

The Horta-Osorio Collection of Antique Chess Sets

Volume 1: India



- Photos and descriptions of António's world-class antique chess sets, boards, and pieces from the subcontinent of India
- An expert team of chess historians explains the intricacies of the chess sets and the geopolitical circumstances in which these historical marvels were made
- 424 pages, 212 photos, 68 illustrations

Authors

Sir António Horta-Osório
Ulrich Schädler, PhD
Jacob Schmidt-Madsen, PhD
Hugo Miguel Crespo, PhD
NM Jonathan Crumiller
Thomas Thomsen, PhD
Leander Feiler, PhD
GM Raymond Keene
Jackie Eales, PhD

Photography

Bruce White
Franco Maria Ricci
Garrick Coleman
Jacob Schmidt-Madsen
Jonathan Crumiller
Masayuki Kondo
Paulo Alexandrino
Pedro Lobo

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António Horta-Osório
Jonathan Crumiller

Volume 1: India is now available for purchase at the Chess & Bridge shop www.chess.co.uk



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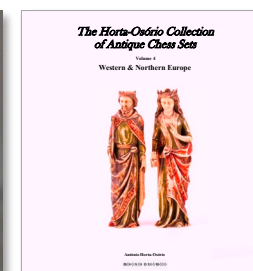
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Fig. 6: Close-up of piece from an Indo-Burmese style set, 19th century. Photo by Jon Crumiller, © Jon Crumiller, / 8061



Fig. 8: Egyptian sphinx. Public domain, / 8062



Fig. 8a: Coat of Arms of the British East India Company. Public domain, / 8072

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Fig. 9: 'Central Provinces' style set, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório, / 0675

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Fig. 10: 'Central Provinces' style set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório, / 2010

'Central Provinces' Sets

The so-called 'Central Provinces' chess sets were possibly also produced in Visakhapatnam. This somewhat heterogeneous group of figural sets, some of which show a clear dependence on John Company sets, is characterised by a certain naïveté in the depiction of persons, and a curious mixture of references to Britain, to India, and to classical Antiquity. Apparently two main groups can be distinguished: one with figurines of the British king and queen, the other with Indian king and his vizier riding on caparisoned elephants.

However, the composition of the chess sets is sometimes so curious that one cannot avoid the impression that games were put together individually by the customers, who simply chose from a variety of figures. Some sets with Indian king and vizier contain western classicist figures, as for example the lion-taming putto ('amor leonem domans'), a motif that became popular among classicist artists during the 18th century (Fig. 12 / 0692 and Fig. 14 / 1487). Other classicising features are naked or draped statuettes, obviously inspired by Ancient Greek and Roman sculptures (Fig. 12 / 0692, Fig. 14 / 1487, and Fig. 10 / 2010), and, of course, the Egyptian sphinx (Fig. 8 / 8062). The lion as a flag bearer, a copy of the lion of the East India Company's coat of arms (Fig. 8a / 8013), that holds the position of the bishop appears in several 'Indian king' sets as a typically British element (Fig. 9 / 0675, Fig. 11 / 1982, Fig. 17 / 2014).

Overview of Antique Indian Chess Sets For Export, but Not Only

Ulrich Schäfer

In his groundbreaking work 'Historia shahiladi' (History of Chess), the first volume of 'De ludis orientabilibus' (On Oriental Games) published in 1694, Thomas Hyde, Librarian of the Bodleian Library and a Professor of Hebrew and Arabic, presented and illustrated four chess sets from India (Fig. 1 / 8014). The first one is a set made from the wood of the toothbrush tree (Sabadora persica), Hyde calls 'Indo-Persian', while nowadays chess sets like this are usually called being of 'Muslim type'. It was his friend John France, who provided this set for him during his stay at Mumbai. France was appointed chaplain at Surat (Gujarat, north of Mumbai) or Mumbai by the British East India Company (EIC) on 23 Feb. 1672, not at least on Hyde's recommendation. Since France, as Hyde tells us, died in 1677, when he drowned in a river, the chess sets must date from before this tragic event.

The three other sets, together with an exquisite chess board (described on p. 59-60) come from the city of Surat, the important harbour of the Mughal Empire north of Mumbai. Here, the EIC had installed their second factory in 1615, while the first factory existed since 1611 at Machilipatnam on the East Coast. In 1616 the Dutch established a factory there as well as the French, who were present from 1667 until 1759. Numerous goods of different type arrived at Surat from all over South-East Asia to be shipped abroad: diamonds, pearls, cotton, silk, musk, spices, indigo, medical plants and many more. Hyde received the games as a gift from Daniel Sheldon, whom Hyde refers to as a merchant (mercator) in the East Indies. Sheldon was member of the EIC since 1658, and factor at Balasore in West-Bengal.



Fig. 1: Indian chess sets illustrated in 'De Ludis Orientalibus', Historia shahiladi', Thomas Hyde, 1694, pages 134-135, / 8014

asking players to handle them in a state of impurity would likely be deemed offensive by many practising Hindus, and not even bothering to represent them correctly would only be adding injury to insult.

The first set installs Krishna as king in his well-known pose with legs crossed and a flute to his lips (fig. 9 / 0690). Krishna is among the most beloved of Vishnu's ten primary avatars, which, as we shall see, also include the celebrated prince Rama and sometimes even the Buddha. The natural queen to Krishna's king would be his consort Radha, but in this set her place is taken by Sarasvati, the consort of the creator god Brahma. Considering that Krishna is depicted in his flute-playing pose, it is possible that the choice of Sarasvati was occasioned by the *srina*, or lute, that she plays as the goddess of not only learning but also the arts. The bishops are even more mysterious with their loin-cloths and unnatural poses which seem to mirror that of Krishna. Standing next to Krishna and Sarasvati, they might be seen as dancers swaying blithely to the divine music, but their half-naked bodies, bundled-up hair, and *rudraksha* necklaces made of dried seeds would rather seem to identify them as holy men in yogic postures (fig. 10 / 8037). Perhaps more obviously than any other pieces found in the deity sets discussed here, they appear to have been deliberately transferred from one context to another.

The knights are depicted as Kalki, the tenth and final avatar of Vishnu, who is prophesied to appear on a white horse with a flaming sword at the end of the current Kali Yuga, or age of darkness, and usher in a new Satya Yuga, or age of truth. While choosing the horse-headed Kalki to fill the role of the knight makes sense from a purely aesthetic perspective, it does little to preserve the already compromised thematic integrity. The same is true of the rooks, which take on the form of Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of the divine couple Shiva and Parvati, sitting under a parasol with his lower right hand raised in a gesture of *abhaya*, offering protection and dispelling all fears. It is easy to see how the compact form of the figure would have suggested itself as a rook, but the only thing linking Ganesha with the rest of the figures is his status as a deity. While the major pieces are identical on both sides, except that one side is stained green, the pawns are differentiated between them. The green side shows eight identical instantiations of Vishnu's avatar Parashurama, or Rama with the axe, who is often associated with aggression and warfare. The natural ivory side supplements the king piece with eight additional incarnations of Krishna, though smaller in size and standing fully erect without the flute.



Fig. 10: Illustration of yogic postures from a manuscript of the *Shriyattvamudra* attributed to Mahārāja Krishnarāja Wodeyar III, Mysore, mid-19th century. Reproduced from Sijman 1999: pl. 10, / 8037

Before page
Fund Memories
This beautiful Hindu set, in green and natural ivory, also has very unusual pieces, such as several Hindu gods, and in particular the rooks as 'dressed elephants' under a sun shade. I bought it from Garrick Coleman in 2014. / 0690

Fig. 9: Southern India set, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório, / 0690

Sample Pages

