle Persian) *hangām-šnās* were valued and active in this period which must have utilized and welcomed new Greek, Indian, and Babylonian astronomy and astrological material, and it appears that indeed the Sāsānians brought about a mixture of the Greek, Indian, and Babylonian astrological material.²⁹

According to the *Fihrist* of Ibn Nadim, the inventor of the game, Wuzurgmihr is also said to have written a commentary on the *Anthologiae* of Vettius Valens on astronomy which is lost, but fragments of the Arabic translation of the Middle Persian version exist.³⁰ The reason for discussing the preoccupation of Wuzurgmihr with astronomy and astrology is the cosmological explanation of the game of backgammon according to the Middle Persian text. According to the text on the invention of the game, when the Indian king sent the game of chess to the Sāsānian court to figure out the logic of the game, Wuzurgmihr, as a challenge designed and sent the backgammon board and its pieces to India to challenge the Indians. The Indian sages could not find the logic of the game and as a result

²⁹D. Pingree, “Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran,” *Isis*, An International Review Devoted to the History of Science and its Cultural Influences, Vol. 54, Part 2, No. 176, 1963, p. 241.

³⁰British Museum MS Add. 23,400, Pingree, *ibid.*, pp. 241-242; Brunner *op. cit.*, 1978, p. 46; Ibn Khaldūn gives similar information on Wuzurgmihr's preoccupation with astronomy and astrology, Pingree, *ibid.*, p. 245; that the Iranians were interested in astronomy already in the fifth century, before the influence of Indian material is indicated by E.S. Kennedy and B.L. van der Waerden, “The World-Year of the Persians,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 83, 1963, p. 323; Panaino believes that Wuzurgmihr is not the astrologer who translated the *Anthologiae*, Panaino, *La Novella*, p. 123.

Wuzurgmihr brought more glory to the court in Iran along with much booty and honor. Since the Indians could not find the logic of the game, the King of Kings, Xusrō I asked the sage to explain the game. Wuzurgmihr's answer is central to Zoroastrian beliefs. The passage clearly demonstrates the cosmological significance of the game as described by Wuzurgmihr. His explanation of the game is analogous to the processes of the cosmos and human life.³¹ Wuzurgmihr makes fate the primary reason for what happens to mankind and the roll of the dice in the game performs the function of fate.³² The pieces represent humans and their function in the universe is governed by the seven planets and the twelve zodiac signs. If we are to accept that Wuzurgmihr suggests “fate” (Middle Persian) *baxt* to be the principal determinant for one’s life and action and accept Eznik of Kolb's statement that in the Sāsānian period, the God Zurvān was equivalent to *baxt*, then we should consider Wuzurgmihr as follower of the Zurvanite doctrine. What is important is the difference between the game of chess and backgammon. While the game of chess is a game likened to battle, backgammon is based on the throw of the dice, meaning based on one’s fate.

According to the Zoroastrianism of the Sāsānian period, fate dominated and controlled human life. The Middle Persian version of *Wīdēwdād* (Anti-Demonic Law) states (Wd 5.9):

gētīg pad baxt, mēnōg pad kunišn ast kē ēdōn gōwēd:
 zan ud frazand ud xwāstag ud xwadāyīh ud zīndagīh
 pad baxt, abārīg pad kunišn

“The material world is (governed) through fate, the spiritual

³¹Brunner, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-47.

³²C.J. Brunner, “Astrology and Astronomy II. Astronomy and Astrology in the Sasanian Period,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, Vol. II, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1987, p. 864.

world is (governed) through action, There is somebody who says: wife and children and wealth and sovereignty and life is (governed) through fate, the rest is (governed) through action.”

Sh. Shaked, however, has warned us that we should not think of the idea of fate governing human life as solely Zurvanite since the “orthodox” form of Zoroastrianism also accepted this idea.³³ The shape of the game board is likened to *spandarmad zamīg* (Avestan) *Spāntā Ārmaiti*, the goddess of the earth. This is a regular feature of Zoroastrian angelology, where the earth is thought to be part of the cosmological structure which is not only an idea but also an image.³⁴ Thus humans are functioning or living upon a cosmological being that is alive. The pieces represent the thirty nights and days. The die represent the *axtarān* and *spīhr* “constellations and firmament,” which by its turn and position (number) decide one’s movement and predict human life. The one on the dice according to the text represents Ohrmazd’s omnipotence and his oneness. The two on the die represent *mēnōg* and *gētīg*, the spiritual and the material world. The three represents the three stages of heaven in Zoroastrianism, *humat and hūxt and huwaršt* preceding paradise. The four represents another cosmological expression, *čahār sōg ī gētīg*, “the four corners of the world,” an important concept in Mesopotamian royal ideology. This phrase is equivalent to Akkadian *kibrāt arb’i* “the four corners,” i.e., the entire world.³⁵ The five represents the five luminaries

³³Sh. Shaked, “Bakt II. The Concept,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, Vol. III, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1989, p. 538; also regarding the influence of Neoplatonic sources on this passage of the *Wīdēwdād*, see J. Duchesne-Guillemin in *Hommages à Georges Dumézil*, Collection Latomus 45, 1960, pp. 102-103.

³⁴Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth, From Mazdean Iran to Shī‘ite Iran*, Bollingen Series XCI: 2, Princeton University Press, 1977, pp. 4-5.

³⁵*kibrātīm arba’im* “king of the four corners of the world” adopted by Cyrus in the sixth century B.C., *The Assyrian Dictionary*, eds. M. Civil, I. J. Gelb, A. L. Oppenheim, E. Reiner, Vol. 8, The Oriental Institute, Chicago, Illinois, 1971, p. 331. In Cyrus' cylinder (CyC 1-2):

according to the text which are the divisions of the heavens, although here there are some deviations from the norm. According to the *Avesta*, the heavens had four stations which were the stars, the moon, the sun and the eternal light. Here we have in a disorderly fashion the divisions of the heavens into the following stations: the sun, the moon, the stars, fire and finally the heavenly brightness.³⁶ Finally, the six represents the *šaš gāhānbār* or the six seasonal feasts according to the Zoroastrian religion.

[mKu-ra-áš šar kiš-šat šarru rabū šarru dannu
šar Bābili (DIN.TIR)ki šar kuršume-ri u Akkadī]
-ni-šu [.... šar ki-i]b-ra-a-tim ir-bi-it-tim

“Cyrus, King of the world, great king, legitimate king,
king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad,
king of the four quarters of the earth..”

See W. Eilers, “Le texte cunéiforme du cylindre de Cyrus,” *Commémoration Cyrus*, Hommage Universel II, Acta Iranica 2, 1974, p. 29-32. *Please note that the fonts used for the transcription are not standard. From literary sources, one can point to the *Šāhnāme of Abū Mansūrī*, of which only the preface has survived. In explaining the division of the world the author states:

آرامگاه مردمان بودبه چهار سوی جهان
از کران تا کران این زمین را ببخشیدندوبه هفت
بهرکردندوهر بهری کشور خواندند

“Everywhere where there was the resting place of the people,
in the four corners of the world, from end to end, this earth
they divided, and made it into seven portions.”

M. Qazwīnī, “Moghdame-ye qhadim šāhnāme,” *Bīst Maqāleh*, Vol. II, Tehran, 1332, p. 43.

³⁶On the question of the influence of Mesopotamian and Greek ideas on the number of heavens see A. Pananio, “Uranographia Iranica I: The Three Heavens in the Zoroastrian Tradition and the Mesopotamian Background,” *Au carrefour des religions, Mélanges offerts à Philippe Gignoux*, ed. R. Gyselen, Groupe pour l'Étude de la Civilisation du Moyen-Orient, Bures-sur-Yvette, 1995, pp. 205-226.

The hitting of pieces is likened to killing and when the pieces come back to the game it signifies the act of resurrection which, according to Zoroastrian cosmology, appears in the twelfth millennium. Astrological signs are also very important for the end of the millennium and the beginning of the apocalyptic age which ushers the twelfth millennium and the arrival of *Sōšāns*, where people are resurrected, and the luminaries return to their original position at the highest point. The seven planets and twelve zodiacal signs are the most important actors in human destiny which according to Zaehner was part of the Zurvanite heresy - astrological fatalism. Thus the seven planets were evil and the twelve zodiac signs were on the side of Ohrmazd, and they were to decide the fate of man in the universe, something that the “orthodoxy” and Zoroaster himself had negated.³⁷ This is why in the *Mēnōg ī Xrad* (278.21-22) it is stated that all the welfare and adversity that comes to man is through the seven planets and the twelve zodiac signs.

It has been claimed that the cosmological nature of the game of chess and backgammon was connected with and corresponded to a *mandala*, a representation of the cosmic cycle in the Indic world. In this cycle, the battle initially took place between the *devas* and the *asuras*.³⁸ But we may also state that this cosmological battle was also to play a similar part in the corporeal world, where human destiny was based on one’s fate and struggle.

Artistic Representation:

³⁷R.C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1961, p. 238.

³⁸T. Bruckhardt, *Moorish Culture in Spain*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1972, pp. 118-119.

The earliest surviving chess pieces are from Persia. These include an elephant carved from black stone (2 7/8 inches). The piece is from the late sixth or seventh century, which corresponds to the time when the Middle Persian text was composed.³⁹ More importantly there is a silver-gilded hemispherical bowl housed at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, which depicts several important scenes from the Sāsānian period (fig 2). They include a scene of marriage, a wrestling scene, and several other scenes including a scene of two people playing backgammon. Representationally one can conclude that this bowl represents the things that mattered in the courtly life,⁴⁰ and based on the text of *Xusrō ud Rēdag*, one can suggest that the bowl represents the activities of which a noble should engage or have a knowledge of. These include wrestling, being informed in religious precepts and ritual, marrying and having offspring, playing instruments, and also being able to play board games, i.e., backgammon. Harper has assigned the date of the bowl to the seventh century based on several premises. These premises include the forms of dress of the personages on the bowl which are similar to the reliefs at Tāq-i Bustān, the shape of some of the vessels, and the attachments of the short sword in the scene.⁴¹

The backgammon scene shows that the person on the left has won the game and has his left hand raised as a sign of victory. The person on the right has

³⁹E. Herzfeld, "Ein Sasanidischer Elefant," *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, Vol. III, 1931, p. 27; F. Sarre, "Sasanian Stone Sculpture," *Survey of Persian Art*, Oxford, 1939, Vol. I, pp. 593-600; C.K. Wilkinson, *Chess: East and West, Past and Present, A Selection from the Gustavus A. Pfeiffer Collection*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1968, xxxvii.

⁴⁰P.O. Harper, *The Royal Hunter, Art of the Sasanian Empire*, The Asia Society, New York, 1978, p. 75.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 75-76; A. C. Gunter and P. Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1992, p. 163.

his left hand on his knee and it appears that one of his fingers on his left hand is bent. The bent forefinger gesture has had a long history in the ancient Near East, going back to the second millennium BCE and was used to demonstrate a gesture of reverence, but in the Sāsānian period, it also came to mean a gesture of submission.⁴² Thus in our scene, the loser may be giving a sign of submission or defeat, while his head is slightly dropped and the winner has his hand raised as a sign of victory.

The other pictorial evidence for the game of backgammon comes from Central Asia, from the city of Panjikent (Sogdian *pncyknδ (h)*). In 1946 Russian archaeologists discovered this site which is situated in present day Tajikistan. The paintings depict religious as well heroic and epic scenes. Some of these paintings depict such epic stories as that of Rustam's battles, the lamentation for Siyāwaxš (Persian) *sōg ī siyāwaš* and other imagery which are quite pertinent to the ancient Iranian world.⁴³

Among the wall paintings from Panjikent, which are now housed in the Hermitage museum at St. Petersburg, there is a scene of what can be called court activity. The painting shows two people playing a board game which in all probability is a backgammon game along with several other personages beside them. The exact context of the story is not clear, but it has been suggested that the scene either represents a Buddhist Jātaka story or a Turco-Iranian narrative

⁴²J.K. Choksy, "Gesture in Ancient Iran and Central Asia II: Proskynesis and the Bent Forefinger," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, Vol. 4, 1990[1992], p. 205.

⁴³For a discussion of these matters see G. Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting, The Pictorial Epic in Oriental Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1981.

theme.⁴⁴ A nimbus appears to encircle the head of one of the players who has his right hand raised as a gesture of victory. The man seated on the left again has his left hand raised showing the bent forefinger. A figure behind the victorious person also appears to be pointing to the loser with the bent forefinger. The bent forefinger here again demonstrates one's submission or defeat at the game along with the acknowledgment of another person with the same gesture as witness.

A fourteenth century manuscript of the *Šāhnāme* contains two scenes, one at the court of Xusrō I, and the second at the court of Dēwišarm. In the scene Wuzurgmihr is seated on the floor with three other Persians all with white turbans. In front of the Persian sage is a board game where by taking into account the story, we can see that the board game is a backgammon board. The Indian king is seated on his throne and is surrounded by the Indian sages who are painted darker and have darker turbans. Wuzurgmihr has his right hand pointing on the backgammon board which probably means that he is either challenging the Indian sages or explaining the ruler of the game after the Indian sages have been dumbfounded. It is particularly interesting to note that one of the two older Indian sages who has white beard has his hand by his mouth, symbolizing his amazement or perplexity. We should also note that the design of the board is very similar to that of the board on the wall paintings at Panjikent.⁴⁵

What can be concluded from these representations and our texts is that board games such as Chess and Backgammon were not just important games for pleasure rather they symbolically represented the importance of the cycle of life,

⁴⁴M. Bussagli, *Painting of Central Asia*, The World Publishing Company, Ohio, 1963, pp. 46-47.

⁴⁵C.K. Wilkinson, *ibid.*, p. xii.

where the game of chess was likened to battle and the struggle in life, and the game of backgammon represented fate and the cosmic cycle. These board games were sports which simulated physical challenge of life and combat, as well as the training of the mind in order to be a well-rounded person, namely someone who has acquired *frahang* / *farhang*.

The Post-Sāsānian World:

We know that in the early Islamic period, the Arabs were familiar with backgammon. There is in fact evidence that during the time of the Prophet Muḥammad in Arabia, the game of backgammon was popular.⁴⁶ There is a popular story which Tha‘ālibī relates that when the Arab Muslims conquered the Sāsānian capital of Ctesiphon, they found a set of backgammon pieces belonging to Xusrō II (CE 590-628), pieces of which were made of coral and turquoise. The companions of the prophet, such as Abu Ḥurayra (d. 676) refused to meet Muslims who had played backgammon. He is also to have said “One who plays *nard* with stakes is like one who eats pork; one who plays without stakes is like one who puts his hand in pig's blood; and one who watches the game is like one who looks at pork meat.”⁴⁷ By the eighth century CE, the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence considered the game of backgammon as *ḥarām* (forbidden).⁴⁸ We, however, have many textual references to the game being played at the court in many regions of the Islamic Near East, which means that the game may have been played by the masses as well, and in fact its popularity confirms this suggestion.

⁴⁶F.Rosenthal, *Gambling in Islam*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1975, p. 88.

⁴⁷Al-Bukhārī, *al-Adab al-mufrad*, ed. M.F. ‘Abd al-Bākī, Cairo, 1375, pp. 326-328; and for other traditions also see Rosenthal, *ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁸Murry, *op. cit.*, p. 114-115.

During the early Abbāsīd period (CE 750-900) the game of backgammon was popular both at the court of Hārūn al-Rašīd and that of his son, al-Ma'mūn. It is said that Ma'mūn liked to play backgammon since, if he lost, he could place the blame on the dice,⁴⁹ meaning fate. The same may be said of the game of chess which was seen as a form of gambling by many Muslims. Medieval authors justified the game by stating that as long as it was played for mental exercise it would be beneficial. The *Qābūs-nāme* dedicates a chapter to the games of Chess and Backgammon, where the proper etiquette of playing and when and to whom one should lose or win from is discussed. It is strictly stated that one should not make bets on the games and only then playing the game becomes a proper activity.⁵⁰ During the Seljuk period it is reported that Alp Arslan was also fond of backgammon. But according to a Persian text, once when Alp Arslan became quite angry when he threw two ones instead of two sixes.⁵¹ Although the game had been deemed as *ḥarām*, the love of playing backgammon has been the most favorite board game in the Near East and parts of the Mediterranean world until today.⁵²

⁴⁹Murry, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁵⁰'Unsur al-ma'ālī Kai-Kāwūs b. Iskadar b. Qabūs b. Wašmgīr b. Ziyār, *Qābūs nāme*, ed. Q.-H. Yusefī, Scientific and Cultural Publishers, Tehran, 1375, p. 77.

⁵¹Ahmad b. 'Umar b. 'Alī Nizāmī Samarghandī, *Čahār maghāle*, ed. M. Ghazwini and M. Mo'in, Armaghān Publishers, Tehran, 1331, pp. 68-69; certain manuscripts mention *se* "three" instead of *do* "two" for the number of dice. Qazwini's manuscript has two, but there is also evidence of the game being played with three dice. In *Nafāyis al-fun, n fi 'arāyis al-'uyūn*, by Muḥammad b. Mahmūd Āmolī, ed. Mirza Aḥmad, Tehran, 1309, Vol. II, p. 220, regarding the game of backgammon, three dice are mentioned and again the game is likened to the cosmos.

⁵²The author lived in Greece for some years and saw the popularity of the game among the Greeks.

It is the Persian form of the game that spread to the rest of the Near East and Anatolia. The reason for this supposition is that still today when playing the game in Turkey and in the Arab countries, the game is called *shesh-baish*, *nard* or *nardi* or (Arabic) *tāwula*. The technical terminology is generally in Persian such as the terms used for numbers: *yuk* ; Persian *yak* ; Middle Persian *ēk*; *du* ; Persian *do* ; Middle Persian *dō*; *sey*; Persian *se*; Middle Persian *sē*; *jahr* ; Persian *čāhār* ; Middle Persian *čahār*; *benj* ; Persian *panj*; Middle Persian *panj*; and *shesh* ; Persian *šeš* ; Middle Persian *šaš*. When calling combinations, they are rarely called out in Arabic and the Persian form is used, such as *shesh-baish* or *dū-yuk*.⁵³ In Georgia the game is called *nardi*, in Central Asia it is called *narr*; in the Deccan the game is called *tukhta-e-nard* from Persian *taxt-e nard*.⁵⁴

Finally in Persian poetry there are many references to the game by Anwarī, Asadī, Ferdowsī, Khāghānī, Manūčehrī, Mas‘ūd Sa‘d, Mokhtārī, Mowlavī, Sa‘dī, and Sanā‘ī all mention the game of backgammon.⁵⁵ Several of the poets place the game in its original cosmological function which means they have stayed faithful to Wuzurgmīhr's description of the game. Manūčehrī gives the following couplet in regard to human fate and the cosmos:

فلک همچو پیروزگون تخته نردی زمرجانش مهره زلولوش خصلی

“The firmament is like the victorious looking backgammon
(game), Its pieces from coral, the quality of pearl.”

⁵³Robert A. Barakat, *Tāwula: A Study in Arabic Folklore*, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia Academia Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki, 1974, pp. 10-11.

⁵⁴Murry, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁵⁵See *Loghat Nāme Dehkhodā*, ed. M. Mo‘īn and Dj. Shahidī, Letter N, Fas. 10, Tehran, 1972, pp. 421-422.

The significance of chess and backgammon and its diffusion into the Islamic world and further into Europe is another matter with which we are not concerned here with. It should, however, be mentioned that different civilizations made changes to these games to make them more coherent with their cultural realities and beliefs. To conclude one point would demonstrate this change in the environment where the game of chess was played. When the Christian Spaniards were able to beat back the Muslims who had brought the game of chess to Andalusia (Spain), one piece of the game was changed. Now the queen replaced the *wazīr* and so the game looked more Spanish than its Near Eastern configuration.

Appendix
Transcription, Translation, and Text of the
Wizārišn ī Čatrang ud Nihišn ī Nēw-Ardaxšīr

There have been several translations of this text in the nineteenth and the twentieth century, beginning with D.P.B. Sanjana,⁵⁶ C. Salemann,⁵⁷ J.C. Tarapore,⁵⁸ M. Lucidi,⁵⁹ A. Pagliaro,⁶⁰ C.J. Brunner,⁶¹ and A. Panaino.⁶² H.S.

⁵⁶ D.P.B. Sanjana, *Ganje shâyagân andarze Atrepât Mârâspandân, Mâdigâne chatrang and Andarze Khusroe Kavâtân. The Original Pehlvi Text, the same Transliterated in Zend Characters and Translated into the Gujrati and English Languages, a Commentary and a Glossary of Selected Words*, Bombay, 1885.

⁵⁷ *Mittelpersische Studien. Ersets Stük (sic). Mélanges Asiatiques tirés du Bulletin de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St. Pétersbourg*, Tome IX, Livraison 3, 1887, pp. 222-242.

⁵⁸ J.C. Tarapore, *Vijārishn-i chatrang or the Explanation of Chatrang and other Texts, Transliteration and translation into English and Gujarati. The Original Pahlevi Texts. With an Introduction*, Bombay, 1932.

⁵⁹ *Il Testo Pahlavico Vičārišni čatrang ud nihi-ni nēw-artaxšēr*, Scuola Orientale, Università di Roma, 1935-1936.

⁶⁰ A. Pagliaro, *Il Testo Pahlavico Sul Giuoco degli Scacchi*, in *Miscellanea G. Galbiati*, Vol. III, *Fontes Ambrosiani VIII*, Milano, pp. 97-110.

⁶¹ C.J. Brunner, "The Middle Persian Explanation of Chess and Invention of Backgammon," *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University*, Vol. 10, 1978, pp. 43-51.

⁶² A. Panaino, *La Novella*, Mimesis, Milan, 1999.

Nyberg made important emendations and notes to the original Pahlavi text,⁶³ and O. Hansen,⁶⁴ and A. Cantera⁶⁵ have made important comments on the text. There have been three Persian translation of the text as well, those of M.T. Bahār,⁶⁶ S. Oriān,⁶⁷ and the best one that of B. Gheiby.⁶⁸ One should also pay attention to the *Šāhnāme* of Ferdowsī which contains a version of this text with much detail which is secondary.⁶⁹ Tha’ālibī has also supplied the Arabic version of the story which is closer to the *Šāhnāme* than the Middle Persian version.

The MK codex which contains the *Wizārišn ī Čatrang ud Nihišn ī Nēw-Ardaxšīr* was edited by K.J. Jamasp-Asana. The text was edited based on several manuscripts, the TD, MK, and JJ. The codex consisted of 163 folios where the *Wizārišn ī Čatrang ud Nihišn ī Nēw-Ardaxšīr* was found in fol. 115 - fol. 120. The codex contains a variety of texts, some short and a few longer ones, such as *the Ayādgār ī Zarērān*, and *Xusrō ud Rēdag* [sic].

⁶³ H.S. Nyberg, *A manual of Pahlavi*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1964, pp.

⁶⁴ *Zum mittelpersischen Vičārišn čatrang*, Internationalen Orientalistenkongress in Rom, Verlag J.J. Augustinus in Glückstadt Holst, 1935, pp. 13-19.

⁶⁵ Review of A. Panaino’s *La Novella degli Scacchi e della Tavola Reale* in *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*, vol. 95, no. 3, 2000, pp. 304-311.

⁶⁶ M.T. Bahār, “Gozāresh-e šatrang va nahādan-e vanirdšēr,” *Tarjumeḥ-ye čand matn-e pahlavī*,” Tehran, 1347, pp. 10-17.

⁶⁷ S. Oriān, *Motūn-e pahlavī*, National Library of Iran, Tehran, 1371, pp. 152-157, 226-342.

⁶⁸ B. Gheiby, *Guzāreš-e Šatranj*, Nemudar Publications, Bielefeld, 2001.

⁶⁹ *Šāhnāme-ye Ferdowsī*, Moscow edition, 1970, vol. VIII, lines 2628-2810, pp. 206-217; Š.H. Ghāsemī, “Peydāyeš-e Šatranj be Ravayat-e Šāhnāme,” *Tahghighāt Islāmī*, Vol. VI, 1991-1992, pp. 458-466.

For the transcription, MacKenzie's system has been used and in the translation, the Middle Persian forms of the names are used with some modifications. The following symbols have been used in the transcriptions: () addition / < > omission. First the transcription, then the English translation, and finally the original text is given.

pad nām ī yazdān

- 1) ēdōn gōwēnd kū andar xwadāyīh ī husraw anōšag-ruwān az dēwišarm ī wuzurg šahryār ī hindūgān šāh abar uzmūdan ī xrad ud dānāgīh ī ērān-šahrīgān ud sūd-īz ī xwēš nigerīdan rāy čatrang ēw juxt 16 tāg az uzumburd ud 16 tāg az yākand ī suxr kard frēstīd.
- 2) abāg ān čatrang 1000 ud 200 uštar bār zarr ud asēm ud gōhr ud morwārīd ud jāmag ud 90 pīl u-š čiš ī mādagīg kard abāg frēstīd ud tātarītos čiyōn andar hindūgān pad wizēn būd abāg frēstīd.
- 3) pad frawardag ōwōn nibišt ēstād kū abāyēd čiyōn ašmā nām pad šāhān-šāhīh pad amā hamāg šāhān-šāh hēd abāyēd kū dānāgān (ī) ašmā(-īz) az ān ī amā dānāgtar bawēnd agar čim ī ēn čatrang wizārēd ēnyā sāk (ud) bāj frēstēd.
- 4) šāhān-šāh 3 rōz zamān xwāst ud ēč kas nē būd az dānāgān ī ērān-šahr kē čim ī ān čatrang wizārdan šāyēst.
- 5) sidīgar rōz wuzurgmihr ī bōxtagān abar ō pāy ēstād.
- 6) u-š guft kū anōšag bawēd man čim ī ēn čatrang tā im rōz az ān čim rāy be nē wizārd tā ašmā ud harw kē pad ērān-šahr hēd be dānēd kū andar ērānšahr mard ī man dānāgtar hom.

- 7) man čim ī ēn
čatrang xwārīhā wizārom ud sāk (ud) bāj az dēwišarm
stānom ud anē-iz čiš-ē kunom ō dēwišarm frēstom ī-š
wizārdan nē tuwān (ud) az-iš 2 bārag sāk man gīrom
ud pad ēn abēgumān bawēd kū ašmā pad šāhān-šāhīh
arzānīg hēd ud dānāgān ī amā az ān ī dēwišarm
dānāgtar hēnd.
- 8) šāhān-šāh 3 bār guft kū zīwā
wuzurgmihr tātarītos ī amā u-š 12000 drahm ō
wuzurgmihr framūd dādan.
- 9) rōz ī dudīgar wuzurgmihr tātarītos ō pēš xwāst
ud guft kū dēwišarm ēn čatrang pad čim (ī) kārezār homānāg
kard.
- 10) u-š homānāg 2 sar-xwadāy kard šāh ō mādayārān raxw
ō hōyag ud dašnag homānāg frazēn ō artēštārān-sālār
homānāg pīl ō puštībānān-sālār homānāg
ud asb ō aswārān-sālār homānāg payādag ō ān
ham-payādag homānāg ī pēš-razm.
- 11) u-š pas tātarītos
čatrang nihād abāg wuzurgmihr wāzīd ud wuzurgmihr 3
dast az tātarītos burd ud padiš wuzurg rāmišn ō
hamāg kišwar mad.
- 12) pas tātarītos abar ō pāy ēstād.
- 13) u-š guft kū anōšag bawēd yazad ēn warz
ud xwarrah ud amāwandīh ud pērōzgarīh ō ašmā dād ērān
ud anērān xwadāy hēd.
- 14) čand tā dānāgān ī hindūgān
ēn čatrang ēw juxt nihād pad was harg (ud) ranj
ō ēd gyāg āwurd (ud) ēč kas wizārdan nē tuwān būd.
- 15) wuzurgmihr (ī) ašmā az
āsxnrad ī xwēš ēdōn xwārīhā ud sabukīhā
bē wizārd.
- 16) u-š ān and xwāstag ō ganj ī šāhān
-šāh wisē kard.
- 17) šāhān-šāh dudīgar rōz wuzurgmihr ō pēš
xwāst.

- 18) u-š ō wuzurgmihr guft kū wuzurgmihr ī
amā čē ast ān čiš ī-t guft kū kunom (ud)
ō dēwišarm frēstom?
- 19) wuzurgmihr guft kū az dahibedān andar ēn hazārag
ardaxšīr kardārtar ud dānāgtar būd ud nēw-ardaxšīr
ēd juxt pad nām ī ardaxšīr nihom.
- 20) taxtag ī
nēw-ardaxšīr ō spandarmad zamīg homānāg kunom.
- 21) ud 30
muhrag ō 30 rōz ud šabān homānāg kunom 15 ī spēd
ō rōz homānāg kunom ud 15 (ī) syā ō
šab homānāg kunom.
- 22) gardānāg ēd tāg ō wardišn ī axtarān
ud gardišn ī spīhr homānāg kunom.
- 23) ēk abar gardānag-ē
ōwōn homānāg kunom kū ohrmazd ēk ast (ud) har
nēkīh ōy dād.
- 24) 2 ēdōn homānāg kunom čiyōn
mēnōg ud gētīg.
- 25) 3 ōwōn homānāg kunom čiyōn humat
ud hūxt ud huwaršt ud menišn ud gōwišn ud kunišn.
- 26) 4 ōwōn homānāg kunom čiyōn čahār āmēzišn kē mardōm
az-iš az-iš čahār sōg (ī) gētīg xwarāsān ud xwarwarān (ud) nēmrōz
ud abāxtar.
- 27) 5 ōwōn homānāg kunom čiyōn 5
rōšnīh čiyōn xwaršēd ud māh ud stārag (ud) ātaxš ud warzag (ī) az
asmān āyēd.
- 28) 6 ōwōn homānāg kunom čiyōn
dādan ī dām pad 6 gāh ī gāhānbār.
- 29) nihādag ī
nēw-ardaxšīr abar taxtag ēdōn homānāg kunom čiyōn
ohrmazd xwadāy ka-š dām ō gētīg dād.
- 30) wardišn ud gardišn ī muhrag pad gardānāg-ē ōwōn homānāg čiyōn

mardōmān ī andar gētīg band ō mēnōgān paywast ēstēd
pad 7 ud 12 hamāg wardēnd (ud) wihēzēnd ud ka ast
ēk ō did zanēnd ud abar čīnēnd čiyōn mardōmān andar gētīg ēk
ō did zanēnd.

- 31) ud ka pad gardānāg-ē ēd gardišn
hamāg abar čīnēnd hangōšīdag ī mardōm kē hamāg az gētīg
widārān bawēnd ud ka did-iz bē nihēnd hangōšīdag ī mardōmān
kē pad ristāxēz hamāg zīndag abāz bawēnd.
- 32) šāhān-šāh ka-š ān saxwan āšnūd rāmišnīg
būd ud framūd 12000 asb (ī) tāzīg az ham mōy
padisār pad zarr (ud) morwārīd ud 12000 mard (ī) *juwan kē
pad wizīn ī az ērānšahr 12000 zrēh ī haft-*gard
ud 12000 šamšēr (ī) pōlāwadēn ī wirāst hindūg (ud) 12000
kamar ī haft čašmag ud abārīg har čē andar 12000
mard (ud) asp abāyist har čē abrangīgīhā payrāyēnīdan.
- 33) wuzurgmihr (ī) bōxtagān abar awēšān sālār kard ud rōzgār-ē wizīdag
pad nēk jahišn ud yazdān ayārīh ō hindūgān frēstīd.
- 34) dēwišarm ī wuzurg šahryār ī hindūgān-šāh ka āwēšān
pad ān ēwēnag dīd az wuzurgmihr ī bōxtagān 40 rōz zamān
xwāst.
- 35) ēč kas nē būd az dānāgān ī hindūgān kē
čim (ī) ān nēw-ardaxšīr dānist.
- 36) wuzurgmihr did-iz ham čand
ān sāk ud bāj az dēwišarm stād ud pad nēk jahišn (ud)
wuzurg abrang abāz ō ērānšahr āmad.
- 37) wizārišn (ud) čim ī čatrang ēn kū č(ērī)h pad nērang az ān
čiyōn dānāgān-iz guft ēstēd kū pērōz kū pad xrad
barēd az ān (ī) a-zēn ardīg mādagwarīh <ī> dānistan.
- 38) wāzīdan (ī) čatrang ēn kū nigerišn ud tuxšišn <ī>
pad nigāh dāštan ī abzār ī xwad wēš
tuxšišn čiyōn ō burdan šāyistan ī abzār ī ōy
did ud pad ummēd ī abzār ī ōy ī did burdan
šāyistan rāy dast ī wad nē wāzišn ud hamwār
abzār ēk-ē pad kār ud abārīg pad pahrēz dārišn
ud nigerišn bowandag-menišnīhā ud abārīg ōwōn čiyōn andar ēwēn<ag>-
nāmag nibišt ēstēd.

frazaft pad drōd ud šādīyh

Translation

In the name of the Gods

- 1) It is said that during the reign of Xusrō, of Immortal soul, for the sake of testing the wisdom and knowledge of the Iranians and to see his own benefit, Dēwišarm, great sovereign of the Indians, sent one set of chess, 16 pieces made from emerald and 16 pieces made from red ruby.
- 2) Along with that (game of) chess he sent 1200 camel loads of gold and silver and jewels and pearls and garments and 90 elephants and things specially made for them, which were sent along, and Taxtrītos who was notable among the Indians was sent along.
- 3) In a letter he had written thus: Since you are named king of kings, and over us you are king of kings, then your wise men also must be wiser than ours, either you explain the logic of this (game of) chess or send (us) tribute and tax.
- 4) The king of kings asked for 3 days, and there was not one among the wise-men in *Ērānšahr* who was able to explain the logic of that chess (game).
- 5) On the third day, Wuzurgmihr, the son of Boxtag stood upon his feet.
- 6) He said thus: May you be immortal, I did not explain the logic of this game of chess till today for that reason so that you and anyone who is in *Ērānšahr* know that I am the wisest in *Ērānšahr*.
- 7) I will easily explain the logic of this (game of) chess and will take tribute and tax from Dēwišarm, and I will create and send

something to Dēwišarm which he will not be able to explain, (and) for the second time I will again take tribute and therefore it will become certain that you are worthy of the kingship of kings and our wise men are wiser than those of Dēwišarm.

- 8) The king of kings said 3 times thus: Bravo Wuzurgmihr, our Taxtrītos, and he commanded to give Wuzurgmihr 12000 silver coins.
- 9) On the second day Wuzurgmihr called Taxtrītos before him and said thus: Dēwišarm has designed this chess (game) like a battle in purpose.
- 10) He made the king like the two overlords, the rook (on) the left and right flank, the minister like the Commander of the Warriors, the elephant is like the Commander of the Bodyguards, and the horse is like the Commander of the Cavalry, the foot-soldier like the same pawn, that is at front of the battle(field).
- 11) Then Taxtrītos set the (game of) chess and played with Wuzurgmihr, and Wuzurgmihr won 3 hands from Taxtrītos, and because of this, great joy came to the country.
- 12) Then Taxtrītos stood upon his feet.
- 13) He said thus: May you be immortal, God has given you this miraculous power, and glory and strength, and victoriousness. You are the lord of *Ērān* and *non-Ērān*.
- 14) Several of the Indian wise men prepared this set of chess (pieces) with much effort, and toil brought it to this place, (and) no one was able to (give an) explanation.
- 15) Your Wuzurgmihr due to his innate wisdom rather so easily and simply explained it.
- 16) He dispatched that much wealth to the treasury of the king of kings.
- 17) The next day the king of kings called Wuzurgmihr before him.
- 18) He said to Wuzurgmihr thus: Our Wuzurgmihr, what is that thing which you said to me: I will make and send it to Dēwišarm?

- 19) Wuzurgmihr said thus: Among the rulers of this millennium Ardaxšīr was more capable and most wise and I will name this (game) backgammon (*Nēw-Ardaxšīr*) in Ardaxšīr's name.
- 20) I will make the board of the backgammon like the *Spandarmad* earth.
- 21) and I will make 30 pieces like the 30 night and day, I will make 15 white, like the day, and I will make 15 black, like the night.
- 22) I will make this single die as the turning of the constellations and the revolution of the firmament.
- 23) I will make the one on the dice like Ohrmazd, who is one and all goodness was created by him.
- 24) I will make the two like the spiritual and the material world.
- 25) I will make the three like good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, and thoughts, words, and deeds.
- 26) I will make the four like the four humors which the people are made of, and (like) the four corners of the world, northeast and southwest, and southeast, and northwest.
- 27) I will make the five like the five lights, like the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and the fire and the heavenly brightness which descends from the sky.
- 28) I will make the six like the creation of the creatures during the six periods of *Gāhānbārs* (which makes the divisions of the year).
- 29) I will make the arrangements of the (game of) backgammon on the board like the Lord Ohrmazd, when He created the creatures of the material world.
- 30) The turning and revolution of the pieces by the die is like people in the material world, their bond connected to the spiritual world, through the 7 and 12 (planets and constellation) they all have their being and move on, and when it is as if they hit one against another and collect, it is like people in the material world, one hits another (person).

- 31) And when by the turning of this die all are collected, it is in the likeness of the people who all passed out from the material world (died), and when they set them up again, it is in the likeness of the people who during the (time of) resurrection, all will come to life again.
- 32) When the king of kings heard that speech, he became joyful and commanded 12000 Arabian horses of the same hair (color), bridled with gold and pearls and 12000 young men who are distinguished in *Ērānšahr*, 12000 coat of mail armor and 12000 swords prepared of Indian steel, (and) 12000 seven-studded (jeweled) belts and whatever is needed for 12000 men (and) horses, everything adorned in the most splendid manner.
- 33) Wuzurgmihr, the son of Boxtag was made commander over them, and at the chosen date, with good fortune and with the aid of the Gods, sent to the Indians.
- 34) Dēwišarm the great, the sovereign of the king of the Indians, when he saw them in that manner, he asked Wuzurgmihr, the son of Boxtag for 40 days time.
- 35) There was no one among the wise men of the Indians who knew the logic of that (game of) backgammon.
- 36) Wuzurgmihr again collected as much tribute and tax from Dēwišarm and through good fortune and great splendor returned to *Ērānšahr*.
- 37) The explanation (and) the logic of chess is this: Victory through skill, in the manner which the wise have said: The victor who wins through wisdom, from having the essential knowledge of weaponless war.
- 38) The explanation of chess is this that, observation and striving through protecting one's own piece, greater striving to be able to capture the other person's pieces, not playing a bad hand because of hope of being able to capture the other person's pieces, always keeping one piece on the attack and the others on the defense, observing with complete mindfulness, and other as has been written in the *Book of Manners*.

Completed with salutation and joy.