

Chess in Europe in the 5th century? / Thomas Thomsen

“The Albanians Played Chess while Rome fell” is the headline of a press release by the Institute of World Archaeology, referring to an ivory object of 4 cm in height excavated at Butrint, Albania. Summarizing from the bulletin: Butrint has been occupied since at least the 8th century BC and by the 4th century BC was an established walled settlement. It seems to have remained a small Roman port until the 6th century AD. After that, information appears to be scant. The release suggests – brushing aside any doubt – that the object is a chessman and that it dates to the 1st half of the 5th century.

Professor Richard Hodges of the University of East Anglia is quoted as follows: “We are wondering if it is the king or queen because it has a little cross”.

The description of the discovery reads: “During excavation of the late Roman phases of a palatial town house large urban palace, a small ivory gaming piece was found on the floor of one of the buildings, whose destruction and roof-collapse can be tightly dated to the third quarter of the 5th century. It may have fallen from the principal chamber of the house, located at first-storey level, a richly appointed reception room revetted in green-streaked cipollino marble. It must have been deposited shortly before the complex was demolished to provide material for the construction of the new expanded city wall, which almost abuts the mansion on its southern side. The piece stands only 4 cm high, and is of ivory, turned on a lathe. It stands on five little feet, which support a low base ornamented with a patterned plant scroll, and its swelling striated body terminates in a little pyramidal cross. It is designed to stand alone and can only be a gaming piece. However, it is completely unlike the pieces and counters used in the Roman game of tabula, an early version of backgammon, and other known games of the period. Although in shape it is unlike the earliest known Indian and European chess-pieces, its upright form is that of pieces used in chess and there can be little doubt that it is one of a set of pieces designed for game which deployed differing men of ranked denominations”.

Some paragraphs discuss the possible meaning of the cross and speculate about the way chess might have travelled from India to the Christian Mediterranean. Research, in particular over the last ten years, has produced an extensive network of evidence, supporting that chess originated around the 6th century in Persia or India and that it entered Europe in the early 9th century via Córdoba, Spain (Calvo 1993). About 200 years later we know of a second route from North Africa through Sicily into Italy. Chess also found



The Butrint “chess piece”
(photo © Steve Diehl)

its way on a northern route through Russia all the way to Scandinavia.

Excavated early chessmen to date are of the abstract Arabic type, save the Afrasiab pieces realistically sculptured after contemporary army units. To better assess the piece from Butrint I had at my disposal a 1:1 replica, made from the photograph by Alan Dewey, a turner from Kent, UK. The known chess pieces that best resemble the Butrint piece, are pieces found in Russia and dating to the 16th/17th century (Linder 1979: p. 135-142; Linder 1994a: p. 189; Linder 1994b: ill. p. 246-47, 250).

In order to assess the probability of the interpretation of the piece found at Butrint as a chess piece, let me list some preliminary thoughts:

1. If it is a chess piece, it most likely is of much later date. This raises problems with the stratigraphy hitherto established. There are several possibilities how it found its way into the excavated layer. What about a soldier playing chess in the vicinity in the 17th century losing a piece that fell from the cracks? After all the piece is assumed to have fallen from the floor above (see press release). Moreover it is well known that small objects can be transported by animals such as mice to lower layers.
2. The reflections published in the press release parallel the earlier attempt to have the Romans play chess in connection with the Venafro chess pieces, which were recently radiocarbon-dated to the 10th/11th century, a dating that corresponds to their shape.
3. If we deal with a chessman, a high probability of further pieces still unearthed on the spot should be considered. Only if such pieces were found, the comment in the bulletin about “the differing men of ranked denominations” would acquire some relevance.
4. The cross described might not be a cross at all. It does not look like a Christian nor an orthodox one. It obviously has escaped the attention of the excavators that crosses on chessmen only become common in the 19th century. The “cross” could well be an anchoring device to fix the piece in an “upside down” position, it then looks like a castle with the “feet” becoming the crenelations (see Williams 2002).
5. Not less astonishing are those 5 “feet”, since chess pieces normally do not have such feet but a flat base. Why should a chessman that is moved across a board have five feet? They would severely hinder the handling of the piece. Nor would such feet lead to a better handling if played on a cloth.

In summary, I believe that the archaeologists have too hastily assumed that their find is a chess piece dating to the 5th century. As a first step I strongly suggest a review of the stratigraphical evidence, as well as a radiocarbon-dating of the object and start an analysis from there.

Bibliography:

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