

Culture and Community on the Silk Road -- The Origin of Chess Revisited

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Historical riddles are quite dangerous things. The thought of solving Linear A or the Phaistos Disk is a drug that can turn sane men into cranks. So it is with the origin of chess. The game itself is a fiendish puzzle of course, but for nearly as long as chess has been played a second enigma has accompanied it: “Who *did* this?” A thousand years ago, an extended cast of oriental wise men, generals and kings were blamed in turn. Modern scientific and historical research is on a surer footing. But not by much – the topic will reliably derail any scholarly games conference and turn it into a bickering zoo if the origin of chess people are let in.

Some twenty years ago I ventured into the field with an article entitled “Pawns and Pieces,” thinking I had approached a solution.¹ But as in the game itself, a first answer often becomes less of an answer than another problem upon further analysis, and the same has happened to the ideas I proposed there. Although far from settling anything, they have nonetheless generated some interest, which is perhaps not such a bad outcome. New and potentially fruitful lines of thought can be decidedly appealing when the alternative is to go around in the same old circles.

I want to share some of these paths that have opened up in my thinking on the origin of chess question since “Pawns and Pieces.” While I still consider its basic argument – that chess was a fusion of Greek war game and Indian race game – to be correct, some aspects of that schema require revision. Furthermore, I think there may be a more expansive explanatory theory available, once the initial schema undergoes the needed repairs. Lastly, the spirit in which these thoughts are offered is one that has mellowed with age, replacing youthful hubris with something far less presumptuous in the face of an eternal mystery. At the same time, years of reflection on that mystery have brought about a certain ease with it, and a measure of comfort with where these thoughts have arrived – a place perhaps approaching some sort of wisdom.

The cultural transmission of chess from India to Persia to the Arab Caliphates and from there to Europe and beyond is an established and vital part of chess history. Notions of cultural transfer played an important part in the argument of “Pawns and Pieces” as well – in that case the transmission of Greek parent games of chess into Central Asia. But there is another avenue of cultural transfer as important or more than these: the Silk Road routes between China and regions to the west. Chess surely travelled these same routes. Either China or India had to transmit chess to the other along them, as the first written evidence of it turns up in India and China at roughly the same time. Which direction it went, though, is one of the perennial debates in origin of chess literature.

¹M. Samsin, “Pawns and Pieces: Towards the Prehistory of Chess,” in J-L. Cazaux, G. Josten and M. Samsin (eds.), *The Anatomy of Chess*, Pfullingen: Promos, 2003, pp. 69-78

The question was addressed by H.J.R. Murray in 1913 in his comment,

“The Indian ancestry of the Chinese game is supported partly by internal evidence based on the identity of certain essential features in the two games, and partly upon what is known of the indebtedness of China to India in religion, culture, and above all, in games.”²

Murray immediately expanded on this, adding that “games” here refers to backgammon, adopted by the Chinese as *shuanguai lu* or “double sixes,” and “religion” can only mean Buddhism. Regrettably, he stopped there without elaborating the argument any further. Its power would have been more evident, had he explored the remarkable depth and breadth of cultural transfer in the direction of China from India in the first half-millennium AD. Moreover, he would have clarified some important aspects of that transfer. Buddhism’s passage to China was by far the largest and most influential cultural migration along the Silk Road, and a grasp of it is crucial for understanding who was ferrying so many other cultural goods to China just then – and there were many, likely including chess.³

Chinese history in the first few centuries AD has an uncanny resemblance to that of Rome. Both had to deal with similar barbarian invasions by Central Asian nomads beginning in the early fourth century. While the Huns plagued Rome, the Xiongnu were doing the same to China. The resemblance of these names suggests that the very same people may have been responsible (as they would be a thousand years later, when the Golden Horde under Genghis Khan conquered all in its path both east and west). China and Rome each also encountered a new, abstract religion at about the same time, a religion that arrived from elsewhere in a trickle at first, then grew in stature until being adopted by respective emperors as the state faith. In the case of Rome this was Christianity of course, but Buddhism was China’s Christianity.

Like Roman Christianity, Chinese Buddhism was a missionary religion. Though we have no Buddhist St. Paul, apostle to the Chinese, we do know a fair amount about many prominent missionaries through the biographies that were recorded and preserved in China. The largest repositories of these are the *Gaoseng Zhuan* (“Lives of Eminent Monks”) and *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan* (“Further Lives of Eminent Monks”), which, along with other minor collections supply the biographies of some eighty missionaries known to be active from the first to the sixth centuries AD. These, of course, are only the ones we know of, and it has to be assumed that there were other anonymous missionaries besides those immortalized in the *Lives*. But of these eighty, over half of them (44 to be exact) are noted as Indian, while the origins of the rest are dispersed among various regions of Central and South Asia.⁴

²H.J.R. Murray, *A History of Chess*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913, p. 119.

³The eastward transmission of chess is in general underexplored compared to its western counterpart, one of the few works being P. Banaschak, *Schachspiele in Ostasien* Munich: Iudicium, 2001

⁴E. Zürcher, “Buddhism Across Boundaries: The Foreign Input” *Sino-Platonic Papers* No. 222, March 2012, p.13

Part of the reason for Buddhism's success in China was that it made inroads into the urban merchant and noble classes. These then became sources of patronage, endowing monasteries and underwriting the work of translating scripture (not unlike their counterparts in the West vis-à-vis Christianity).⁵ Buddhism thus pried open the door to the classes of people most influential in popularizing new trends and fashions, such as the other Indian cultural markers that Buddhist missionaries and migrants from that region brought with them. Once these had established themselves amid the propertied classes, it was a short step to patronage at the Chinese imperial court as well. Indeed, the peak of Indian missionary activity in the years around AD 380 corresponds to the peak of Buddhist influence at court and upon culture and letters in general.⁶

But Buddhism was not just a plaything of the rich in the 300s. The poor were known to take monastic orders as a way to avoid labor service obligations verging on serfdom. This became so common that various emperors debated what to do about it.⁷ Buddhism thus found support across a broad spectrum of society – albeit for various reasons – which cemented its place still more. All things Indian thereby joined Buddhism in becoming more familiar and less foreign to Chinese citizens from all walks of life.

Along with missionaries who came to China with an expressly religious purpose, there were also scores of ordinary immigrants from India who settled there, particularly in the interior and most actively in the late 200s. Some parts of the Tibetan interior amounted to an Indian diaspora.⁸ Whether they came to China because the religious climate was hospitable, or whether their presence in turn caused that climate to be hospitable for the missionaries is unclear, but either way this was yet another path by which Indian ideas, cultures, and customs filtered eastward along the Silk Road.

This was a time of great change in China, in addition to the new religious ideas. As in the West, one of the main agents of that change was the influx of nomadic peoples from Central Asia. This, together with the new religion, gave the era from AD 220 to 589 a distinct character in China, periodized as the Age of the Six Dynasties – roughly corresponding to the age of Late Antiquity in the West.

The Han Dynasty, still revered today by Chinese as the apex of classical antiquity, had come to an end after four hundred years in AD 220 with the abdication of the last emperor, the powerless figurehead Xian, from his throne at Luoyang. A new line of rulers descended from his chief minister Cao Cao replaced him (another pattern not unfamiliar then in the West). This line was in turn deposed in 265 by a senior general in concert with the great noble families, resulting in the

⁵E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 3rd ed. Leiden: Brill, 2007, p.73

⁶*ibid.* p. 151

⁷A. Palumbo, “Exemption not Granted: The Confrontation between Buddhism and the Chinese State in Late Antiquity” *medieval worlds* No. 6, 2017, pp. 121-2

⁸T.L. Høisaeter, “Migrants or Monks: The problems of a migration scenario in first to fourth century Caḍota by the Niyā River” *Distant Worlds Journal* No. 3, 2017, pp. 80-93. See also V. Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History*, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 26 and J. Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, pp. 19ff

Jin Dynasty. The unity and peace under the great emperor Wu of Jin (a figure reminiscent of Diocletian) ended, however, upon his death in 290 and gave way to an extended time of troubles. Civil wars for the throne among the successors of Wu weakened the state. Some of the factions recruited allies from the warrior nomad tribes to the north, and the resulting influx of Xiongnu barbarians changed Chinese history completely. It is again reminiscent of Rome, where Gothic barbarians were invited to fight for the Empire and having entered as federated armies ended up taking it over altogether. In China, the Xiongnu sacked and conquered the capital Luoyang in 310. The Chinese who could escape fled to the south and east, to continue as the Eastern Jin Dynasty centered at a new capital, Jiankang, at the mouth of the Yangtze River near what is now Nanjing. For the next three hundred years China was rent in two: Xiongnu-dominated states to the north, and ethnically Chinese ones to the south and east.

It was this divided world that Buddhism encountered, in its most influential period in the 300s. Chinese Buddhism's historical trajectory was therefore different in the North and the South. Northern Buddhism was more directly connected to the regions of Central Asia and traditions developed there, as at the monasteries of Dunhuang and Turfan. The Xiongnu court was quicker to fund Buddhist activities directly, having its heritage in those same regions of Central Asia. At Jiankang, on the other hand, the position of the Chinese court was weaker and the clans of noble families were instead the power behind the throne. Buddhism therefore made inroads in the capital by becoming fashionable among the gentry and landed classes influential there.⁹ But on either side of this divide, a marked surge in Buddhist activity is observable after the late 200s. As we have already seen, this peak involved domestic monks and translators in a complex interaction with newcomers, missionaries, and traders from lands to the West such as India.¹⁰

That it should happen at this particular moment in time provides a crucially important clue about the possible relation of all this to the appearance of chess in China. For just then, another empire to the west was crumbling and scattering refugees abroad. This was the Kushan Empire of northern India, Bactria, and Gandhara. I suspect that these events are not unrelated. Chinese Buddhism had long and deep ties to the Gandharan region for centuries by this point, to the extent that the very language of Chinese Buddhist texts retained heavy dialectal influences of the Gandharan originals they had been translated from. Moreover, immigrants to the Chinese interior were commonly of Gandharan origin, as shown by the languages of the texts they produced in their adopted home.¹¹ Piecing together the historical clues, I believe that chess may well have been carried eastward along with these migrants from Gandhara and surrounding regions when the Kushans fell, together with the other cultural markers imported from India that eventually became fashionable at Jiankang. A source in Gandhara and "emigration" after the fall of the Kushans would therefore indicate that it is to the Kushans we must look for any earlier flourishing of the game of chess.

⁹ K. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*, Princeton University Press, 1964, pp. 74-79

¹⁰ Zürcher, "Buddhism Across Boundaries" p. 14, also Høisæter and Hansen, *op. cit.* as well as Neelis pp. 19ff

¹¹ D. Boucher, "Gāndhāri and the Early Chinese Buddhist Translations Reconsidered: The Case of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra" *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 118, No. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1998), p. 473, also Høisæter and Hansen, *op. cit.*

It is perhaps unfortunate that the early history of chess should point to the Kushans, as theirs is one of the most enigmatic states in all of history. Yet in the first few centuries AD, when Rome and Han China were at their height, this was the Rome and China of Central Asia all in one. The Kushan Empire was vast, wealthy, urban, and cosmopolitan.¹² We can deduce this from the archeological remains of large cities with trading goods from across the known world. Finds of Kushan coins suggest a developed cash economy, and the often beautiful appearance of the coins themselves attests to advanced artisanal skills. The Buddhist art and sculpture produced then is some of the most sublime of any ever made. But the ruins, and the coins, and the statues in museums are all that remain of this once flourishing state. Its people – who they were, what they did – have vanished into the abyss of time. No one, it seems, bothered to write down the history of the Kushans.

What we do know comes from arduously assembling shreds of evidence. Even basic dates need to be inferred from those shreds. The early history of the Kushans, for instance, only comes to us through parts of Chinese annals discussing nomadic tribes to the north of China, particularly the Xiongnu. It seems that the Kushans were initially western neighbors of the Xiongnu, and were referred to in the annals as the Yuezhi. In 162 BC they were forced out of the Gansu region by the Xiongnu, and migrated westwards. During these migrations the Yuezhi confederacy split into several branches, one of which would become the Kushans and eventually settle in the territory of Bactria by 130 BC. Soon they displaced the Greek kings of Bactria, who in turn moved south into Gandhara and the Punjab to form what are known as the Indo-Greek kingdoms. A century later the Kushans overran these regions too, as well as Indian lands to the east and south of the Punjab. From about AD 30 to 350, this collection of territories would form the core of the Kushan Empire.¹³

The new rulers were faced with the question of what to do with all the subject peoples they had inherited. Strong as they were militarily, the Kushans themselves were outnumbered by Parthians, Greeks, Indians, and still others, living in a complex multiethnic mix. Even before the Kushans had arrived, the region was already one where people could negotiate multiple identities and pass fluidly between them according to situation and context.¹⁴ Now the Kushan ruling family needed to decide how to manage it all. There have been other such cases throughout history, such as the Ghaznavids in Persia or Visigoths in Western Europe, and the result is often a pluralistic cultural syncretism in art, religion, and society. Such it was in the Kushan Empire.

¹² On the advanced nature of the Kushan state, C. Benjamin, *Empires of Ancient Eurasia*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 200, R. Lam, “Kuṣāṇa Emperors and Indian Buddhism: Political, Economic and Cultural Factors Responsible for the Spread of Buddhism through Eurasia, South Asia” *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 36:3, 2013 pp. 437ff, and B. Staviski, *Kushanskaya Baktria: Problemy Istorii i Kultury*, Moscow: Nauka, 1977, p. 12

¹³ C. Benjamin, *The Yuezhi: Origin, Migration and the Conquest of Northern Bactria*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2007, pp.10, 31–6, also R. Chakravarti, “The Kushanas” in D.K. Chakrabarti and M. Lal (eds.), *History of Ancient India*, New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation, 2014, pp. 39-45

¹⁴ R. Mairs, *The Hellenistic Far East: Archaeology, Language and Identity in Greek Central Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, as well as J. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*, Oxford University Press, 1993 pp. 46ff

The new rulers apparently decided to keep this vibrant culture flourishing by leaving it alone. Their initial issues of coinage kept to previous Indo-Greek forms, which would indicate the absence of any new cultural program imposed by the first Kushan kings. These coins generally depicted the ruling king on the obverse side and a deity on the reverse. But the particular god found there could be any one of an entire pantheon: Serapis from Egypt, the Iranian Mithra, Greek Heracles or Indian Shiva. Not until the fourth (and likely greatest) king, Kanishka I, did this iconographic diversity change. Kanishka seems to have been an adherent of the Iranic gods, and promoted them as well as the native Kushan pantheon on his coins and inscriptions.¹⁵

Kanishka and his successors, however, also happened to be indulgent towards Buddhism. The Bactrian Greeks had been tolerant of it long before the Kushans arrived, and once they did arrive the Kushans had no wish to disrupt the situation. But beginning in the reign of Kanishka, Buddhism flourished in Gandhara. Shrines and monasteries proliferated, as did the production of Buddhist art and literature. An important doctrinal council was said to have convened under the patronage of Kanishka. All of this subsequently ensured a fond place for him and his lineage in Buddhist tradition.

As with the other religions of the Empire, the was partly the result of policy choices by the Kushan rulers, but mostly driven by the social situation they inherited. The Buddhist community was linked to the urban merchant middle classes. As the fortunes of the Empire increased due to trade, so did those of this particular community. Urban, literate, well-travelled and cosmopolitan, it could underwrite substantial cultural production and thereby put its stamp on society. But it was also continuing the diversity that had been present in the region since the time of the Indo-Greek cultural consensus.¹⁶

Though the Kushan state is remote in time, there seems something familiarly modern about an urban, wealthy, pluralistic and cosmopolitan society that values the creation of art and literature. This is the kind of society that, like ours, prizes the well-lived life in all its forms, including leisure. It is not at all surprising that this speculative historical trail of chess should lead back in time from Jin China in the fifth century AD to Kushan India and Bactria in the centuries prior. On the contrary, it is only natural that a society like the Kushan state would have all the conditions necessary for chess to flourish, as did the art and literature created by Buddhist communities.

Furthermore, this may also provide independent support for the view I have previously advanced, that the homeland of chess is somewhere in the core Kushan region of Gandhara, Bactria, and the Punjab, and that it was created during or before the Kushan occupation of that region.¹⁷ The conditions that encourage pursuit of the well-lived life are, after all, the same ones that also encourage invention of new and innovative ways to pursue the well-lived life. A

¹⁵J. Cribb, "The End of Greek Coinage in Bactria and India and its Evidence for the Kushan Coinage System" in R. Ashton, S. Hurter, G. Le Rider and R. Bland (eds.), *Studies in Greek Numismatics in Memory of Martin Jessop Price*, London: Spink & Son, 1998, pp. 83-98

¹⁶Lam, *op. cit.* and references therein, on Buddhism in the Kushan state

¹⁷Samsin, *op. cit.* p. 78

dynamic, creative society is exactly the kind where one would expect this sort of cultural innovation. All the more so, if chess can be shown to have flourished there and then.

We have arrived at this line of thought from evidence of the historical movements of Buddhist people and ideas. Buddhism's early history thus informs the social aspects of chess's early history and origins. But there is another way in which Buddhism's early history may shed light on that of chess. It has to do with the method and motive of chess's creation, instead of just the historical occasion. The ideas I want to develop next are far more speculative than the ones above – and those are speculative enough as it is. I suspect they may be too much for some readers, even those open to the historical arguments here. I am not entirely sure myself how persuaded I am by them. But there are some extremely conspicuous patterns that I think ought to be investigated, as they may be vital clues to unlocking the secret of chess origins.

I have come to suspect that my earlier treatment of the Indo-Greek fusion theory was in some ways too simplistic. The culture in which chess was created did indeed blend many elements of Greek and Indian art, but this does not mean that the inventor of chess threw together whatever was available because everyone else was doing so. To imagine this is to ignore the game design process, which is extremely evolutionary in nature and full of trial, error, and revision.¹⁸

It is important to distinguish a game design idea from its implementation. A design idea can be borrowed from another game – and often is – but the implementation of it may need substantial revision before it works well in a new game under development. Sometimes an extended process of experimentation with various rulesets is required before that idea can yield a playable game. In the case of chess, the pertinent idea is that of replacement capture along the line of movement. Prior to chess this type of capture was only implemented in racing games with dice, and it was the core idea adapted from them by chess. One can sometimes see vestigial traces of the race track when small children are learning chess, and make a move by shifting the piece square by square until it arrives at its destination. But how to implement this idea in a non-race game? Here, I think, some experimentation was needed.

I previously suggested that the original moves of all chessmen (apart from kings and pawns) could be generated on a race-game board in the locations where race-game pieces turn corners.¹⁹ For instance, a racing move of three spaces is identical with a knight's move, if the piece begins two spaces from the corner, makes a right turn at the corner and proceeds one more space. A problem with this suggestion is that the resulting move does not need to be conceptualized as one unit this way, nor is there any historical reason to think it ever was. It may as easily be

18 N. Bentley, "100:10:1 – A game design method you can use to design anything"

<http://www.nickbentley.games/the-100-10-1-method-for-game-design/> has insights on the design process from a board game author, in particular: "Many of my initial ideas don't work like I thought they would once I develop them, so I *have to* develop them to judge them. Sometimes a single key rule change can change a bad game into a great one." On the dangers of oversimplifying cultural hybrids, see also R. Mairs, "The Places in Between: Model and Metaphor in the Archaeology of Hellenistic Arachosia" in *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*, A. Kouremenos, S. Chandrasekharan, and R. Rossi (eds.), Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011, p 177

19 Samsin *op. cit.* p. 74

considered a move along a straight linear track. If so, what we have here is just a co-incidental visual similarity with no likelihood of ever having been more than that.²⁰

In the early 1900s, Johannes Kohtz attempted a different derivation. He observed that on a 5x5 grid of squares, a leap over one square diagonally, beginning from the center square to the corners of the grid, generates all the moves of the elephant. Similarly, a 2x1 leap from the center square generates all the moves of the knight. An orthogonal one-square leap fills in the remaining squares around the periphery of the grid. Kohtz suggested this as the source of the chessmen's moves, adding that the orthogonal leap was at some point extended to become the familiar rook's move.²¹ Like the "turning corners" idea, this is an interesting geometrical pattern that is missing any reason to believe anyone ever thought this way. If we place chess in a Buddhist context, however, it turns out that there *is* a reason to believe someone might in fact have thought this way.

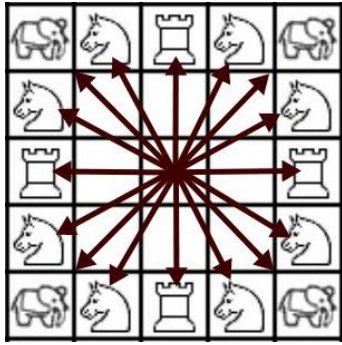
We are accustomed to associating Buddhism with the image of a plump, serene yogi sitting cross-legged while contemplating nirvana. But for the first six hundred years of its existence, Buddhism was aniconic. No depictions of the Buddha were permitted. They only began to appear at some point between the first centuries BC and AD. Before this, the Buddha, and by extension the faith, were represented by symbols like a set of footprints, the Tree of Wisdom, or most notably, the Wheel of Dharma or *dharmacakra*, which the Buddha is said to have set in motion when he delivered his first sermon. Examples of the wheel as Buddhist symbol can be found at sites such as Bharhut or on the Pillar of Ashoka. It was evidently a familiar and instantly recognizable image with wide currency.²²

The Wheel of Dharma clearly resembles the geometry of Kohtz's grid. Given the possible geographic associations between early chess and Buddhism, Kohtz's idea begins to seem more plausible. If chess was in fact present in the Buddhist community, it may be that chess was furthermore invented in that community by drawing inspiration from its artistic repertoire in the implementation of a game design idea involving replacement-capture pieces.

²⁰U. Schädler, *Board Game Studies* 7 (2004), pp. 133-4 for this and other criticisms of the geometrical theory

²¹J. Kohtz, *Vom Ur-Schach: Eine Untersuchung*, Potsdam: (n.p.) 1910

²²R. DeCaroli, *Image Problems: The Origin and Development of the Buddha's Image in Early South Asia*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015, p. 21



*Johannes Kohtz's derivation of the chesspieces (left) and the Wheel of Dharma, Bharhut, 2nd c. BC (right).
Photo: Biswarup Ganguly/Wikimedia*

There is another reason for thinking Kohtz was on to something: the fact that the original rules of chess produce such a drawish game. One of the main culprits is the move of the elephant. Its diagonal leap over one square means that it cannot be chased down by a king or vizier in an endgame, nor is it possible for opposing elephants to capture one another. The presence of an elephant, virtually useless in attack, thus renders most endgames drawn. Even if it is the defender's last remaining piece an elephant often cannot be captured, making any win by bare king impossible. It seems doubtful that an inventor trying to design a playable game would come up with a rule so flawed as to leave his game almost broken – unless the elephant move was designed with something else in mind, such as completing a geometrical schema.

A constellation of evidence thus seems to be coming together, all consistent with and explicable by an Indo-Greek fusion theory of the origin of chess. Firstly, the historical path of chess appears to track the path of Buddhist expansion, which points back to Gandharan and Bactrian regions. Next, a possible Greek remnant in the pawn-move also suggests chess may have existed in those very same regions. Thirdly, Buddhist iconography, common there as well, has some resemblance to the geometries of chess. None of this even remotely approaches a proof, of course. But when enough circumstantial evidence accrues, it begins to make an idea tempting. It may be that these facts are all connected, and the patterns joining them are more than mere co-incidence.

Let us tell a little story. Imagine a pious Buddhist monk living somewhere in Gandhara. He is appalled at the gambling associated with dice games and the social ills it brings upon the families of gambling addicts (largely the same ones that it does today). He wonders if there might be a similar game just as interesting but without the siren call of the dice – perhaps one illustrating the virtues of wisdom and self-control instead of capricious fate. How can he take this thing that they play and make something out of it with no dice? Over time he fiddles around with various ways of making the pieces move and capture each other, but nothing seems to really stick until one day, while meditating over the Wheel of Dharma, he sees it. He sets up the pieces and begins to play. But it still isn't right, even after changing the straight-line jump into something more useful. All the pieces trade off and no one can ever win, unless there is a really foolish mistake somewhere. This isn't any fun. There is that other game the Greeks play, *cities* they call it. Odd bunch, them. Where did they even come from anyway. But their game is kind of like this one, and they seem to enjoy it well enough. What would happen, our monk wonders, if he added

some pieces from it to this game he is working on. Suddenly: well, this is not bad at all. It feels like it has something to it now. And the rest, as they say, is history.

This story is obviously a confabulation. But in light of the arguments here, I think that something not unlike it could well be true. If so, it would be far from a simple tale, but instead one full of false starts, backtracks and revisions. These, though, feel somehow true to the game design process as well as life in a complicated society woven together out of many cultural currents – which the Bactrian, Indo-Greek, and Kushan states surely were.

Perhaps this cosmopolitan diversity is part of the problem for early chess history. It confuses the trail back into the past, making it that much harder for us to follow beyond the familiar landmarks of the 600s – the *Harṣacarita*, *Chatrang-namak*, and so on. Hence the reason why so much writing on the origin of chess seems to circle endlessly around them. The evidence gets too complicated any earlier, so we prefer to continue looking for our lost keys in the lamplight.

Even acknowledging the complex diversity of chess’s homeland does not by itself ensure a correct understanding of that diversity, or its relation to chess as a cultural product. For instance, Gandharan diversity did not cause the fusion of prior games into a new and better one. Instead, cultural diversity operated in the background, supplying the possibility and the means for individuals to invent novel forms of cultural expression. It set the scene, as it were. Our contemporary postmodern mashup of cultures operates the same way now, as do the processes of creation, another reason why the imagined story above rings true.

A nuanced understanding of diversity also helps to prevent the distortions of cultural imperialism. Previous generations of Gandharan studies by Western scholars tended to read as though the Greek contribution to Gandharan art is what makes it worthy of study. The offended response by Indian scholars was more or less the same in reverse, privileging the Indianness of Gandhara to the exclusion of all else.²³ But as our little story illustrates, neither of these need be the case. It is absolutely untrue that the Greek contribution to early chess implies Greek responsibility for early chess. Life is more complicated than that, and always has been. If any side is to claim ownership of chess, it is most properly the party of cosmopolitanism, of belonging to nowhere in particular.

And yet, if the arguments here are correct, chess came to be associated with Buddhist cultural horizons. I see no contradiction in this. Chess is a chameleon. It has been in turns the game of Islam during the Arab caliphates, and the game of muscular Christian morality in Victorian Britain. It would be entirely unsurprising if, before either of these, chess had hitched itself to yet another abstract religion and travelled the world with it. It seems to be the way of chess. As I have tried to argue here, I think this is what did in fact happen, and all this time later we are the better off for it.

²³The *locus classicus* of the debate being W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, Cambridge University Press, 1938 versus A. K. Narain, *The Indo-Greeks*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957, and in a more narrowly artistic context A. Foucher, *L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhāra*, Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1905 versus A. Coomaraswamy, “The Origin of the Buddha Image,” *Art Bulletin* 9, no. 4 (1927). A sensible referee is P. Stewart, “Roman sarcophagi and Gandhāran sculpture” in *The Global Connections of Gandhāran Art: Proceedings of the Third International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project*, P. Stewart and W. Rienjang (eds.), Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020, pp. 50-85