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A NOTE ON CHESS IN 19TH CENTURY TURKESTAN

Georgi Markov

National Museum of Natural History
BAS, Sofia

Abstract

A note by A. Chernevski in the 1877 *Shakhmatny Listok* described two chess variants played in Samarkand, present-day Uzbekistan. One, the “Bukharan game”, is a slightly modified version of shatranj, similar to Rumi chess as described in Murray’s *History of Chess*. The other, the “Persian game with a queen” resembles to some extent the Persian chess described in 1846 in the *Chess Player’s Chronicle* but differs from it in several important aspects. Chernevski’s information, which includes recorded games by native players, is absent from later sources on chess history. A summary of Chernevski’s report is provided, with a discussion of several other historical chess variants, and various errors that have crept into their description in the literature.

Keywords: Chess history; chess variants; Asia.

Introduction

In 1877, *Shakhmatny Listok* published a short note by A. Chernevski on two variants of chess played in Samarkand (present-day Uzbekistan but then Russian Turkestan)—the “Bukharan game” and the “Persian game with a queen”. For the latter, Chernevski (1877) provided two recorded games by native players. Regrettably, Chernevski’s valuable information is missing from later essential sources such as e.g. Murray’s *History of Chess* (Murray 1913). It is summarized below, with a comparison to a few other chess variants and an attempt to trace and rectify the errors in the descriptions of several historical chess games by different authors.

The Bukharan game

Chernevski (1877) has little to say about this one, and provides no recorded game—a fact lamented by Savenkov (1905). He mentions that after its first obligatory move to d3, the queen is reduced to a very weak piece, that there is no castling, and that the bishops move two squares diagonally, leaping over the intervening square even if it is occupied by a piece. This brief summary nevertheless indicates a slightly modified shatranj version, similar to the “Persian game” described by Cox (1801) and Rumi chess (Murray 1913), especially the latter. These are not identical: Rumi chess, according to Murray, differs from traditional shatranj in that “[t]he Queen for its first move can be placed on its third square (Qd3 or Qd6), passing if necessary over the unmoved Pawn on its second square. The Queen’s Pawn for its first move can be placed on the Queen’s fourth square (Pd4 or Pd5), passing, if necessary, over the Queen on her third square. These two moves must be played as the first and second moves of the game.” It is not entirely clear if this means that the first two moves are obligatory, d4 and Qd3; d5 and Qd6 (Mongolian chess, Ströbeck rules and the Courier game come to mind) or—taking Murray’s wording literally—that if a player wanted to use one or both of these privileged moves he should do so at the very beginning of the game. Murray does not mention the rules regarding stalemate and bare king (both wins in “traditional” shatranj). As in shatranj, pawns promote (to Q only) regardless of the number of queens already available.

The “Persian game” described by Cox, on the other hand, has the following peculiarities: the game is opened by a simultaneous move of the queen, or ferz (“vizier”) and its pawn one square forwards (i.e. d3, Qd2; d6, Qd7), elephants cannot leap over a square occupied by a king, and a pawn is promoted (to vizier only, as in traditional shatranj) only if the original vizier has been captured (i.e. no plurality of “queens”). Stalemate is forbidden, but win by bare king is apparently possible (Cox 1801, p. 501). Oddly, while quoting Cox on Burmese chess (and the Cox-Forbes theory), Murray does not mention his description of the “Persian game”. Other sources do, but not without omissions and errors: German 1819 *Archiv der Spiele* (Anonymous 1819) cites Cox correctly, only omitting the information on bare king win, and calling the game “the Persian game of chess as currently played in India”. Tressau (1840), quoting the *Archiv der Spiele*, nevertheless mistakenly makes the first moves e3 and Qe2 (“60 to 53”: very probably a technical mistake, since he describes the move as “lothrecht”, i.e. vertical; note that on the previous page, in the description of the “kleine oder alte Schachspiel”, while putting the Queen on “60”, i.e. d1, Tressau nevertheless first provides

an example of its Freudensprung as “two vertical steps from 61 to 45”, or e1-e3, and then says in the next sentence that it cannot change the colour of “square 44, in this case white”, or d3, afterwards). Verney (1885) quotes Tressau: “On the left of the King is a Piece called Vizier; he is obliged to open the game, and for this purpose moves to the square occupied by the King’s Pawn. To enable him to do this, the King’s Pawn is moved at the same time to the King’s third square”. Pritchard’s entry on “Persian chess [Vizier]” is based on Verney, but inexplicably adds another error, “The game must be opened by e3 with the V[izier] moving to the same square (i.e., a knight’s move)” (Pritchard 2007, p. 244).

The queen’s obligatory first move to d3 in the Bukharan game is more similar to Murray’s Rumi chess (and Chernevski says that, according to the local players, the Bukharan game stems from India) but there is no mentioning of an accompanying double move of the queen’s pawn. It is not impossible, though, that Chernevski—who was clearly more interested in the other variant played in Samarkand, the “Persian game with a queen”—simply did not bother to mention the rule if it existed. Rules regarding promotion, stalemate and bare king are not reported.

The Persian game with a Queen

Chernevski’s information can be summarized thus: game opened by obligatory double move of the Q pawns (1. d4 d5) with all pawns having only a single move afterwards, Q moving as in the European game, castling “present, although differing from the European one”. In fact, as can be seen from the recorded games (see Appendix), this is an operation taking three moves, including a king’s leap as a knight, rather than what would be understood as castling by a modern reader, i.e. moving K and R simultaneously. This recalls V. Grimm’s report on chess at Aleppo (Grimm 1851, p. 185) describing exactly the same procedure as “[i]n Castling, three moves are required”, and van der Linde’s comment, “i.e., there is no castling yet” (Van der Linde 1874, p. 122). “The rest of the rules”, Chernevski concludes, “are the same as in Europe”. This should probably be taken with some caution.

Since, according to Chernevski (1877), the game was of Persian origin, it is worth comparing it to the information on 19th century Persian chess in the sixth volume of the *Chess Player’s Chronicle* (Anonymous 1846, Murray 1913, p. 358). In this game, Ks are on the left of Qs (d1, e8), pawns move one square only, “a plurality of queens is not admitted”, bare king is a loss. Castling is permitted on the king’s side if the king has not been

checked, with the king moving to the knight's square and the rook to the king's square, d1 or e8 (d1/d8 in Pritchard 2007, p. 245 is a technical mistake: Ks are not opposite). The king, again if it hasn't been checked, can move as a knight once; this privilege is used when, or rather instead of, castling on the queen's side. The anonymous correspondent of the *CPC* commented that "I fancy the castling must be an innovation, which indeed is hardly necessary, allowing the King the Knight's move". Chernevski's description of the "Persian game with a queen" above seems to support this observation, even though the two games are by no means identical (see Table 1). The most important differences are the initial setup (Ks opposite, on e1/e8 in Chernevski's game, crosswise, d1/e8 in *CPC*) and the obligatory first double moves of the Q pawns (1. d4 d5) in the former, a feature also known from Mongolian chess but not the game described in the *CPC* (which makes sense, considering the crosswise arrangement of the Ks). Chernevski provides no information on the rules regulating the K's leap (privilege lost or not when checked), pawn promotion (*CPC*: "a plurality of queens is not admitted", which might mean that a pawn was promoted to any captured piece: cf. Grimm 1851), or if bare king was a loss as in the *CPC* game; those rules cannot be inferred from the recorded games either. Although brief, Chernevski's report on a regional historical chess variant not attested elsewhere¹ is valuable but largely unknown today.

In his study on the evolution of chess, I. Savenkov provided a reference to Chernevski's note but—understandably, considering the scope and subject of Savenkov's work—did not reproduce the information in full, mentioning (Savenkov 1905, p. 33) that a Bukharan and a Persian game were played in Tashkent [sic], and adding (p. 42) that the "Bukharan game" must be older than the "Persian game with a Queen" (fully understanding that the latter was a regional variant differing from orthochess).

¹The entry on chess in the Uzbek SSR in Geiler's *Chess Dictionary* (Khodzhaev 1964, p. 92) mentions that a chess game with long-range Q and B only appeared in Uzbekistan in the 19th century, with the following local rules: no castling but K could leap as N once, pawns promoted to a captured piece only, player reaching the eighth rank with his king could enter a pawn on the board. The first two rules seem to complement Chernevski's description (if based on an independent source) but the last might not represent a genuine tradition. Reported for Tuvan chess by Karalkin (1971)—the only source to do so—in both cases this might be an influence from Russian unofficial, or "backyard" rules, on which see e.g. Karakhan (1982). The late 19th–early 20th chess of Turkmenistan (not part of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship in 1877) described in Geiler's *Dictionary* (Aslanov 1964, pp. 89–90) is a different game.

	“Persian game with a Queen”	19th century Persian chess
Setup	Ks opposite (e1, e8)	Ks crosswise, on Q’s left (d1, e8)
	Obligatory Q pawns first move, d4 d5	No obligatory first move
Castling	No castling, K leap (as N)	Short only, with R to K’s square (d1/e8); K leap (as N), used instead of long castling. Both only possible until K checked
Pawns	One square only except on obligatory opening move	One square only
Promotion	No data	To captured piece only [?]: “no plurality of Qs”
Bare king	No data	Loss
Stalemate	No data	No data

Table 1: Comparison between two 19th century regional chess variants, the “Persian game with a queen” described in *Shakhmatny Listok* (Chernevski 1877), and Persian chess, described in the *Chess Player’s Chronicle* (Anonymous 1846).

Murray, while citing Savenkov profusely, nevertheless misunderstood the text on several occasions, one of them directly related to Chernevski’s report. Thus, Savenkov’s brief summary became in Murray’s interpretation (Murray 1913, p. 378): “M. Savenkof quotes M. Chernevski [...] as saying that two varieties of chess are now played in Bukhārā [sic], viz. the European and Persian games”, and from the context it seems that Murray understood the Persian game to mean shatranj. Savenkov did in fact mention European chess being played in Bukhara, adding (Savenkov 1905, p. 39), “compare to Chernevski’s report”, which might explain Murray’s error. In any case, Chernevski’s unique evidence of a local modified version of shatranj and a regional variant with long-range Q and B was misinterpreted to relate to two well-known games, orthochess and shatranj. Thus, it is hardly surprising that later sources ultimately relying on Murray do not mention Chernevski’s information.

Savenkov’s text was misunderstood by Murray on at least two more occasions, both relating to Soyot (i.e. Tuvan) chess. Murray’s “[a]t the end of the game there must be no P left, otherwise it is [...] a drawn game” (Murray, 1913, p. 372) is a mistranslation of Savenkov’s “at the end of the game a pawn must not be taken, etc.” This most probably meant that bare king

was a draw, and Murray’s guess on the subject (Murray 1913, p. 376) seems to compensate for the incorrect translation. There is, however, a more serious error in the description of the queen’s move, “Q moves in a diagonal direction only to the next square” (ibid., p. 372), understood (p. 375) as “the Queen confined to a diagonal move to an adjacent square”. The original text, however (Savenkov 1905, p. 13), says “Ферзь по диагонали ходит только на соседнее поле.” Apparently written with the European moves in mind (by Savenkov’s informant, E. K. Yakovlev) this would be more correctly translated as “diagonally, the queen moves only to the next square”, implying that it moved freely orthogonally as well, and this is exactly how Savenkov understands it: “a queen that already has the moves of a modern rook [...] but diagonally moving only to the next square” (ibid., p. 32). This move (R+K, or as Shogi Dragon King), is known from Mongolian chess (e.g. Pritchard 2007, p. 271) and has been attested for the Tuvan game by F. Kon (Kon 1904, p. 48): “The queen has only the moves of a rook, and in its bishop’s moves is confined to the next squares only”. [In a later edition of Kon’s works, this rather clear statement became the potentially confusing “the queen has only the moves of a rook, and the bishop’s moves are confined to the next squares only” (Kon 1936, p. 75)—possibly a not too competent editor’s input. Kon (1936) is nevertheless a valuable source, containing a recorded game by two native players.] Thus, there is no apparent discrepancy between the rules described by Savenkov’s informant and the recorded game quoted by Savenkov and Murray, contrary to the latter’s conclusion (Murray 1913, p. 372). As for the “third set of moves” (ibid., p. 373) with Q moving as in orthochess, while local rules could have varied (and in fact it would be surprising if they didn’t), one might recall that, according to Rinčen (1955), the Q move in Mongolian chess could be subject to negotiation, with a queen either “long” and moving as in orthochess, or “short”, with the R+K move discussed above.² The information on optional “long” or “short” Q move in Mongolian chess was kindly confirmed by Dr. G. Altan-Och (pers. comm., 2012).

²In a way, this is reminiscent of the negotiable Q move in earlier Russian chess—as orthochess Q or as Q+N, “ферзь всяческая” (Dahl, 1866); the latter meaning not “all kind of Ferzes” (Murray 1913, p. 385) but rather a “universal” queen, or one moving in all possible ways, including as a knight.

Summary and conclusions

In a short note, Chernevski (1877) reported two chess variants played in Samarkand, present-day Uzbekistan. One, the “Bukharan game”, was a slightly modified shatranj version, similar to Rumi chess described by Murray (1913) and the “Persian game” described by Cox (1801); Cox’s information has been reproduced by later sources with omissions and errors. The second variant, the “Persian game with a queen”, for which Chernevski provided two recorded games by native players, resembles 19th century Persian chess as reported by an anonymous correspondent to the *Chess Player’s Chronicle* in 1846, differing from it in several important aspects.

Chernevski’s report was cited by Savenkov (1905). Murray (1913) quoted Savenkov’s text profusely but misunderstood it on several occasions. First, Chernevski’s valuable information on two otherwise unattested variants was mistakenly interpreted as relating to orthochess and shatranj, and thus effectively lost to posterity. Further, Murray misinterpreted the description of the queen’s move in Soyot (i.e. Tuvan) chess, baselessly suggesting a discrepancy between the rules and the recorded game in Savenkov’s text.

Appendix

Chernevski (1877) illustrates the “Persian game with a queen” with the following two games, played in Samarkand on 29.12.1876 (O.S., Julian calendar being used in Russia until 1918) and given here in figurine algebraic notation:

I. White: Abderrakhmanov Black: Najmeddinov

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. d4 d5 | 9. e4 de4 | 17. ♖f1 ♜e8 | 25. ♜f1 ♘f4 |
| 2. e3 e6 | 10. ♘e4 h6 | 18. ♙e3 ♙d7 | 26. ♖c2 ♜e2 |
| 3. ♙d3 ♙d6 | 11. ♘d6 ♖d6 | 19. ♙d4 ♖g5 | 27. ♜f2 ♜e1 |
| 4. ♘f3 ♘f6 | 12. c3 e5 | 20. ♖d3 ♙c6 | 28. ♜f1 ♘h3 |
| 5. ♗e2 ³ ♗e7 | 13. de5 ♘e5 | 21. f3 g6 | 0-1. |
| 6. ♜e1 ♜e8 | 14. ♘e5 ♜e5 | 22. ♙b3 a6 | |
| 7. ♗g1 ♗g8 | 15. ♜e5 ♖e5 | 23. ♖c4 ♜e7 | |
| 8. ♘c3 ♘c6 | 16. ♙c2 ♙g4 | 24. ♖d3 ♘h5 | |

³A footnote by Chernevski here says that “the 5th, 6th and 7th moves constitute the castling, which can also be done by the following moves: if f1 and g1 are free, one can move the pawn from g2-g3, then the King e1-g2, and then the Rook h1-e1. Castling to the Queen’s side is made in a similar way.”

II. White: Najmeddinov Black: Abderrakhmanov

- | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1. d4 d5 | 22. c3 a6 | 43. ♖c7 hg5 | 64. ♖e3 ♖h1 |
| 2. e3 e6 | 23. ♖ae1 a5 | 44. ♕g5 ♖dc8 | 65. ♖d3 ♖h3 |
| 3. ♕d3 ♕d6 | 24. a3 ♕d5 | 45. ♖d7 ♖f8 | 66. ♖d2 ♖h1 |
| 4. ♖f3 ♖f6 | 25. ♖d2 b5 | 46. h4 ♕e4 | 67. ♖e3 ♕b3 |
| 5. ♖e2 ♖e7 | 26. g4 ♕c6 | 47. g4 ♖ab8 | 68. ♖a3 ♕c4 |
| 6. ♖e1 ♖e8 | 27. c4 bc4 | 48. h5 ♖b5 | 69. ♖d4 ♕d5 |
| 7. ♖g1 ♖g8 | 28. ♖c4 a4 | 49. h6 gh6 | 70. ♖e3 ♖b1 |
| 8. ♖c3 ♖c6 | 29. b4 ♖d5 | 50. ♕h6 ♖e5 | 71. ♖a7 ♖d1 |
| 9. e4 de4 | 30. ♖e5 ♖f4 | 51. de5 ♖f3 | 72. ♖e2 ♖b1 |
| 10. ♖e4 h6 | 31. ♖f1 ♖d3 | 52. g5 ♖a3 | 73. ♖d2 ♖e4 |
| 11. ♖d6 ♖d6 | 32. ♕c3 ♖e5 | 53. ♖f2 ♖h3 | 74. ♖a3 ♖h1 |
| 12. h3 b6 | 33. ♖e5 ♕d5 | 54. ♖d1 a3 | 75. ♖c2 ♖h2 |
| 13. b3 ♕b7 | 34. ♖f7 c6 | 55. ♖d8 ♖h7 | 76. ♖c1 ♖g2 |
| 14. ♕b2 ♖d5 | 35. ♖a7 ♖a8 | 56. ♕f8 a2 | 77. ♖d1 ♕c4 |
| 15. ♕c4 ♖d6 | 36. ♖c7 ♖ec8 | 57. ♖a8 ♕d5 | 78. ♖c1 ♕d3 |
| 16. ♖e5 ♖ad8 | 37. ♖d7 ♖f8 | 58. ♕c5 ♖h1 | 79. ♖d1 ♖e3 |
| 17. ♖f3 ♖a5 | 38. ♕d2 ♖f6 | 59. ♕d4 ♖g6 | 80. ♕e1 ♖b2 |
| 18. ♖g3 ♖c4 | 39. g3 ♖ff8 | 60. ♖e3 ♖e1 | 81. ♕f2 ♖f2 |
| 19. ♖c4 ♖g3 | 40. g5 ♖fd8 | 61. ♖d2 ♖b1 | 82. ♖c1 ♖b1 |
| 20. fg3 ♖h5 | 41. ♖c7 ♖ac8 | 62. ♖a4 ♖g5 | 83. ♖d2 ♕c4 |
| 21. ♖e3 ♖f6 | 42. ♖a7 ♖a8 | 63. ♕c3 ♖f5 | 0-1. |

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Dr. Georgi N. Markov
National Museum of Natural History—BAS
1 Tzar Osvoboditel Blvd., 1000 Sofia
Bulgaria
markov@nmnhs.com