31. A unique piece of ivory carving—the oldest known chessman J.E. VAN LOHUIZEN DE LEEUW

tal Anuradhapura, the only other walled city (Ray town, situated on the north-west coast, was the most or Mantora, the site of the ancient Mahatittha. This horses together resembling a Roman quadriga. According to the Museum's register it was discovered at Mântai delicate carving (van Lohuizen, 1959). It is 1.7 cm high 1959-60). It is already mentioned in the second century important harbour of Sri Lanka and, apart from the capiand represents a chariot drawn by four sturdy little work but also on account of the object's small size and its because I have always been deeply interested in ivory no. 67) which immediately drew my attention, not only across a tiny ivory (Fig. 31.1; Idem: 80, no. 30; Museum quently wrote the catalogue of the exhibition (van the Archaeological Museum at Anurādhapura I came teries and archaeological sites in the island and subsematerial for this show from various museums, monasrequest of the Government of Sri Lanka I collected the which was on display is the subject of this paper. At the an exhibition entitled 'Sri Lanka - Ancient Arts' in the Commonwealth Institute, London. The smallest object On 16 July 1981 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth opened ohuizen, 1981). While searching for suitable objects in



Fig. 31.1. Chariot from Māntai, ivory, h. 1.7 cm, Arch. Mus. Anurádhapura, Mus. no. 67 (copyright Arch. Dept. Sri Lanka).

BC and maintained its eminent position for at least fourteen centuries, if not longer (Idem: 161 and pr. II: p. 626). During the early centuries of our era Sri Lanka was in

made in South Asia, the area which in ancient days was Begrām (Hackin, 19543: Figs. 1–239). regularly exported, as proved by the famous treasure of the source of Ivory and from where carved Ivories were more than likely that the chariot under discussion was material but as carved objects. In view of all this it seems that ivory was not imported there in the form of raw cated explanation; all the more so as ivory carving was was re-exported to Sri Lanka. Although this is not material and quadrigas were also known in ancient India from at least as early as the second century BC, as for example at Bhaia (Coomaraswamy, 1927; Pl. VII, Fig. examples of Indian ivories discovered in the West prove and still is a typical South Asian skill and, in addition, the entirely impossible, it is certainly an extremely compliempire, then carved there into a quadriga, after which it ivory was first exported from South Asia to the Roman world, then we would have to assume that a piece of raw this ivory carving was indeed made in the Mediterranean site to be a Roman import from the West (Boisselier, resemblance to a Roman quadriga, that the Museum It is probably for this reason, and on account of its 1979: 117). However, ivory is a typical South Asian authorities consider the ivory chariot discovered at that this international trade (Wheeler, 1954: 138 and fig. 16). the town undoubtedly occupied a pre-eminent place in Sri Lanka's most important harbour for many centuries, island, but especially along the coast. As Mahātirtha was imported from the West and discovered all over the evidence such as Roman coins, cameos and pieces of glass relations were based on trade is proved by archaeological of the emperor Augustus (Idem, pt. 1: 225). That these embassy even visited the court in Rome during the reign close contact with the Roman empire and a Sinhalese During the early centuries of our era Sri Lanka was in Bhārhuj (Coomaraswamy, 1956: Pl. XXX, Fig. 83) Bodh Gayā (Coomaraswamy, 1935: Pl. LIII, 2). If

On taking the object out of the showcase in the Anuradhapura Museum and placing it on the palm of my hand to study it more closely, I immediately noticed its

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smooth base. Turning it upside down it was apparent from the marks on the surface of the base that the object had been pushed around frequently, as is the case with the appropriate pieces. Now the most important board game which India gave to the world is chess (Murray, 1962: 27), and sawe know that one of the chessmen in ancient India was the chariot, the ivory from Māntai is almost certainly a chess piece. This supports our view that the object was not a Roman import, for the game of chess remained

unknown in the West till the mediaeval period.
When discussing the products of India in the middle of the tenth century, al-Mas's udi informs us that: 'by far the most frequent use of ivory is for the manufacture of men for chess and nard. Several of the chessmen are figures of men or animals, a span high and big, or even more (Idem: 37). This statement further supports our view that the charitot from Mantai was not an imported Roman piece of ivory carving. However, as chess was introduced to Sri Lanka from India and, as the piece in question was discovered at the site of Sri Lanka's most important harbour, it may well have been imported from India.

The ancient Indian game was called caturanga, because its elements represented the four divisions of an Indian army: elephants, horses, chariots and footmen. It probably developed from astapada—a racing game with dice which could be played with two or four partners—into the war-game known as caturanga or chess. Both forms of game continued to exist alongside one another for a long time (1dem: 42). They are mentioned in ancient Indian literature as early as the fifth century BC (1dem: 43), and the oldest representation of a chessboard can be found in a relief on the stúpa railing at Bhārhut dating from the second half of the second century BC (Fig. 31.2). Although the chariot eventually became the tower, it was still used in South Italy in the late eleventh century, as appears from an ivory war chariot drawn by four horses, now in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (Fig. 31.3).

By the seventh century the game had become known in Iran and around the year 1000 it was transferred by the Muslims to the Christian world. Until recently the oldest known chessman was the famous piece from the Tresor de St Denis, now in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (Fig. 31.4). It was traditionally supposed to have been a present from Harun al-Rashid to Charlemagne. In view of its Arabic inscription it is now usually considered to be a Muslim copy of an Indian example (Wichmann, 1960: 281). However, its stylistic details, its material and Mas'udl's remark quoted above seem to indicate that the piece was carved in India, more specially in the north epiece was carved in Selezity related to that of early 53th; west as its style is clearly related to that of early 53th would date it roughly between the late seventh and the ninth centuries and not in the fifteenth as

Barrett believed.² In my opinion the Arabic inseription was simply added later on, after the object had been exported. The twelfth-century chessman in the Musco Nazionale, Florence (Fig. 31.5) shares a few details with the twory from the Tresor de St Denis (Fig. 31.4) but in this case I would suggest that the object is indeed a Muslim copy of an Indian example.

In 1965 Härtel bought an ivory chess piece for the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin (Museum no. 1.10001), It is slightly smaller and shows less details than the famous, so-called chessman of Charlemagne, but in view of its stylistic peculiarities it would seem to be of roughly the same date, i.e. the late seventh to ninth cenuries (Fig. 31.6). An even smaller ivory chess piece which appeared recently on the London market: should probably be attributed to about the same period (Fig. 31.7). Finally, in 1977 Buryakov discovered at the fortified settlement of Afrasiab a group of ivory chessmen which he published in 1980 (Buryakov; 1980: 171-2). He dates them not later than the seventh century. In some respects though they show less detail, probably because they seem the tendler.

to be much smaller.

Let us now return to the ivory chariot discovered at Mantai (Fig. 31.1). Its shape is slightly different from that of the chariots often depicted in early Indian art in that the banister is straight and does not show three lobes. In this respect the ivory partly resembles a Roman chariot, which also has a straight banister in front though it slopes on either side. However, we have seen that there are too many arguments against a Roman provenance for the



Fig. 31.2. A game of chess, Bhàrhut, second half second century BC (copyright Coomaraswamy, 1956: Pl. XLVIII, Fig. 223)

banister at all (Marshall, 1951: vol. II, 452, nos. 58-60: been many other types of chariot. Some had banisters usually represented in early Indian art, there seem to have 602-3, nos. 390-1; vol. III, Pls. 134 and 185). front and only on both sides and again others had no sloping on either side, others had no banister on the Indian chariot unknown so far. For, apart from the type piece and so the ivory probably represents a type of

carly Indian art from the second century BC onwards to the second or third century AD, after which the evito have been used in India from the Aryan invasion down obvious that it is a very early piece. Chariots are known tioned in the Ramayana (VI.110.9) and are depicted in 1958: 154). Quadrigas drawn by four horses are mendence suggests that their use declined steadily (Allchin, With regard to the date of the ivory from Mantai, it is

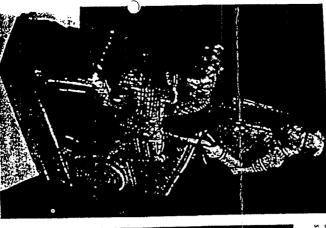


Fig. 31.3. Chessman, south Italy, late eleventh century, ivory, h. 12.6 cm, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (copyright Wichmann, 1960:

their flat hindquarters are reminiscent of the horses at junakonda (Longhurst, 1938: Pl. IX a, c; XXVIII c; Mathura (Vogel, 1930: Pl. VIII b; XX b) and Någår-Lill, 2), Jaggayyapeta (Coomaraswamy, 1929; Pl. 2), such early sites as Bodh Gaya (Coomaraswamy, 1935: Pl horses of the Mantai ivory with their bulging chests and The date of the little horse from Kondapur is generally consequently have been imported from Andhra Pradesh Sri Lanka are well known and our ivory chessman may tural and political relations between this part of India and the ancient Satavahana realm. The close religious, culbelieved to be a toy. This site is located in what was once Hyderabad (Fig. 31.8), which so far has been wrongly famous little terracotta horse excavated at Kondápur, XXV b (toy)). Their nearest parallel is, however, the (Coomaraswamy, loc. cit.). Stylistically, the sturdy slim bodies and long legs. For various reasons, especially 33, no. 79). Later on horses become more elegant, with accepted to be the second or third century (Ashton, 1950:

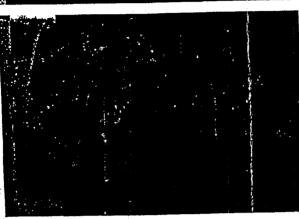


Fig. 31.4. Chessman, north-west India, late seventh to ninth century. 1001; h. 15.6 cm. Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (copyright Wichmann: Pt. 37). Elephant king

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inclined to attribute the latter to the second or third cenon be more alert with regard to the possible occurrence of tury AD. In view of this early date we should from now and the ivory from Mantai, we would therefore be the close parallel between the terracotta from Kondapur being - the oldest known chess piece in the world. chessman is roughly five centuries earlier than the other have hitherto been interpreted as toys. As the Mantai have come to light at various early Indian sites and which game pieces among the small elephants and horses which from Sri Lanka would seem to be - at least for the time ivories discussed in this article, the charming little chariot

COTES

- 1. For instance the ivory discovered at Pompeii (see Wheeler, 1954: Pl. XIX, or During Caspers, 1981: 342)
- 2. Barrett, 1955: 51. However, comparison of the so-called century (Barrett, 1967: 14, Pl. II, Fig. 12), and which is Charlemagne chessman with the ivory diptych from Kansu, clearly related in style, confirms the date suggested by us. which Barrett correctly dated in the late seventh or eighth
- 3. It should be pointed out that the front of the banister is not (Sivaramamurti, 1942: Pl. X, 13) as in early China and the always semicircular but occasionally tends to be straight
- 4. Sastri, 1957: 705. See, however, my forthcoming article,



Fig. 31.5. Chesspiece, Arabia, twelfth century, ivory, h. 6.9 cm, Musco Naz., Florence (copyright Wichmann: Pl. 37).

covered at Kondapur?' to appear in the volume in honour of Dr C. Sivaramamuro. What was the purpose of the terracotta animal figurines dis-

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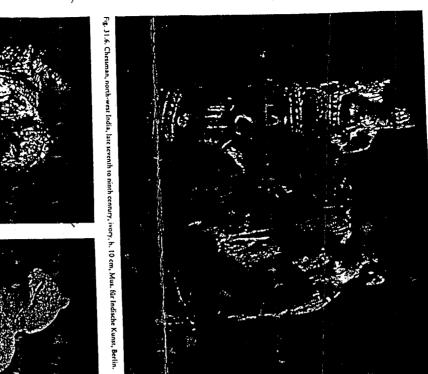




Fig. 31.7. Chespiece, north-west India, late execution ninth century. work, is sent (copyright pinks and Son Ltd., London).

Reference (The HTURSH MEATLEST)

ARREST PROPERTY () Fig. 31.8. Horse, Kondipur, second to third century AD, terracotta, h. 6.7 cm, Govt. Mus. Hyderibid (copyright Ashton, 1950: Pl. 23, Fig. 79).