

THE END OF COLONIALISM IN CHESS

Britain really did rule the waves for many years after defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588. The positive and negative consequences of this global supremacy can still be felt today. One thing for which we should be grateful for is today's communication in English throughout the world, with only a few exceptions. The exchange of information in the fields of trade, science and culture profits from this global language.

However, we should not neglect certain disadvantages of the old English global supremacy. For example, this has given us a legend in the world of chess, a legend which began in 1694 and is apparently ineradicable. This legend has it that chess originated in India and weighs on the work of chess historians trying to throw some light on the beginnings of this wonderful game like a hereditary stigma. In the course of research carried out after 1694, other possible homes of chess have been considered, all of which agree on one point: they took part in the cultural exchange along the almost 4,000 year old Silk Road which stretched from Arabia to China. This is why it would appear sensible to suggest that chess developed along the Silk Road through the mutual interaction between various cultural groups, which in turn led to various forms of the original game. How, then, did the British-Indian legend come about?

A brief review of British colonialism in India is helpful here. The East India Company, founded in 1600, established offices in Surat in 1612, Madras in 1639, Bombay in 1661 and Calcutta in 1690. The Company gradually became master of Bengal and following numerous wars, the majority of India fell under the control of the Company in the 19th century. The Company was dissolved as a result of the revolts in 1857/58 and was placed under the direct control of the British Crown. It was not until 1909 that the British granted India concessionary powers for self government, which finally ended in 1947 with India's independence.

Against this historical background, the growth of the British-Indian legend at least appears plausible. In 1694 Thomas Hyde published his book "*Mandragorias, seu Historia Sahiludii*" in Latin, English and Hebrew, the first serious work on the history of chess ever. There had been a number of legendary speculations in the Middle Ages on the origins of chess. Obviously favoured by British colonial politics and part of the British hegemony, Hyde provided a farsighted and coherent overview of the history of chess. The East India Company was less than 100 years old, but could already present significant successes in the colonisation of India. The atmosphere was one of a gold-rush, and large parts of India literally belonged to the British. And anything that was Indian, was at the same time British. Which true blue Brit would ever have dared to consider the possibility that India may one day gain independence and leave the Empire?

Hyde dedicated his book to the "Chief Secretary to the Treasury of his Royal Majesty". This treasury most certainly contained numerous Indian treasures too which had been collected over the past 94 years. It was thus natural to add another treasure which in all probability was not an Indian treasure at all. This pseudo-treasure did not attract attention amongst the huge number of other treasures. In the preface to his book Hyde explains that chess originated in East India. According to Hyde, chess appeared around 1,000 years ago and was widespread in Justinian's age. It was widely accepted by leading intellectuals of the day. At no point in his investigation does he explain why East India, and not simply India. The historical relations and the dedication may help explain this deficit. It would appear that Hyde, who based his presumptions mainly on etymology despite his scientific approach, had also fallen foul of the colonial way of thinking and acting. It can only have been the existence and influence of the East India Company which led Hyde to his by all means "modern" conclusions. The consequences of this historically false assessment can be felt to this day, though the critical voices are becoming louder.

Even his excellent language skills did not prevent Hyde from making a serious etymological mistake. He states that the Persians learnt the game from the Indians and due to the similarity of its figures to the mandrake plant called these by the purely Persian name "Satrangh" or "Satreng", which is the Persian name for this plant, or "Mandragoria" in Latin. Hyde thus also erred in the title of his book "*Mandragorias....*", and thus in a field in which he was an expert.

The admirer and connoisseur of Oriental poetry William Jones came to Calcutta in 1783 where he founded the Asian Society. He laid the foundation for the British-Indian legend in his "Asiatic Researches" from 1790, where he wrote:

"The beautiful simplicity and extreme perfection of the game, as it is commonly played in Europe and Asia, convince me that it was invented by one effort of some great genius; not completed by gradual improvements, but formed, to use the phrase of Italian critics, by the first intention". And that was that. A legend was born. It still has numerous disciples and can be found in every textbook.

I should now like to speak a word of reason to preclude any potential reproach. When I speak here of the consequences of British colonialism, this in no way implies any kind of indictment or judgement of any one person or nation. The clarification of historical relationships serves only for a better understanding of how the results of research came about because science too is by no means free from the restraints of its day and age. Such restraints are facts which cannot be denied and facts must be given their due attention.

Thus, the British not only annexed the material treasures of the Indian sub-continent but, according to the conclusions drawn by Thomas Hyde and William Jones, the invention of the game of chess too. The British slowly lost this dubious claim with the increasing independence of India. However, the Indians inherited this British sin at the end of the colonial period. It was an undeserved inheritance since India had never asserted such a claim, and such claims were rarely asserted in the subsequent period.

The end of the colonial period in India was in the offing in 1909. Nor did this event remain without consequence for research into the history of chess. 1913 saw the last great British attempt at claiming an Indian origin for chess. H.J.R. Murray published his mammoth work "*A History of Chess*", which still claims that India is the true home of the game according to the motto "Right or wrong, always my country". In terms of chess history, Hyde thus embodies the beginning, Jones the climax and Murray the end of British colonialism. This state of affairs can be formulated even more drastically. If the British had colonised China and not India, China and not India would have almost certainly been hailed as the home of chess for the past 300 years.

The colonial period of research into the history of chess only followed the historical development with a considerable delay. Thus, it will still be some time before this period comes to an end. There are now some moderate voices who only concede the Indians a limited share in the development of the game. However, others are more vociferous and claim that chess did not originate in India, but rather in China or Persia, for example.

In this connection, only regions along the Silk Road, the trade route for goods and ideas linking China with the Mediterranean world, are named as possible countries of origin. We have a lot to thank the Silk Road for. For example, Indian Buddhism found its way into China. Chinese silk was brought to Rome, where Cicero demanded, "*rerum cognoscere causas*". However, the Romans did not know that the silk came from China since it had already passed through innumerable stations on its journey. For the same reason, i.e. gradual misinformation, the Chinese were unaware of the fact that the Romans dressed in their silks. This was due to the huge dimensions of this trade route, which although it was used to transport goods, faded or even eradicated their inherent ideas, the manufacturing practices and the precise origins the further these goods moved away from their place of departure.

Wherever religions used the Silk Road to spread, they largely survived external influences since they had their own distinct hierarchy and structure. Simple and non-hierarchical cultural assets such as games did not fare as well. For example, at that time there was no organisation to monitor the rules of a game so that modifications did not constitute a breach of the rules and were most certainly a matter of course. Even if there is a partial justification for assuming that chess arose here or there along the Silk Road, I believe that future research should not concentrate on trying to discover whether it sprang from this place or the next. I doubt whether we will get any closer to the beginnings of chess by claiming "sole ownership", such as was the case for India over the past centuries. The search for the process by which the game developed with the participation of numerous cultural groups along the Silk Road is more promising. And no serious researcher still believes in Hyde's, Jones's and Murray's suggestion that chess was invented by a wise old man in one day of creation. Hyde, Jones and Murray were prisoners of their age. Incidentally, we suffer the same fate. The time has come to break open the British-Indian chess prisons of the colonial period. This by no means implicitly excludes the possibility that India did in fact make an important contribution to the birth of chess.