

Old Islamic Chessmen Historical, religious and artistic considerations about their shape and design

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Introduction

In this paper I shall dispute the theory that the old Islamic chessmen made from the seventh to the thirteenth century in abstract and stylized shapes were designed on account of the Muslim prohibition of image. Such theory attributes the prohibition some time directly and wrongly to the Kur'an, but more often to Muslim hadiths, their traditions. This idea has generally been accepted by many chess scholars. (1)

I shall try to clarify the complex problem of the Islamic attitude towards representation of images as it was felt between the 7th to the 13th century. I then shall deal with testimonies of Islamic figurations in art of the first half of the 8th century. Among which I shall mention those found at Qusayr 'Amrah and at Khirbat al-Majfar in the Jordanian desert.

I shall examine also other Islamic testimonies from Dar al Islam in which artists have depicted animals and men in a very realistic way for treasured gifts. Usually these were beautifully carved pieces in ivory, works of ceramics and of metallurgy.

All these testimonies will prove that depiction of images in Islam was not considered sacrilegious for secular palaces and for secular objects. The Islamic prohibition of images was observed only for holy places, such as mosques or for holy books, like the Kur'an or for the Prophets or for Allah. Theoretically, therefore, Islamic chessmen as secular object could have been by Muslim craftsmen in a representational way as many other secular objects. But they were not. This was a free choice.

From chatrang-men to shatranj men

No one yet knows for certain how, when and where the game of chess was invented or developed from other tabula games. Certainly the Arabs, during their conquest of the Persian Empire (638/651), discovered a fascinating board game, called by the Persian chatrang from the Sanskrit word chaturanga.

In Persia chatrang was played on an uncheckered board 8X8 squares by two people With 16 pieces each, symbolizing a battle between Indian armies.

And early description of that game is documented in a Pahlavi text probably written around the middle of the 8th century. In an old MS dated

1323, the ancient text has a long title: "Vicarism-i- chatrang u nihisn-i-new-artaxser" which means "Explanation of the game of chatrang and invention of the game of nard".

Many scholars often shorten the full title in "Chatrang Namak or 'Matigan i chatrang" or "Vicarism i chatrang".

From that early document, it is related that such a game was devised by a group of several wise men of India for an Indian ruler. It was played by two people on a board with 16 emerald-men and 16 ruby-men, and it was sent by that ruler of India (not yet identified by the historians) to the Persian Shahansha (King of kings) Khusraw I Nushirwan (531-579) as an intellectual challenge to the wisdom of the Persians. They should have explained, only looking at the pieces, the rules and the objectives of the game.

In the Pahlavi document there is no mention of the style and design of the chessmen, but the pieces are described by what they represent:

"two supreme rulers: resemble king (shah), selected corps to right and to left are in the shape of chariots (raxv), a commander in chief is a tent (parzen), the commander of the rearguard is an elephant (pil), the commander of the calvary is a horse (asp), and the foot-soldiers (piyada) represent the infantry."(2)

Knowing that the Indian sculptures and paintings of the period were inclined towards realistic styles, many chess scholars assumed that those Indian pieces also "***pictorials, with naturalistic figure representing the names of the pieces"***. (3)

But Indian chessmen of that period were, however, never found.

The famous carved ivory piece representing a King on top of a elephant and dated 9th-10th century is certainly an Arabic work after an Indian model as the kufic inscription testifies ("min 'amal Yusuf al-Bahili") but "it is difficult to accept it as a chess pieces". (4)

It is quite probable that Persian chatrang-men were realistically carved in wood, bone, ivory, precious and semiprecious stones.

Fortunately for our knowledge of the history of chessmen, the former Soviet made important discoveries in 1977.

The well documented book of Dr. Linder, "Chess in old Russia", illustrates with great care and detail the finding of Afrosiab (Samarkand), Fergana and Khulbuk.

These pieces were carved "***in all probability from the sixth to the eighth century"*** and testify that "***chatrang figures and apparently chaturanga figures earlier were originally given forms corresponding to the names: elephants, horsemen, foot-soldiers, etc."*** (5)

Excavations in Afrosiab under the leadership of Prof. Bukariev in 1977 uncovered seven ivory carved sculptures which left, "***no doubt as to the playing purpose of the figures"***.(6)

These sculptures correspond to the roles of the chatrang-men as described in the old text "Vicarism".

According to Dr. Thomas Hyde (1636-1703), in his "De ludis Orientalibus" (1694) in the middle of the 7th century the design of chessmen was probably realistic, depicting therefore their roles. He reported an illuminating anecdote, which has been related by a preacher of the Mosque at Aleppo (Syria), Sokeiker of Damascus, who died in 1579. The genuine nature of this anecdote was accepted by Muslim traditionists. It concerns the reaction of the fourth Orthodox Caliph 'Ali (656-661), cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet. One day 'Ali passing by some people who were playing chess, asked them *"What images are these which you are so intent upon?"*

Evidently Caliph 'Ali was not acquainted with chess, though some of his subjects were already playing it. Was 'Ali concerned that these were small idols?

From this story Dr Hyde and many others after him thought that the chessmen at the time of 'Ali were representational and pictorially carved.

During the centuries of Islamic dominance, the game of chess was disseminated in all territories of Dar al Islam which consisted of two main sectors: the West, known as "al Maghrib", and the East, generally referred to as "al Masriq". The first comprised the northern coast of Africa east of Egypt, a big part of Spain and Portugal (Al- Andalus) and Sicily. The second consisted of all countries to the east of the present-day Libya, including Turkey and some territories of Central Asia.

By a linguistic process of arabization the game became known in Dar al Islam as shatranj and it seems that it was always played with Islamic pieces as we call them today.

Through commercial and diplomatic contacts the game was introduced, probably during the 8th century, directly into Al-Andalus and Sicily by the Muslims and indirectly into Byzantium by traders and soldiers.

The name of the game, by a process of natural adaptation to the different languages, became zatrikion in Byzantium, ajedrez in Spain and xadrez in Portugal. The rest of Europe, in which Latin was the official language of the ruling class, the Arab word shatranj was discarded in favor of a shorter word, the Persian shah.

In the game warning like shah (check) and shah wa mat (checkmate) were cried out quite often. It was easier to adopt the sound of such warnings to indicate the game. The name shah was latinized into scac or scach with the usual termination of (scacum, scachum) meaning a "check", the termination of "us" (scacus, scachus) meaning "checked" and the termination of "are" (scaccare, scachare) meaning "to check".

The word "scaci' scachi" (plural) indicated the game of chess itself. The Persian word mat was adopted with the usual termination of "us" and became in Latin mattus, i.e. mate.

With great probability in the last part of the 7th century the chessmen started to be carved by Muslim craftsmen in abstract and geometrical shapes.

Shapes which vaguely suggested the original roles they had in chaturanga and in chatrang.

On Islamic attitude towards the representation of images

In the book, "The formation of Islamic art", Professor Oleg Grabar says:
"Much has been written about Islamic attitudes toward the arts. Encyclopedia or general works on the history of arts simply assert that, for a variety of reasons which are rarely explored, Islam was theologically opposed to the representation of living beings. While it is fairly well known by now that the Koran contains no prohibition of such representations, the undeniable denunciation of artists and of representations found in many traditions about the life of the Prophet are taken as genuine expressions of an original Muslim attitude." (7)

In the Kur'an there are only few passages dealing explicitly with representations of idols, images, statues, sculptures.

And none of these passages are clearly stating any prohibition for making artistic figural representations of men or animals.

The first passage usually quoted is in Surah 5, "The Table", ayat 90-93.

"O believers, wine, maysir sacrificial stones (ansab) and divining arrows are abominations devised by Satan. Avoid them. Perhaps you may prosper".

According to the chess scholar Prof. Duncan Forbes (1798-1868):

"Now, all the eminent Muslim commentators on this passage say thatby the term images the Prophet alluded to "the game of Chess", and that the interdict applied not to the game itself, in which chance had no part, but to the little carved figures or images of men, horses, elephants etc. then used on the board as imported from India and Persia, all of which, in the opinion of the Prophet, savoured strongly of idolatry. The Muhammad casuists and expounders of the sacred text, however, with a degree of sense and enlightenment much redounding to their credit, have managed to rescue the game of Chess from the very degrading position assigned to it by the Prophet, as one of the "abomination of Satan ". At the same time the more rigid and orthodox among the "true believers"....in order to avoid all appearances of scandal, play with plain blocks of ivory or wood variously cut, but bearing to any living creature, so the term images may not apply "(8)

In the first place it should be noted that historically Surah 5 was "transmitted" to Muhammad around 631-632. Most probably chatrang was played in Persia in those years, but we do not have any certain documentation that it was already known among the Arabs and therefore the

Kur'an could not "transmit" to Arabs an allusion about a so far unknown game.

In my opinion, if chatrang was already known to the Arabs it would have probably been mentioned explicitly in the Kur'an as in the case of maysir, the old Arabic social game in which the luck of drawing the right arrows was a deciding factor. Interesting to note that from the passage of the Kur'an all gambling, like maysir, is forbidden (haram) in Dar al-Islam. A second point about the above mentioned interpretation is that the term images (ansab) is nowadays translated as sacrificial stones or more simply idols.

We know that the worship of idols was for the pre-Islamic Arabs a long standing tradition. In the mosque of Mecca, where the Kaba is located, the old Arabs worshipped Allah, Hubal, Manat, al-Uzza and many other gods and goddess. All pre-Islamic idols, made in stone, were of human aspect and adorned with different coloured clothes and perfumed (9)

The passage in Surah 5 is a clear prohibition to Muslims for the adoration of any kind of religious idol. But the Kuranic condemnation is not indiscriminately directed at all statues and images, if these do not have any religious reference.

Certainly Moses was more explicit when he delivered to Israel people the famous Decalogue on Mount Sinai:

"Do not have any other idol beside Me (Yahwe). You will not make any idol or any image of anything which is high in the sky nor low on the ground nor in the water below the ground" (10)

Again the prohibition was intended for idols but Moses forbade literary any images and this fact had a negative influence on graven images in Jewish art forever.

In Surah 34, "Sheba", ayat 12-13 there is a passage in which the word statues is mentioned:

"To Solomon We (i.e. God) subdued the wind, travelling a month's journey morning and evening. We gave him a spring flowing with molten bras, and jinn who served him by the leave of his Lord. We shall chasten with the torment of the Fire. They made for him whatever he pleased: shrines and statues (timthal), basins as large as watering-troughs, and built-in cauldrons."

Now if King Solomon could have had statues and costly vessels, made by the servile jinn at his will, this implies that artistic statues were allowed by God for Salomon's own pleasure and grandeur.

A mention of the term sculpture is in Surah 3, 'The 'Imrams', ayah 47 where it is said:

"From clay I (Jesus Christ) will make for you the likeness (hi'ya) of a bird, I shall breath into it and, by God's leave, it shall become a living bird"

In this case the sculpture of a bird becomes a living being as a "sign" of the

Lord. But also from this ayah we cannot desume any Kuranic prohibition referred to all other mortal artists for representing birds or living creatures.

However in Dar al-Islam doctors of theology and knowledge (ulema) considered all painters, sculptors, carvers, book decorators, poor "imitators" of Allàh, because only God was the Creator, the Modeller, the Fashioner (Surah 59, ayah 24).

The Islamic idea of prohibition of any picture and image comes from some Muslim traditions (hadiths) such as:

"Whosoever makes an image, Allah will give him as punishment the task of blowing the breath of life into it, but he is not able to do this, "or " those who make these pictures will be punished on the day of Judgment by being told: Make alive what you have created" (11)

The shari'ah considered .therefore all images,' created by the hand of an artist, poor imitations when they were depicting any living creature having a soul (nafs) or a breath (ruh).

The artist, copying living models, could have been regarded as ***"guilty of trying to usurp the creative activity of God"*** (12)

Imitations of trees, flowers, leaves were however allowed by the ulema.

To a non Muslim like me, it is very difficult to imagine a more creative activity than these geometrical and floreal creations, arabesques and decorations in which human fantasy has no limit.

Muslims, from the beginning of their islam (submission to Allah), have shown a love for liberating themselves from classic forms of a world which they conquered and probably despised.

They re-employed forms already in use by inventing new geometrical compositions, figuring out proportional measurements in completely abstract forms and simplifying without ambiguity of meaning. They expressed perfectly this tendency in the astonishing care they took with their unique calligraphy.

Calligraphy for the Muslims was considered to be a gift of Allah as stated in the first. Surah revealed. by Archangel Gabriel to Muhammad, Surah 96, ."Clots of blood", ayah 2:

"Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, who by the pen taught man what he did not know".

The early coarse Arabic "Jazm" script, derived from Nabatean forms of letters, was gradually and elegantly transformed into geometrical graphic styles. The Kufic script emerged as the sole script for copying the Kur'an. Calligraphy in Islam became a science, an art which permeated the general taste of the artistic Islamic societies, leading to ideals of geometrical perfection and beauty.

"Arab calligraphy reflected their genius and attracted their best artistic talents "(13)

In my view the Islamic chessmen, made in elegant abstract forms, were an expression of such taste and style. They were made in "abstract" design and form because they were primarily responding to the geometrical taste of the Muslims and well responding to the expectations of an Ideal Beauty already expressed in their calligraphy.

Secondly this abstract design was adopted worldwide because the chessmen of the shape were easy to handle, well balanced for moving on the board, easy to store, convenient to carry even on a camel and resistant to bad handling. At last but not least they were easy to make and therefore reasonably priced.

Another reason for not accepting the conventional idea expressed by so many chess scholars about the genesis of abstract Islamic chessmen (i.e. evasion from a supposed prohibition of images) is that so far we have not found any realistic and pictorial Muslim chess set defying such supposed prohibition. Instead we have found many Islamic works of art, during the same centuries, defying that supposed prohibition. And so one may wonder why such defiance was never tried for chessmen.

The answer is that the Islamic design for chessmen was not dictated by religious restraints on images but by a deliberate choice of a popular propensity for simplification of shapes into abstract and geometrical forms already well reflected in their calligraphy.

The letter represented a figurative path to Ideal Beauty and to Allah. Muslim chess players considered their abstract chessmen beautiful in their simplified shapes and extremely functional to handle, with a low centre of gravity for maintaining equilibrium on the board, with a minimal differentiation of shapes thus enabling them to concentrate on the game without distractions of decorative and ornamental carvings. These deliberate and free modifications of shapes from pictorial pre-Islamic *chatrang-men* (Indian, Persian) into abstract-geometrical *shatranj-men* lasted for many centuries and not only in Dar al-Islam but even in Europe. And the game of chess progressed tremendously fast maybe due to these Islamic shapes.

Some examples of realistic images in Islamic artistic works

Human and animal images in Islamic art were not as rare as we will see. We must distinguish Islamic religious art, destined to Holy Mosques, Holy Books (Kur'an), Sacred Places, from secular art with objects ordered by the rich of the time for personal amusement, pleasure, display and grandeur.

Chessmen belonged from the very beginning to the category of goods and tools made for amusement and pleasure.

We have many examples of Islamic defiance of the prohibition of images in secular art. Among them, I cite the realistic figurations found in Qusayr Amrah (Red Castle), east of Amman.

This building was one of the famous desert palaces which were really "*retreats for and other princely pleasure.*" (14)

In this castle the interior is completely covered with wall paintings: on the west we see an image of a Caliph seated on a throne with two attendants at his side ,above is a herd of wild asses and below acrobats and a semi-nude girl emerging from a bathing pool.

On the south wall six figures identified as the Kings of the World including those of Byzantium, Persia, Abyssinia, Spain (the Visigoth ruler Roderic) are shown offering submittance to the Islamic lord, the Caliph. (15)

Another astonishing testimony is that of Khirbat al Mafjar at Jericho (Jordan), where stucco decorations with floral and geometrical motifs are developed together with figures of fantastic animals and even sculptures of six topless ladies. The entrance to the Palace was graced with stuccos of dancers (fig. 1) and "*animals, winged horses, dog-headed, senmurvs, and an armoured warrior*"(16)



From 8th century, we have an Iranian silver dish (fig. 2) with repoussé figures, to-day at the British Museum We see a prince taking his ease in the open air with a lady and his attendant.



From Al Andalus we have:
. ivory pixies (fig. 3/4/5) which was made around 968 in Cordoba for al-Mughira ,brother of the Caliph al Hakam. The pixies are today at the Louvre.



- The Cordoba stage dated 2nd half of the 10th century, to-day at the Cordoba Museum, (fig.6)



-The Pamplona casket, ivory, dated 1004/5, today at the Museum of Navarra, Pamplona. (fig. 7\8\9\)



-The Griffin, Taifa period (11th century) to-day at the Museo dell' Opera del Duomo of Pisa (fig. 10)



-The Monzon lion, a bronze of the Almohad period (12\13th century), today at the Louvre. (fig.11)



Examples of realistic Islamic cast bronzes were frequently found in Khurasan.

These include a bird (fig.12) and an elephant (fig. 13).



The first is dated 10/11th century, the second 11/12th century.

A large number of animals on birds in the round were made in the eastern Iran during 10/11th century. They were designed to function as vessels in their own right (e.g. incense burners) or as a decorative element on larger objects.

Another cast bronze with realistic figures is a jug from Jazira (Syria) dated 13th century (fig. 14)



From Egypt, we have two examples in wood. Both works are dated 11th century. The first at the Museo Nazionale in Florence (fig. 15) and the second at the Islamic Museum in Cairo (fig.16)



NOTES

1) Here in chronological order, few statements on Islamic chessmen by some chess scholars

H. J. Murray

"The Sunnite Muslim sees a prohibition of carved chess-pieces which actually reproduce the King elephants, horses etc., in the prohibition of images.

Persian commentators, however have explained the term as referring to idols, and the Shi'te and Moghul chess-players have no objection to using real carved chessmen. ~The Sunnite player on the contrary will only use pieces of conventional type in which it is impossible to see any resemblance to any living creature"

(A History of Chess, Oxford 1913 p. 188)

M. D. Liddell

"From the ancient pieces that have come down to us, there is no doubt that the earliest men represented living forms and that the conventionalisation came from motives of economy, from the desire for portability (too elaborated men cannot be carried in a bag on a camel) from religious scruples".

(Chessmen, Usa, 1937, p. 11)

H. &S. Wichmann

"The motives leading to the creations of these novel, abstract chess pieces were religious. Since the Koran prohibits any kind of imagery, the Mohammedans had to create new forms, which had to reinterpret in abbreviated form the realistic-naturalistic models. This metamorphosis caused the sectional structure of Indian sculpture to be condensed and the intricate and visually striking outer surface to be reduced to elementary curves. The molded mass became rounded under the influence of the basic forms of the sphere and the cylinder"

(Chess, Munich 1964, p.16)

A. E. J. Mackett-Beeson

"Chess did not become known to the Arabs until their conquest of Persia in the seventh century, and therefore any reference to the game in their Sacred Book is impossible. Since the Koran strictly forbade all the believers to handle figures in any shape or form, it is not surprising that when chess did become known, the legitimacy of the game among the Arabs was suspect because of its image association, and it was only after many years of debate that judicial decision was reached. It was finally decreed that the game of chess was perfectly legitimate provided that chess pieces used were of simple geometric shapes, and that the game was not played for the purpose of gambling.(Islamic) chess pieces can be of simple form and yet pleasing to the eye; they have a delightful symmetry, they are well balanced"

(Chessmen, London 1968, p.71)

F. Lanier Graham

"While the Arabs were developing the literature of the game, they also were developing the design of chess sets. The designs they inherited from Persia and India in the seventh century were naturalistic images. The Muhammadans, being extremely fond of the game, developed an alternative. They designed their chess pieces abstractly"

(Chess sets, New York, 1968, p.14)

C. K. Wilkinson and J. Mac Nab Dennis

"The pieces may well have been made in a not entirely realistic manner so that they would be easy to handle in playing. Incidentally, it is wise not to put too much stress on the non representational character of Muslim pieces ,for the taboo on representation in things that were not strictly of religious nature was not particularly strong, especially in Persia with its never dying pictorial tradition"

(Chess, East and West, Past and Present, XXVIII, 1968)

Dr. I. Linder

"Under the influence of prohibitions, chess un the east was basically devoid of images, and instead of battle elephants and horsemen , shahs and foot soldiers ,there were symbolic and abstract pieces"

(Chess in Old Russia, Moscow 1975, p.28)

F. Greygoose

"The Koran forbids any form of imagery and therefore Mohammadans were forced by their faith to turn the Persian like figures into abstract forms"

(Chessmen, London 1979, p. 18)

V. Keats

"The whole of Muslim art, including the shapes of chess pieces, has been guided by the Koranic law, which in turn derives from pre-Islamic civilization, stating that no likeness of man may be created. Consequently, chess pieces throughout the Muslim world have remained strikingly similar in shape, from the advent of Islam right up to the present day"

(Chessmen for collectors, London 1985, p. 43)

C. Schafroth

"The abstraction of naturalistic chessmen by Arabian artists was largely due to the beliefs and tenets of Islam. The use of images was considered sacrilegious and believers were forbidden to handle graven images .This posed a serious problem for the Muslim chess player. The solution was to significantly abstract the forms of the pieces. The resulting chessmen were somewhat blocky, with knobby projections and smoothly modeled surfaces""

(Sculptures in miniature, Chess sets from the Maryhill Museum of Art, Goldendale 1990, p.17)

A. Chicco

"On the other hand, it is neither exact (to say) that the typical stylized form taken by the Arabic chess pieces must be necessarily associated with the prohibition of the Kur'an, which, as it is well known, forbade the images of living being. A great deal before the Hegira (622AD) the Arabs had the opportunity to know religions which were forbidding statues and simulacrum... There are no prejudicial reasons which exclude a priori the existence of "stylized" chessmen even before the Hegira or even their presence in a tomb of Roman age"
(Storia degli scacchi in Italia, Milan 1990, p.7)

M. Pastoureau

"L'Islam en effet utilisait des pièces stylisées, non des figures, suivant en cela les principes (non coraniques) qui interdisent aux Musulmans de représenter la figure humaine ou animale. Les Occidentaux ont d'abord utilisé ces pièces musulmanes non figurées, puis ils les ont imitées."
(Pièces d'échecs, Paris 1900, p. 13)

A. Sanvito

"Who ever suggested the idea of Islamic design to the carver, surely was concerned with the aspect of practicality and simplicity, but probably tried to convey, even in the abstract and stylised form, the original realistic figures. The fact that before the birth of the chess game, thought to be around the 6th-7th century several tabula games were in existence, some of which requiring pieces whose forms may well have influenced the chessmen models which followed. ... Those stylisations made in the East for practical reasons or, maybe and more than anything else, for religious reasons...."
(Figure di scacchi, Milan 1992, p.16 and 24)

K. Whyld

"It is often said that the shape of chessmen became simple because of Muslim religious objection to the making of images of living creatures, but, with the exception of the relatively recent horse's head for the knight, this has always been the case with playing sets. The main criteria have been simplicity of the design and ease of production"
(The Oxford Companion to chess, London 1992, p.76)

(2) " La letteratura Persiana "Pagliaro/Bausani, Milan 1968, p.126

(3) "Chess sets" Graham, New York 1968, p.13

(4) "Pièces d'échecs" Pastoureau, Paris 1900, p.11

- (5) "Chess in old Russia", Dr.I. Linder, Zurich .1975, p.24/28 (6) idem, p.24
 (7) "The creation of Islamic art " O. G. Grabar, Rev. ed.1987, p.72
 (8) "The history of chess" D. Forbes, London 1865, p.166
 (9) "Vita di Maometto" Tabari, Milano 1985, p.85
 (10) Deuteronomio, V,7-8 (11) "Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam", H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers, 2nd ed.1974
 (12) "Islamic art" B. Vrend 1991 p. 26
 (13) "Islamic calligraphy" Y. H. Safadi, p. 7
 (14) "Islamic art', B.Brend, p.26 (15) idem,p.28
 (16) idem, p. 29

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