

**Five Chessmen made of Stone  
- Slate from Gandhara? -  
and their familiarity with the Finds from Afrasiab**

**Manfred A.J. Eder**

The earliest “official information” about five Chessmen made of Stone ....  
- which I should like to make subject for discussion in this meeting -



.... I found on the website of the French researcher Jean-Louis Cazaux from Toulouse, who I had been corresponding with over perhaps more than 25 years. His message on the internet (print-out 18.12.2009) reads as follows (quote):

*“The mysterious Afghan chessmen – Les mystéricuses pièces d’Afghanistan  
How come these 5 pieces have surfaced in the USA in 2006 is a mystery (for me).  
A US dealer sold them saying they were sourced from **North Afghanistan**.  
For a while they were available from a specialized seller in UK, who was very  
kind in contacting me. Now they have been bought by another collector and  
belong to a private collection.  
Their exact origin is not known, nor is known their estimated date. Personally  
I don’t believe that they can be fakes. I do think there [=they] are genuine and,  
in this case, this finding is of a tremendous importance: it is a second chess set  
[group of chessmen] found after the Afrasiab chessmen, to which they look  
very similar.*



[quotation continued]

*Then, it can be speculated a date around 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century, in the Sassanian or early Arabic period. Also **coming from an Eastern Persian land, they significantly increase the claim** [by Cazaux] **of these countries to be the cradle of Chess.***

*It seems that the five pieces are all made of the same material: stone – but which? They could all come from one set, perhaps 3 from one side (no” human” heads) and 2 from the opposing side (with “faces”).*

*With these very unfortunate wars in Oriental countries, it seems that more and more archaeological treasures are circulating on the open market. The biggest regret is that no information is collected about the exact origin, the conditions in which they were found, all which could suggest a serious datation (and not just a speculation) and give hints about their cultural context. This is a pity.*

*However the good point is that [the] pieces are now in the good hands of a well informed collector (and protector), they are far away from the very high risk of suffering the madness of man.”*

I have no reason to make it a secret that the so-called “well informed collector (and protector)” – is me.

Cazaux describes the way the pieces went as he and me were told by the seller, a member of the British section of Chess Collectors International, and his son, living in the USA, who probably was the man with the contact to Afghanistan, from where - as reported - he has got the group.

Having been a collector not only of chessmen but also of gaming pieces and dice for over 50 years, buying from antique dealers with whom my wife and myself became friends, we do reliably know, that for numerous objects in the international art-markets one has to *take as given* what one is being told by the suppliers! This, in the same way, is true for well reputed auction-houses when cataloguing their world-wide sales as well as for hundreds and more famous museums around the world which present their collections – not always and through-out with best possible information! Also they often tell - more-or-less - what they were told. But:

This is then, when serious research must start.

There was no chance to refuse the offer of the “*Five chessmen from Afghanistan*”, as they were nominated, with every risk involved(!); not only as a collector, but even more for research, especially because of their “familiarity” with the famous finds from Afrasiab, which was absolutely striking! We will come to that.



The „Afrasiab“ Chessmen are tiny small:  
Highest =  
Horse+Rider:  
32 x 16 x 3 mm  
Pawns´ height:  
26/30 mm  
respectively

But let us first have a closer look at “The glorious Five”:



Fig. 1  
**Rider (royal?)  
on Elephant**

Height 59 mm  
Length 65 mm  
Depth 30 mm  
Weight 151 g



Fig. 2  
**Rider with helmet,  
armed, on a "beast"  
(Elephant? Lion?)**

Height 53 mm  
Length 52 mm  
Depth 26 mm  
Weight 94 g



Fig. 3  
**Rider with flat head,  
armed, on Elephant**

Height 48 mm  
Length 51 mm  
Depth 24 mm  
Weight 92 g



Fig. 4  
**Rider without head,  
sitting on two horsebacks  
with "belt"? (No saddle!)**

Height 50 mm  
Length 41 mm (base 40)  
Depth 25 mm  
Weight 95 g



Fig. 5  
**2 Men with flat heads in  
carriage upon 2 horses**

Height 45 mm  
Length 40 mm (base 38)  
Depth 25 mm  
Weight 96 g



## General Observations

- \* The five Figures are forming a group due to identical material, proportions and general conditions.
- \* They are made of Stone: SLATE, analyzed by RGMZ – Römisch-Germanisches Zentral-Museum, Mainz, as certified on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

(In various comparisons the material reminds of slate from Gandhara; main source of info: „Gandhara – Das Buddhistische Erbe Pakistans“, Exhibition-Catalogue, 2008-2010, PhvZ. Mainz)

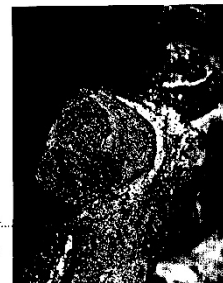
- \* There is no doubt that the five artefacts were buried at the same spot, which can be seen from the identical patina (Sinter) the pieces originally were covered with.
- \* The condition of the surface of all pieces is pitiable! It appears that they were “cleaned”, i.e. freed from patina all over: the original surface of the artefacts has been scratched off – with regrettable consequences! Two examples:
  - Fig. 1 – *Rider (royal?) on Elephant* shows that the collar of the rider remained untouched, not unlikely due to the risk to break the head off.
  - Fig. 5 – *Two men with flat heads ...*: obviously one ear of the left horse broke off and was glued-on again, but up-side down!

*Handwritten:* 13.5.11  
 Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum  
 Forschung, 1078, 7, 10  
 Vor- und Frühgeschichte  
 R G Z M

Materialanalyse: Spielstein

Untersuchter Gegenstand: Figur aus dunklem Stein in Form eines Reiters

**Analysenergebnis:**  
 Die Bestimmung der Elemente mit der Röntgenfluoreszenzanalyse (Magnesium, Silizium, Aluminium, Eisen als Hauptkomponenten plus Natrium, Kalzium und Schwefel) in Kombination mit Ramanspektroskopie ergaben, dass es sich bei dem Material um ein Gestein aus der Talkchloritgruppe handelt.  
 (Die Talkchlorite sind eine Gruppe von Magnesium-Eisen-Aluminium-Silikaten mit variabler Zusammensetzung)



Mainz, 13.05.2011

*Handwritten:* S. Hartmann  
 Sonngard Hartmann  
 Materialanalytik  
 hartmann@rzm.de



- \* Each of the five different Figures shows an animal or animals with rider(s).
- \* Only two of the riders have human faces: **Fig. 1** and **Fig. 2**.  
Perhaps the head of the rider in **Fig. 4** was broken off before “buried”!?  
This is not clear, because the very spot of the neck is covered by patina.  
On **Fig. 3** and **Fig 5** the riders are designed with “flat heads”! Meaning?  
A subject for discussion!
- \* Since the artist was well aware of what a “horse” looks like (see **Fig. 4** and **Fig. 5**), there can be no doubt, that he meant the animals of the figures pictured under **1** and **3** – showing a “trunk” – be Elephants! But what about the “beast”, i.e. **Fig. 2**?  
A second choice to Elephant, with some phantasy, could be a Lion!

### Taking piece-by piece in some details:

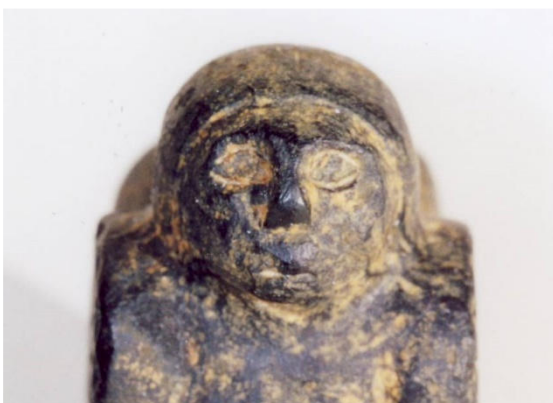
**Fig. 1 – Rider (royal?) on Elephant - suggested: The “King”**



The rider has had a good “hairdresser”! (Better to see from the back).  
A “royal” appearance - likely to play the **“King”**.

The trunk of the Elephant goes around the right side of his head, which is damaged by an open (new!) gash on its left.

**Fig. 2 – Rider with helmet, armed, on Elephant or a “Beast” like a Lion (?) - suggested to play the “Advisor”, i.e. “Queen”**



The rider is heavily armed – with helmet, shields (on either side!), a large saddle (chain-mail?), also protecting the animal.

The animal’s trunk(?) seems to be hold in the middle of its front. Or is it a snout of - a Lion?

In literature: to be the **“Advisor/Queen”**.

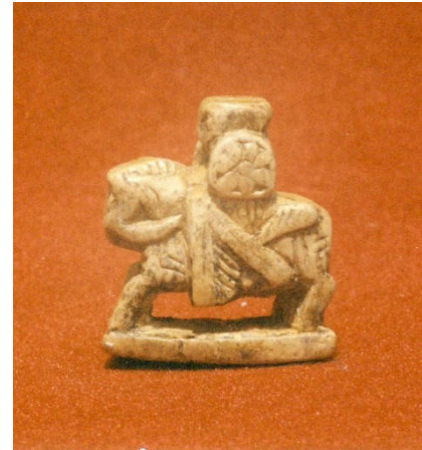
Not easy to see on the previous illu. but: The left leg of the animal obviously was damaged before the object was earthed. (Sinter!)

**Fig. 3 – Rider with flat head, heavily armed - suggested to play the “Bishop”**



It appears the trunk (yes!) goes left around the head – of the.... Elephant! (“Bishop”)

For comparison: The similarity of “equipment” of one of the two “Knights” in the “Afrasiab”-Group is absolutely striking!



**Fig. 4 – Rider without head (broken?), sitting on 2 horse-backs - suggested: “Knight”**



The Stone-Group of five different Figures suggests this one to be the „Knight“.

In clear contrast to this interpretation is - in spite of the “brotherly” design! - the major piece of the “Afrasiab”-Find: “King or Advisor”?? (See later notes)



Above left shows the “Afrasiab”-King or -Advisor with its broken back(-seat); above right shows the complete image. (Private collection)

**Fig. 5 – Two Men with flat heads in Carriage upon two horses - suggested: “Rook”**



Left: Chariot = Rook made of Slate      Above: “Afrasiab”-Chariot = Rook made of Ivory  
Both represent a carriage drawn by two horses, with two armed warriors protected by shields.

From the “Afrasiab”-Group we know of two Pawns, with a 3<sup>rd</sup> one from a private collection -



while we have no idea, what the “Pawns” of the Stone-Group looked like!  
 Amasing, that again and again we lack of “Pawns” as the biggest part of a set with  $2 \times 8 = 16$  pieces!<sup>1</sup>

But there are still some more elements left to compare in details:  
 the shields of the “Stone”- versus the “Afrasiab”-Chessmen for example:



From Fig. 2 (Advisor=Queen)



From Fig. 3 (Bishop)



From Fig. 5 (Chariot=Rook)



From “Afrasiab” Knight 1



From “Afrasiab” Knight 2



From “Afrasiab” Bishop



From “Afrasiab” Rook

The familiarity of the five Chessmen made of Stone with the seven Afrasiab-Chessmen made of Ivory indeed is not less important than surprising! And for discussion we have to note that the individual pieces seem to have had different “functions” and positions on the board: The “King” in Stone represented by an Elephant versus on “3 Horses” in ivory, alternatively in the latter group playing the “Queen”. The “Bishop” in Stone has his vis-à-vis in Ivory clearly also as an Elephant, but its equipment is identical with one of the “Knights” of the Afrasiab-Group! The Horserider made of Stone, understood as the “Knight”, is more familiar to the major-piece of Ivory rather than to the two Ivory-Knights in that group. Confusing?

<sup>1</sup> Also see “Proto-Chess: No! – Proto-Chessmen: Yes! – New Considerations and ...” in this Volume

Yes, indeed. However: There can be no doubt that the designers of the chessmen of both the set in Ivory as the set in Stone based their principle concept on the pattern of the Indian army with its four wings:

the Chariots, Horseriders, Elephants plus – unknown – Footsoldiers.

Especially the presence of Elephants in the Stone-Group allows to point out that the Elephant as the king's animal and its ranking as the strongest wapon in war, protecting the King and his War-Minister, is to underline as an element of typical Indian origin!

(Our Friend Dr. Leander A. Feiler, busy to investigate which role the War-Elephant played in the army of the Sassanids, will give you his view in our discussons!)

### **In conclusion:**

**In any case both groups must have experienced their birth in not too great a distance in *time* – and also most probably not in too far a distance in *place*!**

### **A principle and fundamental problem:**

The biggest mistake often made is that the **place** where artefacts were *found* and unearthed (e.g. Afrasiab!) is taken as the place where they were *made*! Are the “Afrasiab” chessmen *Sassanid* because they were *excavated* in Old Samarkand?

I always felt honored by my personal friendship with Professor Dr. Jurij Burjakov, the archaeologist and historian from Samarkand, Uzbekistan, who made me particularly proud by his invitation to discuss his “Afrasiab”-Find from 1977 with him.

He visited us in 1993\*

and in 1997,



\*and the results were published in “Antike Welt”, 1/1994. (Jurij – by the way – has never insisted on that the “Afrasiab”-Chessmen were *made* in Uzbekistan.)

So, in logic consequence: Profeser Burjakov and through him his colleagues at the Samarkand State Architectural and Art Museum Preserve (in 2000 under the direction of the Art-Historian and Head of the Art Department Zaynab G. Ivanitskaya) in fact were the first to be informed about the **“Five Chessmen made of Stone”**.

Spontaneously, unfortunately, a misinterpretation led Jurij at a fist glance to the assumption (E-Mail May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009) that these pieces were taken care of in a museum in India, as his daughter – Jelena Moldenhauer, living in Germany – translated her father's paper into German (E-Mail May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009). This has been corrected on the same day, expressing the hope, that we would have an opportunity to inspect the stone pieces in a personal meeting.

Already in his letter of February 7<sup>th</sup> 2001, which he sent to me by fax from the “Archaeology Institut” (Fax-No. 00998 662 321290), he wrote in German, regarding the continued discussion about the AFRASIAB-Chessmen – Quote in original:

*“Ich hab interessante Fakte ueber meine Schachen. Es gibt bestimmte indische Motive. Noch bekam ich nicht die nötige Literatur (versehentlich schickten mir ganz andere Literatur ueber diese Motive an anderen Gegenstände), aber bald bekomme wieder und schreibe Dir sofort darueber. Ich glaube das ist interessant für Ihnen und fuer Renate Saed [Syed].“*

In short: „I have interesting facts about my Chessmen. There are certain Indian motives. – I’m waiting for the correct literature. – I believe this is interesting for you and Renate Syed.”

Till September 2008 we were full of hope to see each other in Germany again, when Jurij visited his daughter Jelena Modenhauer; however, the only chance was to talk on the phone – once more emphasizing confirmation that the Afrasiab-Chessmen are of Indian origin. (For our records and as a memorandum I quote from my letter September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008, to Jelena Modenhauer:

*“Sodann erwähnten Sie und Ihr Papa bei unserem Telefonat, dass er wichtige Hinweise dafür gefunden hat, dass die AFRASIAB-Figuren tatsächlich indischen Ursprungs sind. Wollte er dazu nicht eine Mail schicken? Leider ist nichts angekommen. Ist es möglich, Ihren Papa per E-Mail zu erreichen? Darf ich dann um die Adresse bitten?“ – End of quote.)*

Back to the „Five Chessmen made of Stone”, which Professor Burjakov commented full of enthusiasm in a report over three pages in Russian, translated by Jelena into German, to make it a historic document dated May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009 (20:09). Some essentials in excerpts from numerous details in his analysis, parallel with the Afrasiab-group, as “good reasons why” their birth-place must have been INDIA:

He draws special attention to the shape of the figures, their jewelry and decoration, their ritual cultic symbolic, deeply expressing Indian roots. Example: the floral rosettes on the shields, the lotus-blossoms symbolizing sun and light; in India lotus flowers also mean the miracle of Buddha’s birth, meaning immortality. Last but not least, he points back to Ashoka’s Lions as a lasting tradition, if we further analyze Fig. 2 as possibly showing a Lion’s face but not an Elephant. This, in fact, once was also Isaak Linder’s interpretation: a Lion-Face on the Afrasiab-“Queen” (to the right).



**What may we eventually conclude regarding PLACE and TIME?**

Except for the fact that the Stone of the five chessmen is *Slate* which points to Gandhara (nowadays Pakistan, formerly India), we have no idea about a possibly more likely location of their production.

The Afrasiab-group was not made in Uzbekistan, where it was found, but as well in India. Where?

The main difference between both groups is their size (!) and their weight!

All in all we may determine the age of the Stone-pieces next to the age of the Afrasiab-group, i.e. around 700 A.D. – in spite of the fact, that stone alone does not allow to measure age. The dating of the Afrasiab-group is safe – see Burjakov in “Antike Welt” 1/1994.

**We look forward to further discussions in Kannauj 2020 and beyond!**

Please, contact

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**What a sad moment, when Jelena Moldenhauer informed us,  
that her father, our dear friend**

**Professor Dr. Jurij F. Burjakov**

**left us and this world on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015<sup>2</sup>.  
I gladly dedicate this article to him and his family.**

**Manfred A.J. Eder – on behalf of FSG**

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<sup>2</sup> Obituary see „The Chess Collector“-Magazine, Vol XXV No 1 Jan 2016