

*The Horta-Osório Collection
of Antique Chess Sets*

Volume 1

India





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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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7	Chapter 1 Introduction <i>António Horta-Osório</i> <i>Jonathan Crumiller</i>	151	Chapter 8 Other Board Games and Chess sets from Visakhapatnam <i>Ulrich Schädler</i>
17	Chapter 2 Overview of Antique Indian Chess Sets For Export, but Not Only <i>Ulrich Schädler</i>	177	Chapter 9 Chess Sets from Rajasthan (18th and 19th centuries) <i>Ulrich Schädler</i>
33	Chapter 3 Techniques and Materials Used by Craftsmen in India for the Manufacture of Chessmen and Boards in the 18th and 19th Centuries <i>Thomas H. Thomsen</i>	231	Chapter 10 Islamic Pattern Chess Sets <i>Raymond Keene</i> <i>Jackie Eales</i>
45	Chapter 4 Medieval and Antique Pieces Single Pieces, 7th to 18th Centuries <i>Ulrich Schädler</i>	261	Chapter 11 North Indian Chess Sets <i>Jacob Schmidt-Madsen</i>
65	Chapter 5 The Chess Sets of the East India Company <i>Jonathan Crumiller</i>	301	Chapter 12 South Indian Chess Sets <i>Jacob Schmidt-Madsen</i>
101	Chapter 6 Other Sets from Murshidabad and Berhampore <i>Ulrich Schädler</i>	333	Chapter 13 Chess Sets from the Subcontinent Region of Sri Lanka <i>Ulrich Schädler</i>
121	Chapter 7 Classic Board Games and Chess sets from Visakhapatnam <i>Ulrich Schädler</i>	347	Chapter 14 Domestic Antique Indian Chess Sets <i>Leander Feiler</i>
		365	Chapter 15 The Game of Empires: Indian Chessboards and Artistic Exchange in the Age of Discovery <i>Hugo Miguel Crespo</i>



CHAPTER I

Introduction

About This Book

This book is the first in a series of volumes encompassing the world-class antique chess collection of António Horta-Osório. The volumes in the series are organized by the originating country/location/region of the chess sets, boards, and pieces; this volume focuses on the collection's antique chess items from India and its surrounding regions. The chapters are written as semi-independent essays by world-renowned experts within the fields of chess and history.

Our goal is to highlight Antonio's chess collection via high-quality photographs that capture the essence of these works of art, coupled with explanatory text with details about the history and special features of each set. Whether the reader's intent is to use the book as a reference guide or simply to turn the pages to enjoy the visual glory of the sets, we are confident that your desire to appreciate the best-of-the-best will be fulfilled.

The Collector

António Horta-Osório

I have always been fascinated by battles and by soldiers. When I was a small child I used to collect all the armies of the Second World War (made by Airfix) and play with them for countless hours in my room. Also with Cowboys and Indians.

I now believe that that was the start of my fascinating attraction for figural chess sets. My father taught me to play chess at the age of six, a game I most enjoyed learning and which I played for many years throughout school. My wife and I met at age eleven at a Jesuit school in Lisbon, and we used to play together for hours given it was the best place to be together and be able to speak without interruptions.

I played so many times with Staunton type chess sets that it is probably why I do not have any attraction to collect them (or playing sets in general).

At the same time my grandmother from my father's side had an antique collection from my grandfather, that was displayed in a dark closed room at her house. Whenever I was allowed to get in there I always focused my attention on a Chinese figural chess set, depicting the Cantonese against the Mongols in red and white, placed on a wood and ivory board, black and white, in the middle of the room. At the time I thought it was an amazing object and probably unique. My grandmother told me my grandfather had brought it from China many years before.

When I became eighteen years old, in 1982, she offered me that chess set, which I have carefully kept ever since. It was my first chess set! It had a white knight made of stone as a replacement piece which I later had made in ivory. I have never found a similar set during my collection years, although Chinese sets are probably the most common in terms of number and themes.

Then, when we first lived in London in 1992/3, my wife and I found what we thought then was a beautiful Kashmir set in green and white, needing some repairs, on a wood and ivory Indian board beautifully carved with animals on the sides and on some of the squares, in Portobello Road, which we bought. Our second chess set!

Then we found nothing till 2003, when I went to Harvard Business School to do my Advanced Management Program there, during the first Iraq war, and I “found” the Internet and eBay...

While I was there I started buying sets online, mostly Chinese figural ones from different American states, receiving them at HBS by post or traveling by car to neighbouring states to collect them.

It was like discovering a whole new world.

Back in Lisbon I kept collecting through eBay and started meeting other collectors either through eBay or by “word of mouth”. This is how I first got in touch with my dear friend today, Jon Crumiller, who had the username Computojon (mine being Hortamar).

That same year, in 2003, my wife who was an avid reader of the “How to spend it” section of the Financial Times, told me there was an ad from a chess dealer there. I called him and met Garrick Coleman, the best chess dealer for high quality sets I have ever met. I bought many sets from him and a few years before Garrick sadly passed away, we were discussing how our relationship had started, and I reminded him of the FT ad. He said he remembered it very well and added something like: “You were the only person to respond to that ad... But it was well worth it as you became my best customer!” I smiled as I was simultaneously flattered and astonished that nobody else had contacted him.

The first collector I met in person was Doug Polumbaum, in 2005, who lives in NYC. I was going to bid on a Philippine set on eBay, but there was traffic and I got home too late to place my bid (no good mobile phones then...). The set had been sold already! I was very upset and I called the buyer to see if he would sell the set to me. That is how we met;

Doug was incredibly nice, had a wonderful collection and agreed to sell the Philippine set to me. Then we became friends and in 2005 he contacted me first-hand to check whether I would be interested in buying his chess collection that he had decided to part with. I was delighted and after having visited him and exchanging information (Doug had perfect records of his collection) I bought most of his sets, more than fifty sets over time, especially the ivory and figural ones. I did not buy some beautiful wooden sets he had at the time, which I later regretted, but some of them later joined my collection through other collectors that sold them to me.

That same year I got a contact from a CCI (Chess Collectors International) member, Franz Josef Lang, sadly recently deceased, who told me he had heard of me and would like to visit me in Lisbon. I invited him for lunch at Banco Santander Totta, where I was the CEO at the time, and we had a wonderful lunch talking about chess. I remember vividly Franz Josef telling me I should visit Victor Keats' collection in London (I was a Non Executive Director of Abbey National, going to London every month), which I organised asap. I remember as if it were today, Franz Josef saying how impressed and humbled he had been when he first visited Victor, and I felt exactly the same, wondering if I would ever be able to reunite such a wonderful collection one day...

In 2006 I went to live in London for the second time, to become CEO of Abbey National, which made my collecting much easier given I could visit Garrick Coleman whenever I wished or whenever he would receive new sets.

Also in 2007 there was an outstanding chess auction at Christie's London, the collection of Jean Claude Cholet (whom I never met), and where I met in person most of the main chess collectors of the time, and where I bought close to twenty lots on the sale. I had met Thomas Thomsen (through Franz Josef Lang) earlier and we became very good friends. Thomas is incredibly knowledgeable about chess and taught me a lot; for the auction he said: “come with me to sit on the first row and put your arm up whenever you want to buy a set and do not look back and keep it up!”. I followed his advice and bought most of the sets I was seriously interested in.

That is when I first met Jon Crumiller in person. Jon was just starting to collect figural sets, having first focused on playing sets, and he today has one of the outstanding collections worldwide.

Thomas Thomsen, as I mentioned above, had been helping me understand what great sets were and their origin. I had bought initially two chess sets from him and one beautiful Guzarat 17th century mother of pearl chess and backgammon board, which he kindly agreed to part with, when Thomas asked me, in 2008, whether I would be prepared to buy “most of his collection”, as he wanted to reorganize his finances in a different way. That was a big investment as Thomas had one of the best antique figural chess collections in the world at that time. That also made me hone my taste and decide what type of collection I wanted to build for the future as there were many different types of sets in his collection.

It was when I really decided that I wanted to focus my collection on figural sets, antique ones (XIX century or earlier) and made of carvable materials (ivory, wood, bone, amber, rock crystal, coral, etc). So no metal sets, no porcelain sets (with a few exceptions) and no playing sets except if they had especial features or superb carvings. Although not in really carvable materials, I have added gold to the list given its “beauty and precious status”. I have also decided, contrarily to most collectors, to also include boards, either to match/display the sets or on their own, given their beauty. Again here, only in carvable materials and with a focus on XVII century or earlier boards (as there are more older boards than complete chess sets).

Thomas also had good records of his collection and after a lot of conversations and iterations we settled on a target list where I bought around 100 items from Thomas, between sets, boards and antique single pieces. I was delighted when the truck arrived to my house in London full of boxes and everything was unpacked at my house. I felt then that my collection had joined the top world collections, under my definition of antique figural sets and antique boards in carvable materials.

Then in 2009 I was contacted by Gareth Williams and his wife Vel. They wanted to part with their collection (depicted in Gareth’s book “Master Pieces”), and we agreed to meet at the Le Colombier in Chelsea (close to where coincidentally I now live).

We went through the list of his sets, and we easily made an agreement for me to buy practically all of the figural antique sets Gareth had.

In 2009 I met Ernst Boehlen, having visited him in Berne. He had a wonderful collection there, having kept the best sets after selling several sets through Luke Honey at Bonhams.

We reached an agreement in the end, and I bought c. 30 sets and boards from him, which significantly further enhanced the quality of my collection.

Over the following years I made important successive acquisitions, both through Garrick Coleman (from whom I bought more than 50 sets and bords over the years), auctions at Christie’s, Sotheby’s, Bonhams, Bloomsbury and other auction houses, and also privately from fellow collectors.

Some had become friends over the years from seeing each other at CCI meetings , such as Franz Josef Lang, Bill Levene, Dermot and his son Ciaran Rochford, and Sid Freer and his son Trevor. Others I have been introduced to, including Rene de Chochoz, Halvor Jaeger and Lothar Schmid’s children.

I also developed strong friendships with other collectors which were also on the stage of building their collections, such as Jon Crumiller, Michael Melching, Max de Angelis and Emilio Ferre’. I believe that together with George Dean and Victor Keats’ collections, they own some of the highest quality chess collections in the world.

Given I did not envisage to target a given number of sets nor did I want to have too similar sets, I decided to sell the sets that I had acquired that were “too similar” or that had been upgraded through a new acquisition. I believe that, through the years, I have sold around one third of all the sets I acquired, either through auction or privately.

I now have around 600 sets in the collection, around 200 chess boards and a significant number of antique chess pieces. And, being very passionate about games, I have also collected other (mainly) Asian games such as Pachisi, Sugoroku, Weiqi, Xiangqi, Shogi and others.

But the main collection is about chess, part of me since my infancy, and this first book intends to show other collectors or people interested on chess, sculptures or other cultures the beauty of Indian and the sub-continental chess sets, boards and pieces. I have a special attraction for Indian sets, perhaps due to the historical relationship between India and Portugal.

We have placed special emphasis on the quality of the photos, contrary to most books we have seen, organized by Franco Maria Ricci and Pedro Lobo to highlight and allow the readers to better grasp the details of the pieces.

I hope you enjoy it; I have had a wonderful time thinking, preparing and executing it together with my dear friend Jon Crumiller and my other dear friends who have contributed to this book.

The Collection António Horta-Osório

I debated for a long time with myself, my wife and chess collector friends about the remit of the collection and how to define it.

More than 20 years later I am very pleased with the way the collection was shaped and its current form.

It presently contains more than 600 complete antique chess sets (many with matching boards), 150 separate antique boards and many individual antique pieces, mostly where a full set is not easily found or does not exist.

John Hafler, one of the greatest collectors of all times described his criteria for collecting chess sets, as published on CCI’s first published magazine in 1987:

When I read it, only recently in August 2024 on holidays, I thought to myself, “incredible that we have developed such similar criteria for collecting chess!”

And I had many of my friends advising me over the years that I should add different criteria to my collection, and make it broader to include, for example:

- Playing sets
- Non carvable materials such as metal, porcelain and glass.
- Contemporary sets
- Paintings
- Other paraphernalia

Which were well intentioned advice (and also reflected the personal tastes of my friends) but which I am very happy to have “resisted” because:

- Those do not really appeal to me
- It would have been too wide of a range to be able to focus on my criteria in such a strong depth as I have otherwise been able to do.



Fig. 1: The Chess Collector, Chess Collectors International, 1987, page 4. 8041

- For space reasons as I make it a point to have all my sets exhibited (otherwise I just sell them)

As a result I focused on very strict criteria (with some exceptions like in every rule...)

- Antique (XIX century or earlier)
- Figural or Islamic
- In carvable material (ivory, bone, wood, amber, rock crystal, coral and gold – the exception).

And antique boards also in carvable materials but older (preferably 17th century or earlier), given boards are more resistant than chess pieces (so there are more antique 17th century or earlier boards than sets).

And individual pieces when the full sets do not exist anymore or are very difficult to find.

After collecting for more than 20 years and having been fortunate to have been able to buy most of the greatest sixteen collections that existed 20 years ago, I can say that my favourite sets are the ones from India.

That is why this first volume is about “Chess sets from India and the Indian sub-continent“.

I became fascinated by the diversity of the Indian culture and the way it reflected on the chess sets made in the the different regions of the continent. Also I guess that being Portuguese and very fond of the Portuguese history in the 15-17th centuries, where very strong ties were established between Portugal and India (Portugal arrived in India by sea in the late part of the 15th century and only stopped ruling Goa in 1964, almost 500 years later) had a big influence in my preferences.

From the c. 600 sets in the collection, c. 160 are Indian/Indian sub-continent (including Nepal, Ceylon and Persia), the largest representation.

Jon and I selected 150 to be included in the book, plus 23 individual boards and 8 individual pieces. So very few Indian sub-continent sets are not included and mostly because they are almost exact replicas of sets already in the book.

The second largest representation are the other Asian sets (China, Japan, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia (c. 150), followed by the German/Austrian/Swiss sets (c. 120) and the French sets (c. 80).

These four countries/regions represent c. 80% of the collection.

The other 20% originate from a multitude of countries, like England, Netherlands, Denmark, Spain, Sweden, Italy, Turkey, Middle East and Africa. Sadly only one Portuguese chess set is in the collection and it is a Vista Alegre porcelain set (reasonably modern and in porcelain – an exception to the criteria because of its nationality...).

And more recently, for the past few years, I have been also acquiring and focusing more on really old Islamic sets and pieces, that I had not really paid much attention to previously. The fact that these pieces, part sets and sometimes complete (or almost complete) sets are c. 500-1,000 years older than my other sets has been growing on me and I have been adding pieces and sets mostly in ceramic, rock crystal, glass and lapis lazuli, but also in aquamarine, amethyst, soapstone, calcedony, topaz, alabaster, jet, ivory and bone.

Finally, and fortunately, my wife and I do also own some of the most outstanding Indo-Portuguese chess/games boards that were ever made, all from the 16/17th centuries and in carvable materials (teak/ivory/mother of pearl), which you can see in chapter 15.

In terms of quality and provenance, 80% of the collection is made up of the sets I have acquired directly from other collectors, so with known provenance and themselves representing decades of collecting and of research/pruning (plus the ones I acquired from Garrick Coleman, himself selling on behalf of other collectors).

The collection has given me a huge amount of pleasure over the last more than 20 years and still does.

To research, document, find and buy a new set is always a renewed pleasure, never diminished.

Two questions come often to my mind:

- when to stop (make it a “closed” collection)
- and what to do with the collection?

The first question is probably this easiest; as long as I am in good health and still passionate about chess sets/boards, I think I will continue collecting; without preempting selling some high quality sets to new collector friends, to help them build their own collection over time, as long as I have another similar set in the collection (which fortunately is the case as I have bought entire collections, some with similar but very rare sets).

The second question is more difficult, and I do not have the answer yet. And I guess that this project of documenting the collection publicly through this series of books will go a long way comforting me that it will, somehow, stay “all together permanently” irrespective of the final physical destination of the sets and boards in the decades and centuries to come.

Antique Ivory in Today's World

Jon Crumiller

The chess sets in this book need little introduction because they speak for themselves: they are timeless masterpieces from centuries past, making their public appearance for the first time in many years. It is important to note that the ivory items in this book have been confirmed as antique, meaning over 100 years old, by CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), whose mission is to preserve and protect endangered species.

A book that showcases ivory items might be considered controversial. Indeed, any modern-day reference to elephant ivory must be taken within a larger and more important context: the survival of the world's elephants is threatened by human predators. As the chosen stewards of our planet, it is our duty to protect these majestic, intelligent, and sophisticated creatures from the snares of increasingly brazen poachers. That mandate is incontrovertible.

With that in mind, one might be inclined to wonder why many of the antique chess sets in this book are made of ivory. The reason is simple and straightforward. Collectors of

antique items, including museums, private collectors, and institutions of higher learning, seek to acquire the best-possible expressions of art—those rare, crowning achievements of artistic talent, skill, and craftsmanship. For chess sets and other ornamental items of prior centuries, ivory was the definitive choice of the master artisans; it was exotic, readily carved, durable, and perfectly weighted, with a glossy appearance, smooth and solid to the touch. So the acquisition of a top-tier antique chess set is, in most cases, the acquisition of a top-tier antique ivory chess set.

Yet today, elephants are hunted so that their tusks can be exported and converted into mass-produced trinkets, offered for sale in tourist shops and flea markets in Asia and around the world. How to reconcile the difference between these two diametrically opposed scenarios?

An important distinction needs to be made between the present and the distant past. To state an obvious but overlooked fact: we can diligently strive to save the elephants of today and tomorrow, but we can't save the elephants of yesteryear. Another consideration, also obvious and also overlooked, although I imagine that we would all agree with it, is this: a defining characteristic of who we are, the human race, is that we take great measures to protect our cultural history, as captured by the artistic expressions of master artisans throughout the ages.

The chess sets in this book are part of those masterful artistic expressions, and are part of our cultural history. So while it is mandatory that we take all possible steps to preserve the world's elephant population, we would submit that it is also important to preserve our artistic heritage, even when the chosen artistic medium of the time is one that must not be newly obtained in today's world. True, the primary objective is more urgent than the secondary objective, but there is no reason to sacrifice an essential part of our heritage, as evidenced by these works of art, due solely to the perception that such a sacrifice would somehow promote the preservation of today's elephant population. It doesn't. The two objectives are entirely separate, and both can be met simultaneously.

The craftsmanship of the antique chess sets highlighted within this book is both exquisite and historical. We hope that the readers of this book will agree that these works of art still evoke feelings of excitement and awe, as they did in their original days of glory, centuries ago.

The Numbering System for Chess Sets, Boards, and Other Images

Each chess set, board, piece, and image within this book has a four-digit unique ID number, partly for organizational purposes, but also to ensure clarity to the readers (and the authors). These unique numbers have no significance other than their uniqueness, to ensure that there is no confusion between any sets. These unique IDs will span over all possible volumes in the book series.

The unique IDs are given in italics at the end of each caption, e.g. *8041* in the above

illustration, and also specified in italics when referencing any of the illustrations within a chapter, e.g. (Fig. 1 / *8041*).

This Book / Series of Books

This volume is about India and the Indian subcontinent chess sets, pieces and boards. It intends to be the first book of a series that will comprise our full collection of chess sets, pieces and boards.

We chose India as the first volume given that it is probably the geography that fascinates me the most in terms of chess, with its huge diversity of pieces, styles and themes across geographies and across centuries within the country.

And we also chose it given the historic connection of Portugal to India, where the Portuguese arrived by sea to Goa, in the 15th century, and stayed for centuries, almost 500 years until 1960.

It is therefore the geography where I have most sets, pieces and boards from.

Jon and I selected c. 180 of these items as the core of the “larger” Indian region sub-collection, having mostly left outside the book many single pieces, some boards that I bought in order to exhibit the sets and not for “themselves”, and (very) few sets.

I would like to write here a special tribute to Jon Crumiller, without whom this book would never have existed.

Jon has written and coordinated the publishing of some chess books before, a very helpful experience, and was the one to strongly incentivise me to do it in early 2024. He also had the generosity of helping me plan it, organising an online spreadsheet with all the sets, pieces and boards for easier reference, and coordinating the whole process along the way and with the chapter authors from inception to publication. He was tireless at making sure everything was on track, with gentle nods to all of us (other authors) to keep it there and in a wonderful team spirit and enormous attention to all details along the way.

Thank you very much Jon; your help on this book and your friendship are enormously appreciated!



CHAPTER 2

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

Ulrich Schädler

In his groundbreaking work 'Historia shahiludii' (History of Chess), the first volume of 'De ludis orientalibus' (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 (*Salvadora persica*), Hyde calls 'Indo-Persian', while nowadays chess sets like this are usually called being of 'Muslim type'. It was his friend John Fraunce, who provided this set for him during his stay at Mumbai. Fraunce 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 Fraunce, 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 shahiludii', Thomas Hyde, 1694, pages 134-135. / 8014

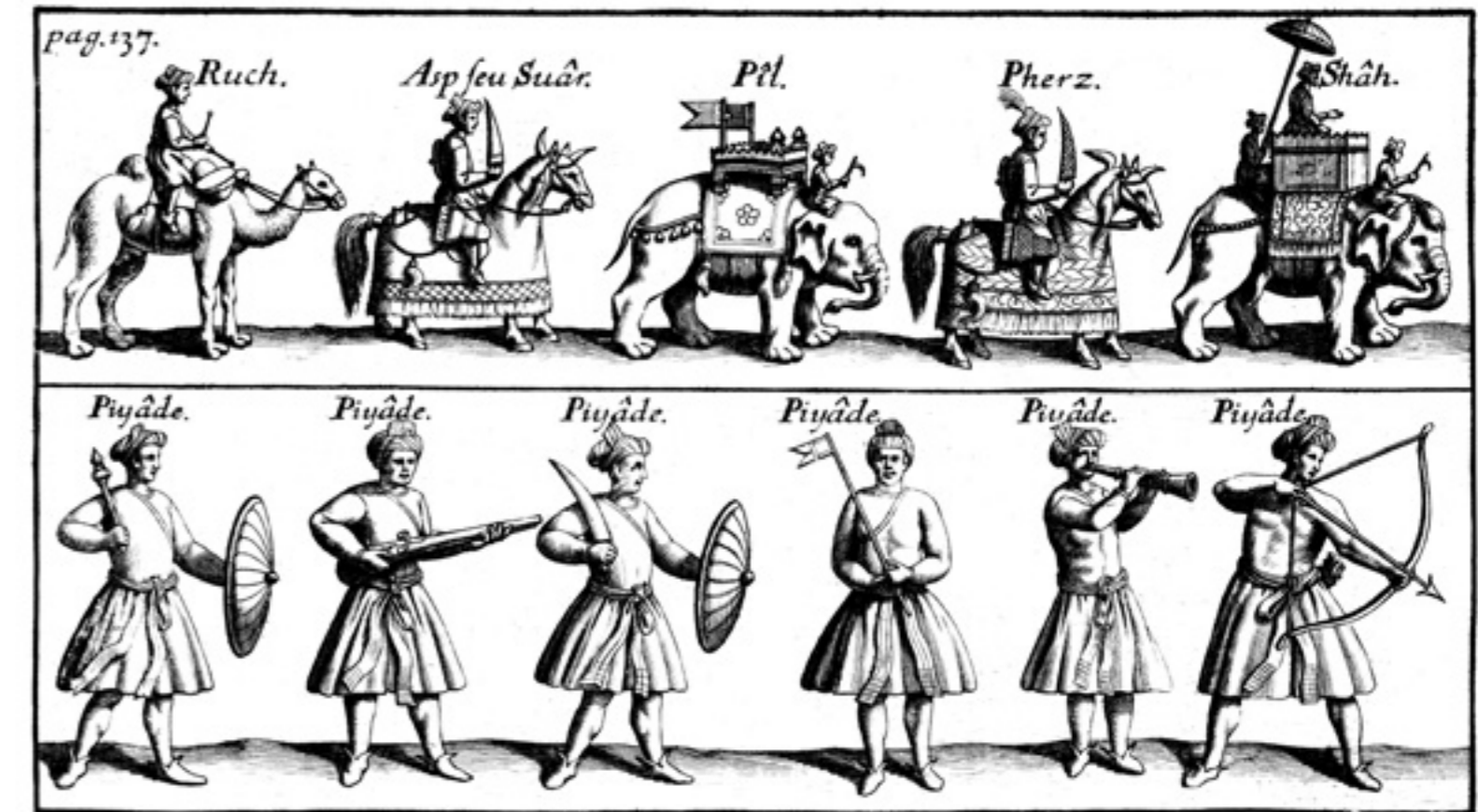
The first of Sheldon's chess sets is similar in shape to the 'Indo-Persian' one mentioned above, but turned of solid ivory, varnished and interspersed with gold. The pieces are splendidly coloured in red and green, of a quality, as Hyde states, of pieces in use by princes and magnates ("in usum principum et magnatum"). The other one is also of non-figural type and made of ebony. The pieces are hollowed out and contain a kind of metal bell, which rings when a piece is moved.

Non-figural sets like those three sets are usually labelled as "abstract" because of their non-figural shapes. However, whether these are really shapes abstracted from figurative ones, which is the actual meaning of the word "abstract", is a matter of debate. This is why I prefer to speak of non-figural shapes. Hyde's pieces bear some resemblance to so-called Arabic-Islamic chess pieces, many examples of which arrived even in Europe during the time of the crusades.

The turned pieces of the so-called Muslim type are easy to produce and to handle, and could be stowed and transported in the folded cloth game board, which used to serve as a bag, without suffering major damage. Such non-figural sets were widely used in India, not only among Muslim players, and made in different qualities, some for ordinary people, others made for "princes and magnates".

The last set is an elaborate figural set (Fig. 2 / 8015), the pieces of which depict, as Hyde states, the ancient East Indian army. The chess board itself was on top of a precious table which could also be used as a writing table. The reviewer of Robert Lambe's book 'The History of Chess, together with short and plain Instructions, by which any one man may easily play at it, without a Master' (London 1764) in the Gentleman's Magazine of October 1768 (p. 481-483, esp. 482) summarises Hyde's detailed description of this precious set for the non-Latin speaking reader. Hyde adds a drawing of the pieces to his description. The king is sitting on a throne (howdah) placed inside a wooden structure on an elephant's back; before him the mahout driving the elephant, behind him an umbrellifer protecting the king from the sun. The vizier (the modern queen), a general according to Hyde, is a mounted horseman holding a short sword in his hand and equipped with a bow and quiver hanging from the horse. The piece, which takes the place of the modern bishop is interpreted as a standard bearer (vexillifer) designed as an elephant with a square construction attached to its back, from which two field signs (vexilla) protrude. It should be noted here that in other Indian chess sets the elephant takes on the role of the rook. The knight resembles the vizier, but holds a drawn sword (ensis or gladius evaginatus) in his right. The rook is described as a rider on a dromedary, to which a pair of tom-toms is fixed. Each of these pieces has an individually designed pawn in the shape of differently equipped foot soldiers.

Very similar chess pieces coloured red and green are kept since 1610 in the Staatliche Museen Dresden (Rüstkammer Y 0355.01). Some pieces of a chess game in the British Museum are also of the same type, especially the vizier (Hyde's pherz or generalissimus), the knight on



his horse, and the rider with drums on a dromedary (Hyde's rook). The game comes from Surat and was given to Hans Sloane (1660-1753), whose collection became the founding collection of the British Museum, by his nephew William in 1723 (see Hans Sloane's Miscellanea, n. "-1122. A chesse play the board of silk & the twelve men white, several animals of ivory, several pointer, several ware like postures on elephants &c. as in the great Mogul's country. Given me by my nephew."). The fact that the set is incomplete appears to indicate that it was not new but what was left of a game that had already been used by native chess players. We can reasonably assume that all the three games were produced in the same artistic environment, and probably not too far away from Surat. Sloane's game also reminds us of the fact that in India game boards were usually made of cloth.

I have lingered over these games because not only are they the earliest known to have been brought to Europe, but also the earliest known examples of a traditional model of Indian chess sets, Indian artisans repeated and varied over the centuries, especially in Rajasthan. And they date to a period on the threshold towards the emergence of a games industry catering for European tastes.

Fig. 2: Indian chess set illustrated in *De ludis orientalibus, 'Historia sbabiludii'*, Thomas Hyde, 1694, page 137. / 8015



Fig. 3: Jan Huygen van Linschoten, *Mare Arabicum et Indicum* (Map of Arabia and India), c. 1599. / 8016

Several public and private collections preserve ivory figurines of kings riding on elephants, similar to the ones described in Chapter 4. They are often of remarkable size and highly elaborated, sometimes with additional figures such as guards or soldiers accompanying the king's elephant, as is the case with the famous Charlemagne's elephant in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris. Some of them are dated as far back as the Middle Ages. However, ivory cutters at Berhampore and elsewhere carved figurines of elephants, some even equipped with howdahs on their backs, to be sold as individual pieces, as illustrated in Chapter 4. Thus, without context and without other chess pieces from the same set, it is difficult to determine whether such single elephant kings are really chess pieces or rather toys or devotionalia.



Fig. 4: Mathew Carey, *An Accurate Map of Hindostan and India, from the best Authorities*, 1814. / 8017

On the other hand, the observation might be of interest that there exist some incomplete groups of chess pieces with the kings and viziers missing. This is for example the case with 47 surviving 18th century chess pieces, mainly rooks and pawns, in the Clive collection at Powis Castle. As we have seen, also in Hans Sloane's set in the British Museum the kings are missing. It seems obvious therefore that sometimes kings and viziers were removed from a game and used otherwise, while the rest of the army could be used by children as toy soldiers.

European Colonialism in India

With Vasco da Gama's arrival in Kozhikode (Calicut) at the South-West coast of India in 1498, the Portuguese had opened the trade route to India and East Asia, where they established commercial and diplomatic relations with the Mughal Empire and installed military and trading posts at Goa in India and Macao in China.

This new trade route naturally attracted the attention of trading companies from other countries, who also hoped to make rich profits from the trade in cotton, silk, saltpetre, spices, and other goods. The Portuguese quickly came into conflict with the Arabs, the Mamluks in Egypt, the Ottoman Empire, the Spanish, the Dutch 'Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie' (VOC), and the British East India Company (also called 'John Company') upon the safest harbours, the best access to raw material and products, privileges from the Mughal Emperor, or influence on rulers of Indian kingdoms. Thus, the Mughal Empire and other Indian states, which joined one side or the other, were also drawn into all these conflicts and allowed themselves to be played off against each other by the Europeans. Soon, the French also got involved and founded the 'Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes orientales' in 1664, which gained temporary influence in the south of India and on the East coast with Puducherry as an important fortified harbour. The French activities in India ended with the defeat against Robert Clive ('Clive of India') in the Battle of Plassey (1757), in which the French supported the Nawab of Bengal Siraj al-Dawla in his conflict against the British, and the destruction of Puducherry by the British in 1761. With control of Bengal, the British EIC, founded in 1600, succeeded in installing British colonial rule in India. Until after the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the company administered British imperial government in India. These wars between the EIC and native states found their figurative expression in the so-called 'John Company' chess sets.

Indian games for European customers

The production of game boxes, folding game boards, one- and double-sided game boards, and accessories such as chess sets, counters, dice and dice cups in India was pushed by the so-called Asian Trade during the centuries of European colonialism in Southeast Asia, already since the late 16th century, but in particular from the 18th century onwards. The main customers were at first the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, the French, and the British. Not only Indian craftsmen produced luxury items for the new target group of Europeans, but also artisans in Burma (today Myanmar) and China produced games and gaming material, including lacquer boxes and mother-of-pearl gaming counters, much appreciated by European card players.

We must not forget that chess despite its prestige as a noble game of great ancestry became more popular in Europe only at the end of the 18th century and in the early 19th century, when chess and billiards were regarded representing bourgeoisie values of rationality. The most popular games people played in Europe were Backgammon, Billiards, Dominoes, and card games such as Whist and Boston, while in Britain also Cribbage, Pope Joan, and Bezique were en vogue.

The preferences of European customers and their impact on Indian crafts is illustrated by Lawrence M. Stubbs in his 'Monograph of ivory carving in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh', published in 1900. He observed that in a region with only sporadic demand from Europeans as Lucknow and Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh, the artisans produced chessmen mainly for the local market. Since they did not have regular access to ivory, they carved chiefly from camel bone and sold their products to middlemen. Customers for ivory work were the European residents, who had to order chess sets specially, since the craftsmen did not have chess sets in stock, but made them to order for interested customers. Stubbs gives the example of a set made for a certain Mr. Ali Yusuf in Lucknow (p. 7): "Eight pawns about an inch long, dressed according to the carver's idea of old Indian infantry uniform, with shield on one arm and a lance poised in an angular direction in the other (to show the pawn's angular motion when it takes a piece); king sitting on a throne about an inch square; vizier with a stately beard on a somewhat lower 'masnad' than the king; two camel sowars (bishops); two cavalry sowars (knights); two elephant sowars (castles), one set white and the other red (minakari) work. Cost Rs. 40."

A similar set was given to the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1885 on the occasion of his 70th birthday by consul William Schönlanck. Ordinary chessmen, for which the artisans used the conventional models they inherited from their fathers and grandfathers, Stubbs says, were much more modest, except for those commanded by noble customers. As a matter of fact, on looking at Indian chess sets for local use, one observes that ivory is often applied only in form of leftover pieces glued together; otherwise cheaper or easier accessible materials such as camel bone, wood, brass, silver or stone are more common.

As Stubbs's report from Lucknow shows, craftsmen made chess sets and game boards practically all over India, but apparently there were only few production centres with sufficient capacity for production of games and other goods the Europeans were after on a larger scale, i.e. skilled craftsmen, access to raw materials, and distribution. Innovative designs were chiefly introduced by Europeans and intended to satisfy their taste and desire for representation.

Many of the sets made for foreign customers were obviously not intended for real play but as show pieces. The pieces of 'John Company' sets are often too big to handle, many Rajasthani figures are very delicate with their many protruding parts, and even the slender abstract chess pieces from Visakhapatnam appear not to be very convenient for playing regular chess matches. Chess players in Britain would prefer robust and easily distinguishable pieces with a stable stand offered by chess sets of the so-called 'Barleycorn' pattern, 'St. George' pattern (so-called according to the St. George's chess club of London), 'Calvert' (referring to John Calvert, turner and maker of chess sets, between 1791 and 1822), 'Dublin' (referring to the Dublin Chess Club) or 'Edinburgh Northern Upright' patterns, and, since 1849, the 'Staunton' sets (named after the English chess master Howard Staunton) produced by John Jaques.

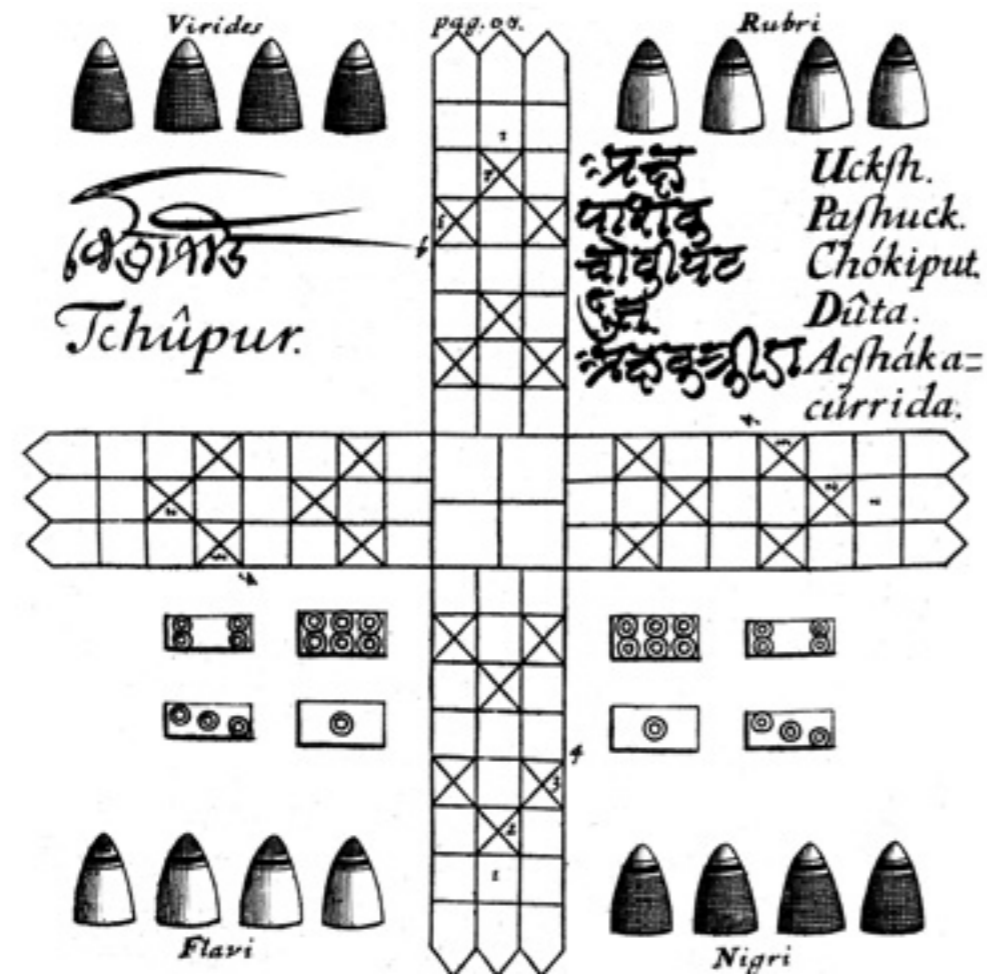


Fig. 5: illustrated in *De ludis orientalibus*, 'Historia nerdiludii', Thomas Hyde, 1694, page 68. / 8018

Indian craftsmen were capable of producing game boards and accessories of various styles according to the demands of clients from different European countries. Game boards and accessories of sometimes high quality show that such products were manufactured for customers in Spain and Portugal, in Italy and France. For example, the backgammon board of a double-sided game board for chess and backgammon from Gujarat (chessboard 0908 in Chapter 15), made from mother-of-pearl and dating to the 16th/17th century, has the typical Iberian semi-circular niches for the game pieces instead of the usual elongated 'tongues'. The same holds true for reversible game boards for the game of the goose on one side and chess and backgammon on the other, made in Western India using Persian style micro-mosaic inlaid decoration (so-called *sadeli*) during the same period and obviously for Portuguese customers.

During the time of the British colonial empire in India, the British formed an important clientele for Indian artisans, although factories of other countries continued to exist. Employees of the East India Company purchased their products, on the one hand to furnish their Indian homes, and on the other to showcase their Indian commitment at home. In any case, games were purchased for private use, as the EIC penalised gambling in public places such as taverns or play-

houses with dismissal from service, as a decision from 1679 teaches us. Some EIC officials also developed a genuine interest in Indian art and culture, as for example Edward Clive and James Tod, who amassed rich collections of Indian art and handicrafts. In this context, chess we are dealing with in this volume, finds its place, since it was regarded a game of Indian origin.

However, the British were also interested in other indigenous Indian games: Thomas Hyde, for example, in his book on the history of oriental board games entitled 'Historia nerdiludii' (the second volume of 'De ludis orientalibus' cited above), described the traditional Indian board game Chaupar (he calls Tchûpur, p. 68-70 with illustration), also known as Pachisi (Fig. 5 / 8018). He had got a copy from an Indian boatswain, who however could not explain the rules to him. So he contacted two secretaries of the EIC and other British merchants to learn about the game, consisting of the board, 4 × 4 wooden pieces of the toothbrush tree *Salvadora persica*, and two rectangular long dice. It took a hundred years more until Captain Thomas Williamson, after 20 years of military service in India, undertook a short-lived attempt to introduce the "Hindostanee Game of Patchees" in Britain. Only after another century the anglicised and simplified version 'Ludo' and a little later 'Snakes and Ladders', also a board game of Indian origin, started to conquer the world.

What is said in India about Captain James Tod (1782-1835), the author of 'Annals and Antiquities of Rajast'han or the Central and Western Rajput States of India', is also revealing in this sense. He had begun a military career within the EIC, before he was appointed political administrator of the five main states of Rajasthan in 1818. The following year, the Ruler of Mewar called a village "Todgarh" (translates "Fort Tod") in his honour. According to Indian sources, Tod, who left India in 1823, is said to have played Chaupar (Pachisi) with the Count of Sardargarh.

Nowadays specialists distinguish among different types and styles of chess sets they attribute — often without solid ground — to various regions and centres in India. They speak of 'Muslim type' or 'Rajasthan' chess sets, of 'Pepys sets' or 'John Company' sets. The games are believed to come from Gujarat, Rajasthan, the 'Central Provinces' or more precisely from Mumbai, Jodhpur, Lucknow, Goa, Murshidabad, Berhampore or Visakhapatnam, to name the most frequently mentioned. Let us have a short look at some of these centres and their particular styles, which are dealt with in more detail in other chapters of this volume.

Western India: Gujarat and Goa

The earliest examples of games made in India for Europeans come from western India and are usually attributed to the Mughal provinces of Gujarat or Sindh, the states to the East and West of the modern Indian-Pakistani border, or to Goa and the Malabar coast further south. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, game boards were produced here, in addition to caskets, traveling cabinets and other furniture, mainly for Portuguese customers.

Sophisticated materials such as different exotic woods, polychrome ivory, bone and horn, were used for intricate and detailed ornamentation in inlay technique including micro-mosaic (sadeli work). Complex vegetal scrolls and flower motifs cover the surfaces of these pieces. In some cases humans or animals, the details of which enhanced with engraving, appear in the midst of this stylized vegetation. These characteristic decorative motifs are inspired chiefly by Persian art and were also applied to other types of objects such as furniture and textiles. Although related in style and technique and yet also showing some differences depending on where they were made, these styles are referred to as „Indo-Portuguese“.

Several elements in these game boards can be clearly identified as European. The very fact that they are wooden boards is European, because in India game boards were usually made of cloth. Some double-sided game boards have the „Game of the Goose“ on one side, a game of Italian origin unknown to India prior to the arrival of the Europeans. The squares of the chess boards are chequered in black and white as is usual in Europe and lack the typical markings in the central and corner squares and the central squares of each of the four edges of the board as on Indian chess boards.

As with other goods destined for Europe, game boards were frequently traded via Goa, conquered by the Portuguese in 1510, which became an important platform for Indo-European commerce.

Mumbai

A centre for production of Anglo-Indian items was Mumbai, where objects made from so-called Bombay inlaid work were produced since the beginning of the 19th century. Despite the labelling as „inlaid work“ the technique consists of veneering (not inlaying!) wooden surfaces with elements from ivory, horn, Sappan wood, ebony and tin wire in micro-mosaic (called sadeli) and is said to have been introduced to Mumbai and Surat from Shiraz. As far as games are concerned, we have to mention small rectangular folding boxes with a Backgammon board inside and on the lid a Chess board, a Cribbage board, and a board for 'German Tactics' or 'Game of siege', a German 'Fox and Geese'-variant that became popular in Britain during the second half of the 19th century.

Rajasthan

Rajasthan is famous for its polychrome figural chess sets meticulously crafted of ivory or camel bone, as Thomas Hyde's figural chess set described above. Except for those early games, most of the sets preserved in private and public collections date to the 19th and 20th centuries, with Jaipur or Jodhpur thought to be the main centres. The pieces, especially the king and the vizier sitting in howdahs mounted atop elephants, can be of remarkable size. Red (for the Hindus) and green (for the Muslims) or cream, sometimes with gilt highlights, are the usual colours given to the two armies. Similar, but usually much simpler are sets of sandalwood and ebony, which are still produced nowadays.

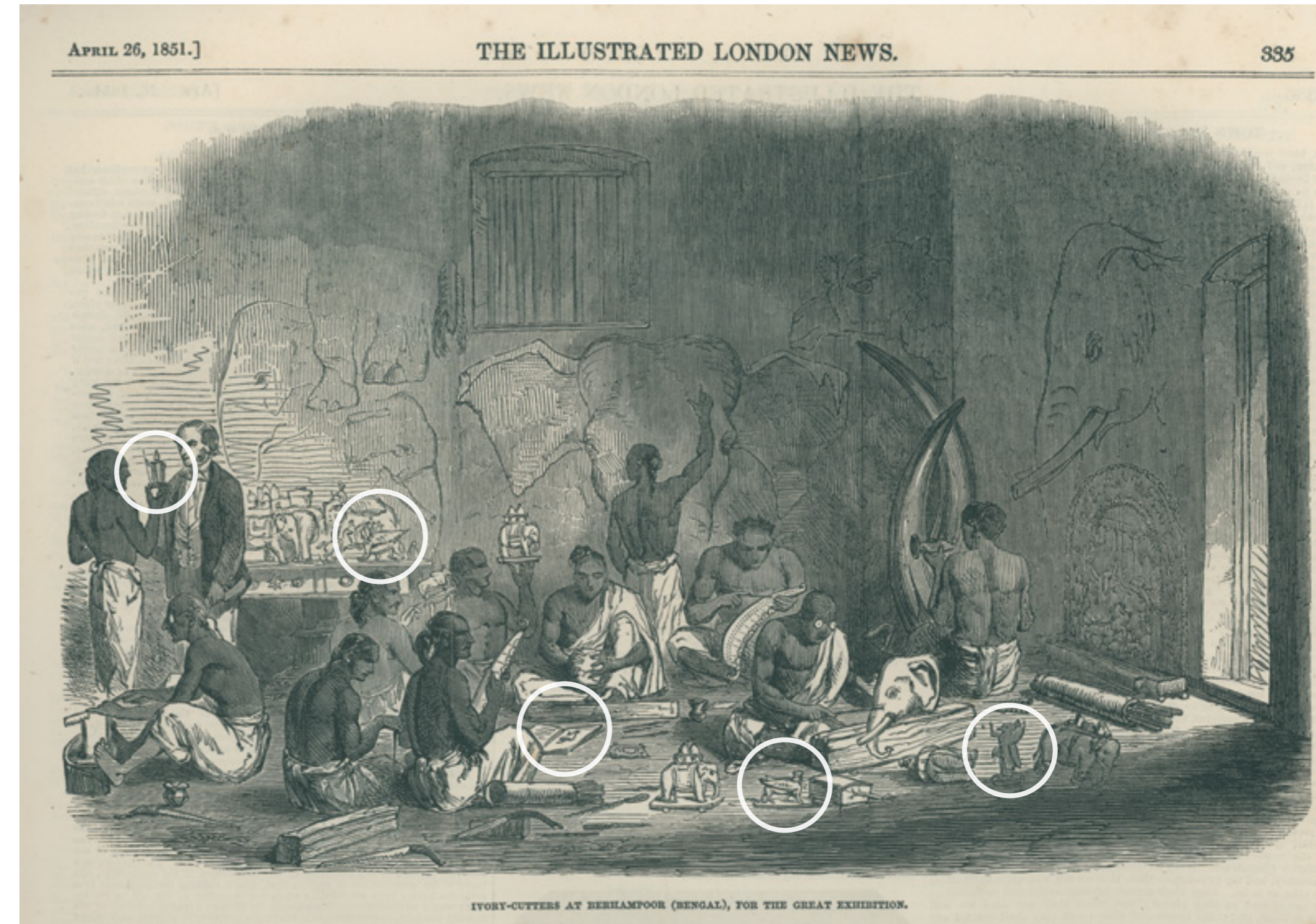


Fig. 6: Illustration of a Berhampore ivory workshop with Nineveh-themed items circled, *The Illustrated London News*, issue of 1851-04-26. / 8019

In another type of Rajasthani chess sets the King is depicted sitting on a throne, while the bishop, knight and rook are depicted in the form of elephant's, camel's and horse's heads on pedestals.

Bengal: Murshidabad and Berhampore

The region of Murshidabad (West Bengal), some 160 km north of Kolkata, was an important centre of ivory carving primarily for furniture already in the first half of the 18th century. When in 1765 the British took over the financial administration (taxes, customs) in the Bengal region, ivory carvers turned to Anglo-Indian clients, be it EIC-officials working in India and for the European market. European designs were introduced into their products, also through European artisans who installed themselves in the region, bringing with them British pattern books for cabinet makers. From the late eighteenth until about the middle of the 19th century, nearby Berhampore was renowned for its ivory carving workshops. However, ivory carving in the region declined rapidly in the second half of the 19th century.

One major type of chess sets produced here were the so-called 'John' sets or 'John Company' sets. They often show the East India Company army on one side against the army of an Indian ruler on the other side.

In 1851, in preparation of the Universal Exhibition in London, ivory carvers from Berhampore gave eloquent testimony to their craftsmanship. They carved a remarkable chess set inspired by the figures of deities, demons, and warriors illustrated in Austen Henry Layard's book

about his excavations at Assyrian Nineveh (near Mosul in Iraq), probably "The Monuments of Nineveh" published in 1849. This undeniable proof of skill — all they could refer to were profile drawings, they had to develop into three-dimensional figures — impressed the public in such a way that on 26 April 1851, the Illustrated London News published an article with a picture of the Indian ivory carvers at work (Fig. 6 / 8019; see also Chapter 3, Fig. 1 / 8003). The text says that "it would doubtless amuse many people in England if they could see the rough and primitive tools with which such minute and beautiful work is turned out".



Fig. 7: Nineveh-themed Indian chess set, British Royal Collection. / 8020

The chess set ended up in the British Royal Collection (Fig. 7 / 8020), where it is still kept to the present day.

Visakhapatnam

At the end of the 18th century Visakhapatnam on the North shore of the Coromandel coast between Chennai and Kolkata, became famous for their games boxes inlaid or veneered with ivory and gaming pieces of turned ivory or horn.

The 'Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition in 1883-1884' (vol. 2, Calcutta 1885, p. 200) reads: "This collection embraces work-boxes, card-cases, inkstands, chess-boards, and a number of nick-nacks, made chiefly of sandalwood inlaid with ivory fretwork, tortoise-shell, horn, &c. The surface of the ivory is generally adorned with a filling in black of mythological figures very well executed, or with floral forms in light and shade which are copies of European designs. The workmanship of the articles is usually superior, and although expensive, they are much in demand as drawing-room ornaments".

After a visit to Visakhapatnam Henrietta Clive, the daughter of Edward Clive, who acted as governor of Chennai from 1798 to 1803, describes the technique in a letter to her father dated April 4, 1801: "We have seen people inlaying the Ivory it appears very simple they draw the pattern ... they intend with a pencil and then cut it out slightly with a small piece of Iron, they afterwards put hot Lac upon it, and when it is dry scrape it off and polish it, the Lac remains in the marks made with the piece of Iron..." (Treasures from India, p. 84).

It seems that she brought two games boxes back to England to Powis Castle (Clive Collection) in 1801. These boxes are the more important since they can be dated rather exactly and hitherto are the earliest games from Visakhapatnam known to have arrived in Europe.

The exterior of these game boxes is for chess, the interior for backgammon, probably the most popular board game of the British at the time. Also part of the whole are three smaller boxes inside, to store the chess figures and the backgammon counters. Some of these boxes have the shape of a two-volume book set, i.e. when folded, the board could be placed vertically in a bookshelf, such as the example in the collection presented here, and a nearly identical one in Tyntesfield, North Somerset, dating to about 1850 (NT 11142). The model for this type are British leather-bound folding boards for chess and backgammon, popular in the 19th century, with the spines usually marked with a serious title such as 'History of England', 'History of America' or 'Staunton on Chess' among others. In some cases one of the boxes bear the double rows of holes for the fiches to keep score in a game of Cribbage.

The chequered game board and the often black and white pieces alone are signs of European influence. The chess pieces are mostly of turned ivory and horn, except for the heads of the bishop and the horse's head of the knight screwed onto the base. The vizier is, although of non-figural shape, clearly seen as a Queen, since it is just smaller than the king and wears a crown. The piece representing the bishop has usually a triangular top with

slightly curved edges — a reminiscence of the bishop's mitre. This element shows that the models were British chess sets, since in other countries this piece has many names, but is never called a bishop.

During the 19th century, artisans at Visakhapatnam also produced another type of boxes and game boards in the so-called Mughal style, i.e. wooden surfaces to which ornamental sheets made from ivory and tortoiseshell or from bone to imitate those more precious materials were applied.

Mysuru

We cannot conclude this survey of Indian chess sets without mentioning the former Kingdom of Mysuru in the South of India. In 1831, the British took over the political and administrative control of Mysuru, depriving Mummadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar III (1794-1868) of his functions. This left him plenty of time to pursue his passion: traditional Indian board and card games. He collected games, invented games and variants of games of his own, wrote books about games and had an entire room of the Jaganmohana Palace (now the Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery) decorated with polychrome wall-paintings depicting the playing of games, knight's tours and game boards. In 1867, he sent an outstanding compendium of games fashioned in the shape of an unfolding ivory-inlaid wooden box to the Universal Exhibition in Paris, purchased by the India Museum and now kept in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Some chess sets produced in Mysuru, chiefly made from wood and for European customers, show that there was a local production of games down to the end of the 19th century. However, it seems that Wadiyar, in spite of his enthusiasm for games, did not engage in fostering a production of games on a larger scale to satisfy other customers than himself.

Our brief overview aims to show that the subject of chess games from India touches on aspects of art, history, politics, economics, culture, and even social issues. All over the world chess connects people, who use the universal language of one of the greatest board games ever invented by man.

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Important information can be gathered from the catalogues of the International Industrial Exhibitions held in the 19th century, especially in London 1851, 1862 and 1871, Dublin 1865, Vienna 1873, Philadelphia 1876, Paris 1878, and Calcutta 1883/84.



CHAPTER 3

Techniques and Materials Used by Craftsmen in India for the Manufacture of Chessmen and Boards in the 18th and 19th Centuries

Thomas H. Thomsen

In the literature the use of ivory in particular is well documented, other materials to a lesser extent. References to the techniques and the tools used are scant.

In most cases the quality and precision of the work allows us to draw conclusions about the tools probably used given the evidently high level of skills.

This chapter will cover the art of carving and turning for chessmen as well as carpentry and inlay work for the boards. Also the methods for decorating the finished items, i.e. staining and painting, will be addressed. The techniques applied in casting metals, like bronze, silver and gold, i.e. the lost wax process or stone cutting, etc., are well covered in the literature and are not part of this article.

The art of carving and turning in India was often passed from father to sons, the latter often started at the age of 10-12 years and were assigned tasks of increasing responsibility in line with the progress made. Usually the first step was learning free hand drawing, essential to outlining the desired piece on the raw material. It is reported that the master craftsmen enjoyed a respectable status in society due to the high level of skill involved.¹ Maharajas often kept court carvers. A different structure is found in the factories located in the larger cities, where a larger number of carvers, turners, etc. were employed. Here individual workmen would specialise in a particular type of work, i.e. turning, carving, polishing, etc. (fig. 1 / 8003).

Next double page
 Fig. 1: Berhampore ivory workshop, *The Illustrated London News*, 1851-04-26. Public domain. / 8003

¹ Vinod Prakash Dwivedi, *Indian Ivories*, National Museum New Delhi, 1976.



IVORY-CUTTERS AT BERHAMPOOR (BENGAL), FOR THE GREAT EXHIBITION.



Fig. 2: Turned chessman prior to carving. / 8043

Materials Used for Chessmen and Boards

A wide variety of materials were used: ivory, bone, horn, sandal wood, rose wood, ebony and other wood types, tortoise shell, brass, bronze, silver, gold, rock crystal, coral, semi-precious stones, textiles, glass pearls. Some authors mention the use of fossil mammoth ivory from Russia as well as walrus ivory. There is no evidence available for it.

It is reported that Indian carvers preferred ivory from Africa and Burma (= today Myanmar) to the locally available material since it had a finer grain and was less likely to turn yellowish. In any case, most pieces were probably bleached. The differing properties were attributed to the different types of food that wild animals would eat as opposed to domestic ones. The ivory was supplied by the British trading companies located in the larger cities.

Types of Chessmen and Boards

The chess pieces from India are of two basic types: First the turned ones that often have elaborately carved additional decorative work and secondly the purely carved ones of the figural type. Chessmen of the first category are made of one piece or in sections that are joined by threads or pegs. The figural pieces can be carved out of one block or assembled with the various parts pegged together and mounted on a base.

Examples for the first category are the turned chess pieces from Visakhapatnam and Berhampore with additional elaborate carving (fig. 2 / 8043), and of course all the Muslim sets that are mostly pure turning work. In the second group we find among others the so-called John Company sets, generally made of one piece mounted on a flat base, and the polychrome Rajasthani sets, assembled from a number of individual elements that are joined by pegs.

The boards are traditional carpentry work using exclusively valuable woods and materials like ivory, bone, tortoise shell and ebony for the inlay work. This technique is used for the chess squares and for any decorative floral or geometric work on the frames. In Visakhapatnam ivory veneer was engraved or etched and the resulting pattern usually filled with molten black lac or ink.² Once dried the surface is scraped clean and polished (fig. 3 / 8044).

Tools

Most of the tools used to shape chessmen and boards are the same or similar to the carpentry tools well known for centuries. Even the simple turning rigs like the bow driven lathe, go back a long time. A lathe is essential to achieve a precise cylindrical form. The mentioned bow lathe is already described and pictured in a manuscript from 1284 by Alfonso X the Wise kept in the Monastery of El Escorial near Madrid (fig. 4 / 8045).³

² Michael Mark, *Antique Indian Chess Sets*, Kelkheim, Germany, 1997.

³ Alfonso X "the Wise", *Libro del Axedrez, Dados y Tablas*, 1284, commented edition by Schädler/Calvo 2009, p.67.)



Fig. 3: Visakhapatnam engraved and coloured decoration. / 8044

In Africa even to this date craftsmen can be found in bazaars using this type of lathe. It consists of a simple frame with two points to hold the workpiece and is driven by hand with the help of a string bow (fig. 5 / 8046).

The tools are held in the other hand or in some cases even with the foot. We can safely assume that during British rule some simple machines were imported, probably of the spring pole type or of the pedal-driven sort that includes a flywheel (fig. 6a / 8047a, fig. 6b / 8047b, and fig. 7 / 8048).

There are no indications that any elaborate ornamental lathes like the ones produced in Britain by Holtzapffel or Evans reached India. As opposed to China, in India the so-called puzzle balls were not produced.⁴

These simple types of lathes have the advantage of easily achieving a low number of revolutions per minute [RPMs], an important feature to produce threads with the help of a chaser (fig. 8 / 8049). For the normal turning work, very sharp chisels or cutters are best. To work on

⁴ *Crossing Games, Journeys between East and West*, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon, 2022, p. 51.



Fig. 4: Bow-driven primitive lathe, manuscript by Alfonso X, 1284, fol.3r. / 8045



Fig. 5: Bow-driven lathe (Persian lathe), after John Jacob Holtzapffel, *Turning and Mechanical Manipulation*, vol. IV, London 1881, p. 7 Fig. 6. / 8046



Fig. 6a: Bow and spring pole-driven lathe, Paternostermaker, from: Hausbuch der Mendelschen Zwölfbrüderstiftung, Band 1. Nürnberg 1426–1549. Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg, Amb. 317.2^o, fol. 13r / 8047a



Fig. 6b: Bow and spring pole-driven lathe, Wood turner, from: Hausbuch der Mendelschen Zwölfbrüderstiftung, Band 1. Nürnberg 1426–1549. Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg, Amb. 317.2^o, fol. 18v / 8047b

wood, an angled cutting position of the tool is required, and for ivory, the tool is positioned below the centre line, achieving a scraping rather than a cutting action.

The precise measurements were controlled with the help of compasses and templates. The latter are a must if, say, eight matching pawns are to be produced. If a large number of identical pieces are to be turned, the best approach would be the making (sharpening) of a special tool reflecting the exact profile required.

The much-needed drill was of the bow-driven type that allows, given the required skill, a fairly precise action (fig. 9 / 8050).

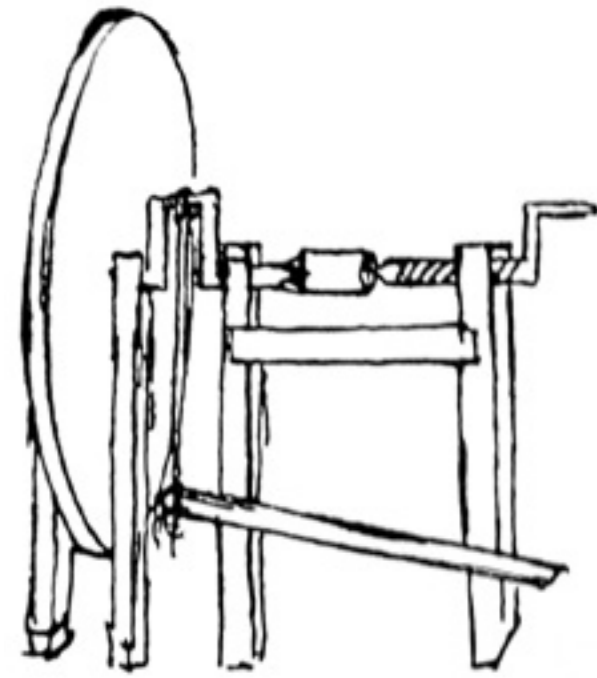


Fig. 7: Pedal-actioned lathe (Leonardo da Vinci). / 8048

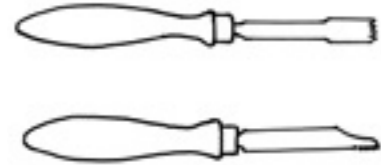
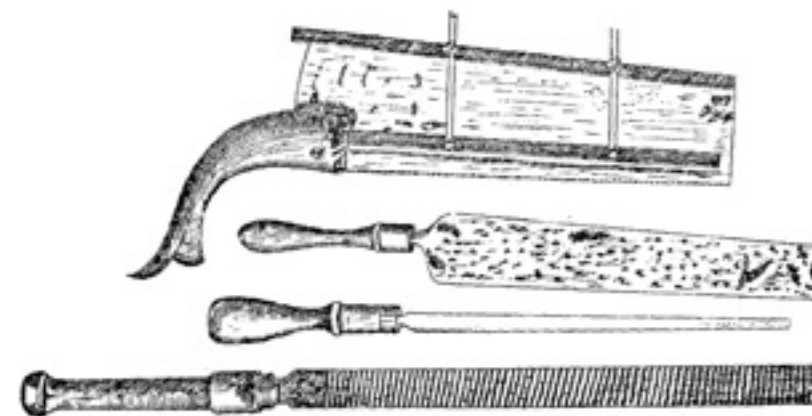


Fig. 8: Chasers to produce threads on a Lathe. / 8049



Caption: Punjab, The Civil and Military



Fig. 9: Bow-driven drill, after John Jacob Holtzapffel, *Turning and Mechanical Manipulation*, vol. IV, London 1881, p.4, Fig.3. / 8050



Fig. 11: Simple tools used in India, Monograph on Ivory Carving in the Punjab, The Civil and Military Gazette Press, Lahore, 1900, Fig. 2 / 8052



Fig. 12: Threads on Indian chess pieces. / 8053

The carving tools used were simple like the ones used by carpenters. Saws are used to cut the tusks for the rough work preparation, rasps and files as well as chisels are the most important tools to remove the material.⁵ The more modern tools had handles, the older ones did not (fig. 10 / 8051 and fig. 11 / 8052). Measurements, like in turning, were controlled by compasses, rulers and templates. We can safely assume that the tools used all over India were of the same simple type corresponding to the technology of the time.

Process for Chessmen

Fig. 2 / 8043 above shows the outline of a turned chess piece before it is passed to the carver for finishing. Finally, the workpiece would be polished using fish scales and chalk. Making a chess piece out of several sections had significant advantages, such as the economic use of the ivory, the easier handling of the workpiece and a shorter piece in the lathe. A long section in the lathe could bend or break the workpiece due to the cutting force exercised by the tool. The threads produced by turners in India had a saw-like profile

⁵ *Monograph on Ivory Carving in the Punjab*, The Civil and Military Gazette Press, Lahore, 1900.

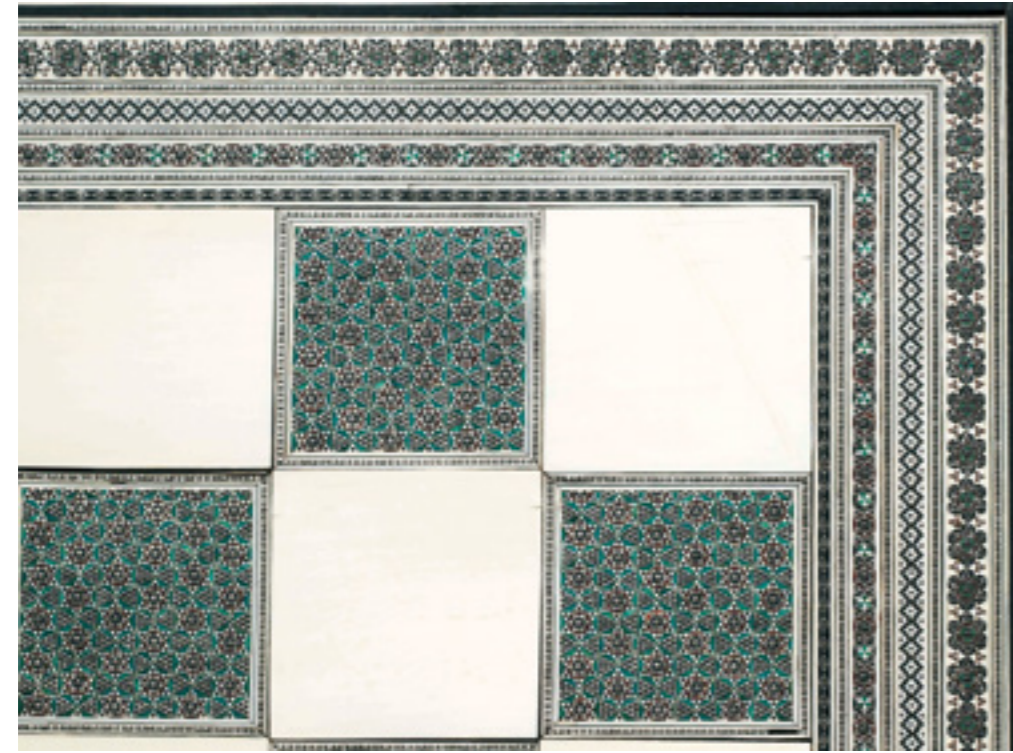


Fig. 13: Inlay *sadeli* work. / 8054

Evidently, drills were used to achieve particular forms. A difficult task, for example, is the shaping of people sitting under a howdah on an elephant like seen in Bengal and in John Company sets. For such fine work the carver will often sharpen specially adapted tools with very fine tips.

Process for Chess Boards

Boards were most likely made by trained carpenters with experience in inlay work. A difficult task was the production of ivory veneer for boxes and boards. No reports have been found to show the kind of rigs they used to produce thin layers of ivory. In the north, ivory furniture was popular; the inlay work was predominantly found in the south of India. For the classic inlay work, carpenter knives and fine chisels were needed.

The so-called *sadeli* work is a micro-mosaic consisting of very fine patterns assembled from wood, ivory or bone and pewter for decorative purposes. This is achieved by bundling thin strips of the material that are glued together and then sliced into thin layers for the inlay work. Boards and boxes made this way are the result of long tedious work (fig. 13 / 8054).

(fig. 12 / 8053), in later sets threads of the European profile are also used. The threads, of course, could also be used to fix the section to be worked on to a handle with a matching thread, thus facilitating the work of the carver.

For a figural chess piece, one would start with a drawing which outlined the profile from the front and side. Using a saw, the profile would be followed in the two planes. For the subsequent carving work the piece would often be held in a wooden vice, since the wood does not damage the ivory. Alternatively, the piece could be glued with lacquer onto a holder; very useful for small items. The latter method is also an option to hold smaller pieces for turning. One could also keep an extended base serving as a handle that would then be cut off from the finished part.

Staining and Painting Ivory

To tell the difference between the two sides of a chess set, various methods are used. Some sets are natural ivory and the pieces of the two sides have different shapes or wear different uniforms or arms. Mostly one side is stained or painted. The classic colours for chess sets in India were red and green.

To stain ivory, basically the same methods applied for centuries for colouring cloth are used.⁶ The finished and polished pieces are dipped in a hot dye close to boiling temperature and retrieved once the desired intensity of colour is obtained. Up to the late 19th century, vegetable or mineral pigments were used; today less light-resistant aniline dyes are common. Ivory, being an animal product, contains fats etc., and will not take on a colour unless the surface is “broken.” This is achieved by adding some acid to the dye or by dipping the pieces in an acid bath before staining. After staining, it is important to put the piece in clear water to stop the colouring process and to avoid drip marks. As to the dyes used, there are many recipes reported; mostly they were kept secret.

For obtaining a red colour, the recipes were based on the use of cochineal, Brazil wood or henna. It has been reported that in India discarded red British uniforms were boiled to recover the red pigments for ivory staining.

For green colours, copper salts were used. For black, acetate of iron could be used. Some of the recipes reported in the literature are complicated, and for some it is doubtful whether they would have worked.⁷

In particular, the very attractive chess sets from Rajasthan are painted. The basic colours to distinguish the two parties were red, green and white. The faces are skin-coloured and other colours are used as required. Many implements are gilded; this is also found in sets from the northern regions. For good vivid colouring, egg tempera or casein-based paints were used and then additionally protected by a thin layer of shellac; the latter has been known in India for more than 2000 years. There are also chess boards produced in the same manner.

In particular in Jaipur, enamel art reached impressive heights. The enamel was applied to items of gold, silver or copper. Some rare chess sets executed in solid gold are known, additionally decorated with precious stones. More recently, sets soldered out of silver sheet metal and colourful enamel have been made.

⁶ T. N. Mukharji, *Art-Manufactures of India*, Indian Museum, Calcutta, 1888.

⁷ Cecil Lawrence Burns, *A Monograph on Ivory Carving*, Presidency of Bombay, Mumbai 1900. Information obtained from Michael Mark, London.



CHAPTER 4

Medieval and Antique Pieces

Single Pieces, 7th to 18th Centuries

Ulrich Schädler

In this chapter we present a few individual pieces rather than complete sets. They take us back to the early days of the European presence in India and date from the period before British colonial rule. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Indian artisans slowly began to produce objects such as furniture and other household items including board games for European, particularly Portuguese, customers, who were becoming increasingly fond of their 'exotic' style.

Although the pieces we describe here are individual items, they are all the more valuable as they provide us with information about the iconography, style and technique of early modern Indian chess sets.

Much earlier than these pieces and therefore not from the same context is a precious ivory figure of a so-called "elephant king," we will look at in more detail at the end of the chapter.

Carved from ivory, the first pictured piece is very interesting, which most likely represents a king in chess (Fig. 1 / 1146). It does not depict a mahout guiding an elephant as one might think at first glance, but a warrior king or general riding on an elephant's neck ready to fight an enemy in a duel. Such ritualised duels between military leaders are said to have been adopted in Southeast Asia, in particular in present-day Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand, from Sri Lanka. However, the introduction of modern firearms by the Portuguese led this tradition to a gradual extinction by the end of the 16th century. This gives us an important clue as to the dating of the piece, which was probably carved no later than the 17th century. The elephant is equipped with rich trappings to fix a square covered structure, perhaps a shrine on its back. With his trunk he grabs a piece of a tree trunk on the ground. Behind the structure, which perhaps serves as signal to signify the rank of the rider, is another figure difficult to identify, perhaps a steerer or even a supernatural being.

Next pages

Fig. 1: Indian royal king seated on an elephant, 16th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1146

Fig. 2: Medieval royal chess king, 16th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1777



The chess piece was once part of a set to which a knight belongs that is preserved in a German private collection: The piece is fashioned as a rider attacking an enemy with his lance, who has fallen on his back and tries to protect himself with his shield from the horse that is trampling him down under its hooves.

We find both, the horseman overriding an enemy and the mounted elephant with its rich trappings and the structure on its back, in set n. 0712 (ch. 12, fig. 5 / 0712), probably made in Western India (Mumbai or Surat) in the 17th century.

The next pictured piece, made of ivory, is very likely a king (Fig. 2 / 1777). A figure adorned with rich chest and arm jewelry sits on a four-legged throne with a high backrest mounted atop an elephant. In front of him is the mahout, who guides the elephant, and servants stand behind him. The elephant is adorned with garlands around its forehead, neck and back, a splendid blanket covering its body, and rings around its legs. It is therefore not a war elephant, but the depiction shows the king traveling or representing at a festive occasion.

The next ivory figure, carved in the 17th century, represents a cavalry commander (Fig. 3 / 1217, 1217b). Both arms of the rider as well as the right ear of the horse were once inserted as separate pieces, the missing bridle and reins were perhaps also worked separately and from a different material. The lower legs of horse and rider are missing. The dainty horse calmly striding along is rendered in a stylised manner with its carefully combed mane. The man wears a cuirass with tassets typical of the period, a large collar and three-quarter-length trousers. His long coat blows in the wind and is carefully draped over the horse's back. He was probably holding a command staff in his right hand. Contrasting with the smooth surfaces, the head of the rider is rendered in great detail, so that one might even think of a portrait: his long, carefully combed hair falls down his back in three rows of curls, while his short fringes and his full beard of medium length frame the calm, solemn expression on his face. The static posture of the horse and the rider, who does not wear a helmet, show that no act of war is depicted, but rather a procession.

The fine ivory figure n. 1215 depicts a man sitting on a four-legged chair with a high backrest but no armrests (Fig. 4 / 1215). The right foot is broken off with part of the flat moulded base, as well as the right arm he held before his chest, in which he might have held a cup of wine or water. Great eyes and a pointed nose characterize his round beardless face. The man is dressed in a tight long-sleeved shirt under a sleeveless jacket and wide three-quarter length trousers and wears a hat on his head. As such, it is a typical depiction of a Portuguese nobleman in contemporary and befitting attire. An Indian painting of a Portuguese gentleman preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and dating to c. 1600 may give us a good idea of the person represented here. The simple chair, the rather ordinary, not very splendid robe, and the lack of royal insignia suggest that this small ivory figure was once a vizier in a chess game. It shows us that chess sets with an Indo-Portuguese theme were produced in India early on.

Fond Memories

Indo-Portuguese king mounted on a horse; with traces of polychrome, 17th century. I bought this piece from the same dealer as the other Indo-Portuguese king, around 15 years ago. It has always puzzled me that I could find beautiful Indo-Portuguese chess boards but never an Indo-Portuguese chess set, so I am happy and very fond of the two Indo-Portuguese kings I was able to find, both from the 17th century. / 1217

Fig. 3: Indo-Portuguese chess king seated on a horse, front and back views, 17th century. Photos by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1217, 1217b





Legend ill.: Portrait of a Portuguese gentleman drinking wine (c. 1600). Indian, Mughal period, c. 1600, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/148512>)

N. 1158 is also made from ivory and may date to the 17th century (Fig. 5 / 1158). The elephant stained red (the opposite party was probably stained green) is lavishly adorned with trappings over his forehead, the neck, the flanks and feet and covered with a prestigious carpet, the ornamental details of which are highlighted in gold. The same holds true for the structure fastened to his back that consists of a space opened up by arcades on an octagonal base, and crowned by a two-tiered dome. This construction is very different from the canopied howdahs one often meets with Indian chessmen. The elephant of set n. 0686 (ch. 12, fig. 7 / 0686) attributed to the Deccan might provide a fair comparison.

N. 9006 comprises three ivory figures of horses, which probably served as knights in two different chess sets (Fig. 6 / 9006). While all three horses belong to the same artistic school, only the two bigger ones should have been part of opposite sides of one and the same set, while the smaller horse betrays too many differences in style and therefore most likely belonged to another set.

Standing on oval moulded bases the bigger horses are rendered in a highly decorative manner. Their massive bodies are covered by ornamental trappings around the neck and on the hind quarters, the bridles are adorned with decorative medallions, and three pompoms on each side hang from the saddle. The horses are standing on their hind legs with front legs raised; one is running over a crouching enemy, the other is jumping over a stylized shrub. In the Mughal period, horses were harnessed in this rich and decorative manner on ceremonial occasions.

The smaller horse is fitted with a saddlecloth, lavish bridle and reins and bell rings around its legs. Although in a very similar posture, it differs in style in various aspects. The ornamental harness virtually merges with the animal's body to form an inseparable unit. Some physical features, such as the musculature and the mane, are rendered as deeply engraved lines.

One might compare these horses to the riderless horses in set no. 1716 (ch. 9, fig. 11 / 1716) from Rajasthan dating to the 18th century.

Although in this chapter we followed a chronological sequence, we conclude with a special object that antedates the chessmen presented above and deserves a closer examination. The so-called “red elephant” (fig. 7 / 1034, 1034b, 1034c, 1034d) has already been discussed in various publications on chess history, but we are able to add further information to what has been said so far. The “red elephant” belongs to a small group of ivories known as “elephant kings,” of which only a handful are known to have survived. The points under discussion concern their origin, their date, and the question of whether these unusually large figures are chess pieces at all.

Fond Memories

Indo-Portuguese chess king seated on a throne and with traces of polychrome; 16th century. Bought it from a dealer around 14 years ago. / 1215

Fig. 4: Indo-Portuguese chess king seated on a throne, 16th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1215

Next pages

Fig. 5: Indian polychrome king as an elephant, 17th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1158

Fond Memories

Three beautifully carved ivory knights, Indian, 17th century. I can only imagine what the full set would have looked like! I first bought the smaller horse from a dealer and later found the larger pair (7 cm tall) from the collection of Ernst Boehlen, and from the 18th century. Arendt Boehlen had bought them in Munich in 1979. / 9006

Fig. 6: Three chess knights, 17th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9006





The figure of an impressive height of 16.2 cm, made from one single piece of ivory, is stained dark red and stands on an oval base decorated with a chevron frieze (fig. 7 / 1034, 1034b, 1034c, 1034d). It depicts a ruler sitting gracefully on a throne with high backrest mounted on an elephant's back. His face is characterized by the curved nose and the long, receding chin, which gives the face an individual portrait-like expression. Three — originally four — unarmed servants are standing on the rim of the throne, the border of which is decorated with stylized flower motifs. At the back of the throne another person is standing upright on the elephant, with both arms holding on to the backrest of the throne. This posture is so peculiar that one might think of the depiction of a prisoner, bound to the throne with his arms and legs spread and being publicly displayed for the glory of the king. On either side two smaller elephants, mounted by a person of high rank are led by a mahout and a groom grasping his trunk, accompany the big elephant. On the left, the elephant lifts a person with his trunk helping him to climb up his neck. In front of the elephant, a rider and his horse lie overturned under the elephant's trunk, a somewhat surprising scene within the peaceful atmosphere represented here. Since the general impression is that the figure is certainly not about the ruler's departure to war, this motif is likely to symbolize that the king subdues his enemies without military force and only through his authority.

The men wear typical baggy trousers that are cut wide up to the knees, then fit tightly around the legs and fastened at the ankles with a band. Such trousers are known as Punjabi suthan. This indicates that the figure was made in the North-West of the Indian subcontinent. Radiocarbon analysis revealed a date of the ivory between the 6th and the 9th century with a high confidence for the period from the mid-7th to mid-8th century. An analysis of the pigments confirms this date range, ruling out that the sculpture was carved centuries later out of an old tusk.

Thus, the “red elephant” is roughly contemporary with the “elephant kings” in Paris and Berlin or even slightly older, of comparable size, and comes from the same geographical, historical and artistic context as we shall see now.

The figure kept in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin (Inv. No. 10001), although badly damaged, is referred to north-west India and dated to the 7th-10th century by the museum curators (Fig. 8 / 8055). Made of one piece of ivory, it stands 9,7 cm high including the oval base decorated with a chevron pattern. A ruler seated on a throne with high backrest atop an elephant is accompanied by horsemen. Like the king on the “red elephant”, he has his arms resting on the armrests. And here again we see the person with arms and legs spread wide apart attached to the back of the backrest of the throne.

The most famous sculpture of this group is a 16 cm tall figure made from one single piece of ivory (fig. 9 / 8056). It was once preserved in the Abbey of St. Denis before it was transferred in 1793 to the Cabinet des Médailles of the National Library in Paris (inv. n. 55.311). Usually dated to the 7th-9th century it represents a king sitting relaxed on his throne carried by an ele-

Fond Memories

This is an amazing piece that belonged to Hans Krieger collection and was sold at Christie's in December 2010, where I bought it as a 19th century piece always thinking it should be 16th century. To my surprise when I asked a carbon 14 test to be made on the piece at Oxford the results came back as the piece having been made in the 9th century! And when we also tested the red pigments the lab analysis came back again as pre-medieval! / 1034

Fig. 7: The “Red Elephant”, Royal Chess king as Elephant, 9th century, from different viewpoints. Photos by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1034, 1034b, 1034c, 1034d



Fig. 8: Elephant king now kept in Berlin. Photo by Jacob Schmid-Madsen, © Museum für Asiatische Kunst. / 8055

phant. Eight warriors around the throne protect the king, while five cavalymen accompany the elephant on the oval base. An acrobat drops headfirst down the elephant's front and is caught by one of the cavalymen. This surprising figure is the counterpart to the figure in a similar pose on the „red elephant,“ with the difference that it is not depicted standing on the elephant's hind-quarters but sliding upside down along its front. According to recent research, the Paris elephant king would have been made during the Abbasid caliphate in either Mansura or Multan, i.e. in Arab-influenced Sindh in modern Pakistan. The piece was for a long time considered a king of a chess set that the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (765-809) gave to the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne. However, nowadays, most scholars have discarded this traditional hypothesis.

Another well-preserved “elephant king” is kept in a German private collection (Fig. 10 / 8060). Although slightly smaller (13,2 cm), it is similar in many details to the Paris example including the same acrobat figure on the head of the elephant. It was probably also made in Sindh, but is believed to date to the 17th century. The question arises as to how such an iconographically close copy could have been made while the model was in St Denis.

A second such “elephant king” in the Horta-Osorio collection also belongs in this context (Fig. 11 / 9017, 9017b, 9017c, 9017d, 9017e). It was made of one piece of ivory and stands 12,5cm



Fig. 9: Elephant king now kept in Paris. © Cabinet des Médailles of the National Library. / 8056



Caption: Fig. 10: Elephant King, 17th century?, Private collection, Germany. Photo by Manfred Eder, © Manfred Eder. / 8060

high. A radiocarbon analysis came to the conclusion that the elephant from which the tusk was taken to carve the figure, lived in the 7th century. The piece is therefore the only one in the series of elephant kings with a confirmed date and is thus of enormous historical significance. The ruler is crouching in a big howdah, which covers the back of the elephant completely. As the king in Paris the young man is kneeling on his left leg while his right knee is raised. Dressed in a tight-fitting shirt and short trousers he presents what might be a ceremonial dagger in a precious sheath with both hands (compare the group n. 0694 from Rajasthan). The serene face is characterized by prominent cheekbones, a hooked nose and a long moustache. On his head he wears a diadem, under which his long hair falls over his neck. As jewelry, he wears magnificent earrings, a necklace around his neck and a bracelet set with precious stones on the arms.

The high side and back panels of the howdah are shaped into five arcades in which people move about, comparable to the “elephant kings” in Paris and Germany. The elephant, whose ears are cut and trimmed, is equipped with a headgear and ornamental chains around the neck and the body. Riding horses or walking by foot, several persons wearing similar diadems and earrings as the ruler accompany the elephant. Most interesting is a scene on the front left side of the figure: a man hangs diagonally on the back of his horse, from which he seems to slide down, while the elephant is lifting the horse with its trunk.

Compared to the Paris piece, the carving style is less smooth. The question of whether this is to be understood as a stylistic feature or as a sign of the final stage of polishing not having been carried out, thus leaving the figure in an unfinished state, could only be answered by a stylistic comparison with similar pieces from the same period and produced in the same artistic environment.

The iconographical analogies described connect these figures and speak in favour of a long-standing pictorial tradition in the North-West of the Indian subcontinent. Finbarr Barry Flood suggested that these ivories were conceived as representations of ideal royalty with the king in the centre, enthroned on the elephant, whose symbolic wisdom, strength and dignity he claims for himself. Otherwise they may possibly relate to a recurring event of some importance. Rangachar Vasantha pointed to the South-Indian Jambu savari-procession, a stately, religious parade of the Maharaja, seated majestically on a howdah atop a caparisoned elephant and accompanied by horses and elephants, from his palace to a place of worship. Similar processions also took place in other parts of the Indian subcontinent on various occasions, be it religious or other celebrations or the triumphal entry of the ruler after a military expedition.

The two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. After all, every public appearance of the prince or the king, enthroned on a magnificently adorned mighty elephant and accompanied by dignitaries from his power apparatus, was suitable for visualizing the very nature of kingship to all those who witnessed this spectacle. However, considering the rarity of these figurines, it is also conceivable that they were made for very specific events and not on the occasion of recurring festivities.

Next page

Fig. 11: Elephant King, 7th century, from different viewpoints. Photos by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9017, 9017b, 9017c, 9017d, 9017e





The further question discussed in the context of these “elephant kings” is whether or not they are to be regarded as chess pieces. Most scholars today doubt that these ivory figures are chess pieces at all. Apart from their unusual size and weight, the main argument is that no other chessmen have come to light that could have belonged to such a monumental chess set. The figures were probably made as individual pieces, without reference to the game of chess.

As far as the “red elephant” is concerned, its colouring may suggest that it was indeed a chess piece, but then the 31 other pieces of the game would not have survived or would not have been recognized among the record of Indian ivories to this day, which is hard to believe.

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CHAPTER 5

The Chess Sets of the East India Company

Jonathan Crumiller

Each type of antique Indian chess set has a notable place in a collector's subjective hierarchy of chess sets, but one particular type of set has always been placed on the highest echelons of chess collecting: chess sets that were crafted in the Berhampore area, under the domain of the East India Company.

East India Company Set with the theme of Clive of India

This first set shows the classic features of East India Company sets (Fig. 1 / 9002). The king and queen pieces are military officials or Indian royalty, riding in a howdah atop an elephant. King pieces are often covered by a canopy; queen pieces (although the riders are usually men) are often sheltered under an umbrella. But these features can vary: both pieces can be covered, or both pieces can have umbrellas... or neither!

The bishop pieces are often represented by riders on camels; knights by cavalry, i.e. riders on horses; and rooks by towers, sometimes with a flagman perched on top. Pawns are soldiers with weapons, dressed for battle. All pieces are situated on bases. There are variations on each of these details, for each piece, as shown by the collection of sets within this chapter.

In conjunction with the superb artistic merit of the East India Company sets, the rarity of these sets also contributes to their extreme desirability within the chess-collecting world. It is unknown how many such sets were made; but the sets were too time-consum-

ing to be mass-produced, given the high level of craftsmanship required and the detailed work needed to craft each separate piece. The marketplace was limited to the high society of European culture. And some of the sets have been lost to the ravages of time during the intervening centuries. But estimates of the remaining number of East India Company sets can be gleaned from the number of sets that have been offered in the major auctions over the past hundred years or so, and by extrapolating on that number, a reasonable guess would be somewhere between 100 and 150 sets extant today.

Many such sets remain hidden in private collections, but the set shown above has been in the public eye for a long time. It has been featured in various exhibitions: the Hove Museum, 1939; the India and Pakistan Exhibition, Burlington House, 1947; Eastbourne Art Gallery, 1959; and the British Museum, 1967. Moreover, this set is highlighted in one of the seminal chess-collecting books, *The Illustrated Guide to World Chess Sets*, by Victor Keats.

The East India Company

The context within which these sets were made is of great historical importance. The British East India Company stands alone amongst commercial entities, even throughout history, because their mission was to facilitate and monopolize commercial trade within India by seizing and conquering vast territories. The company functioned as more of an occupying force than as a commercial entity: at its peak, the company's army consisted of over 250,000 soldiers. A large majority of these soldiers were sepoys, i.e., hired Indian servants who fought battles, and wars, on behalf of the company, so the large number of casualties on both sides of these armed conflicts were mostly Indian. Then, after a territory had been secured, the manufacturing of all kinds of goods, including chess sets, was undertaken, using the natural resources of the Indian territories and the well-honed skills of subjugated craftsmen and women who labored for the company.

The East India Company had an alternative name, actually a nickname: the *John Company*. Some sources attribute the name as a nod to John Bull, the national personification of Great Britain, similar to the use of Uncle Sam in the United States. But more likely, the nickname arose from a moniker of the Dutch East India Company, an early competitor which predated the British company: *Jan Compagnie*, with a similar pronunciation.

In today's nomenclature within the chess-collecting world, the chess sets that had been manufactured under the aegis of the East India Company are more often referred to as John Company sets, although the two names are used interchangeably.

The company's ivory carving workshops that specialized in the manufacture of East India Company chess sets were located on the far eastern side of India, known as West Bengal, 125 miles north of Kolkata, in a pair of town-settlements: Murshidabad and Ber-



Fond Memories

Victor Keats was the first collector I visited (in 2006, introduction by Franz Josef Lang) and I will always remember his kind hospitality and comments on his outstanding collection. John Co sets are probably my favorite sets, and I immediately recognized this set (and set 9003, Fig. 9) when I saw them twelve years later in the collection of a dear friend of mine, Emilio Ferre, who kindly agreed to part with them when I planned to write this book (in 2024) about Indian sets. / 9002

Fig. 1: East India Company set, late 18th to early 19th century, displayed on a 19th century Indian chessboard. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9002

Next page

Fond Memories

As Jon mentions, this was my first John Co set, bought in March 2004. I vividly remember Garrick Coleman sending me a picture of the set (I lived in Lisbon at the time), my immediately agreeing to buy it, and the set arriving by post at my house a few days later! / 0701

Fig. 3: East India Company set, circa 1815-1830. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0701





Fig. 2: Map of mid-18th-century India; circled area includes Murshidabad and Berhampore. Public domain. /8000

hampore (Fig. 2 / 8000). Murshidabad was an early producer of top-quality ivory goods, including chess sets, during the latter part of the 18th century, but subsequently the production of East India Company goods, including chess sets, mostly shifted to the ivory workshops of Berhampore, which was only a few miles to the south.

“Clive of India” Theme

Most John Company sets follow a specific theme: each side is in battle formation, ready for combat. One side has pawns armed with rifles, the other side with spears or swords.

This setup is known as the “Clive of India” theme, which is based on one of the most important military battles in modern history.

Robert Clive was a towering historical figure who led the military exploits of the East India Company for several years in the 1750’s and again in the 1760’s. He is best known for his victory in the Battle of Plassey, during which his outmanned forces took advantage of fortuitous circumstances – including heavy monsoon rains that dampened the gunpowder of the opposing forces, but not that of his own troops – to propel the East India Company to a landmark victory. Due to its victory at the Battle of Plassey, the company was able to establish military supremacy throughout Bengal, as well as enhance their reputation as a powerful armed adversary throughout other Indian territories.

An offshoot of his fame and fortune was the representation of Robert Clive in various artworks, in both Britain and India. This representation was instantiated in John Company sets with the theme of “Clive of India”, i.e., the chess parallel to the Battle of Plassey itself. Some John Company sets even show his physical appearance as part of the theme: the rider on one of the British pieces could be modeled after Robert Clive himself.

The “Clive of India” theme is the predominant one for John Company sets, although other themes can also be seen in some sets.

East India Company Set with the theme of Clive of India

This East India Company set also has the classic “Clive of India” features (Fig. 3 / 0701). This set has additional sentimental value, as having been the very first John Company set acquired by António.

The depiction of elephants, camels, and horses is consistent with the battle theme. Elephants were often suited with protective armour, and coupled with their thick hides, were extremely difficult to stop. Camels were used to carry heavy loads as well as riders. But it is the horses that held the highest importance to armies: the opposing sides in the Battle of Plassey included more than 15,000 cavalry riding on horses.



Fond Memories

Huge John Co set, with a 16cm king and juggernauts; bought from Garrick Coleman’s private collection in April 2010. Garrick emailed me earlier in the year to say that he and his family had decided to sell his “two exceptional” Indian sets, given his continued health issues. I visited him at his home and bought them both. It is one of the most exceptionally carved John Co sets I have ever seen, together with its rare size especially the kings /queens and its beautiful juggernauts. For good reason had Garrick kept it as one of two sets he had in his personal collection. / 0691

Fig. 4: East India Company set, early to mid 19th century, displayed on a 19th century Indian chessboard. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0691



Fig. 5: Comparison of juggernaut car and John Company juggernaut bishop. Illustration from Granger (1846); photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 8001

For East India Company sets, the two opposing sides are typically distinguished from each other by the bases: one side is natural, the other side is stained. The stains used for John Company piece bases are typically red, green, or black. The piece bodies themselves are usually not stained; but other John-type sets, attributed to the wider Bengal region, were made with various colored stains that result in polychrome-colored pieces. Such sets can be seen in other chapters.

Note the red stain on the bases of one side. Red stain is the most common stain that was used for antique chess sets, and the bright red stain itself is made from an insect: the female cochineal bug. Cochineal red stain is still used, even today, as an organic food dye.

East India Company Set with Juggernaut Bishops

Possibly the most sought-after piece variant within John Company sets is the awe-inspiring “juggernaut”. Instead of riders on camels, the bishops are represented as large, elaborate chariots, drawn by galloping horses or beasts of burden.

This set displays the juggernaut bishops in all their glory (Fig. 4 / 0691).

The term “juggernaut”, including our modern usage as a merciless, destructible, or unstoppable force, originated “in the mid-nineteenth century and was the early rendering in English of Jagannath, an important deity in the Hinduism of eastern and north-eastern India.” (Wikipedia)

The term was subsequently associated as an allegorical reference to the Hindu temple cars of the Jagannath Temple in Puri [eastern India], which apocryphally were reputed to crush devotees under their wheels.

An illustration of a juggernaut car from Granger (1846) is shown here (Fig. 5 / 8001), next to one of the juggernaut bishops from this set.

Similar features are readily apparent: wheeled chariots, flags on the roofs, hulking animals, and the juggernauts’ large, ominous size.

East India Company Set with Juggernaut Bishops

Different types of carts are often used for juggernaut bishops. The most elaborate form is the covered chariot, pulled by two fierce animals, but there are bishops in other John Company sets with different features which are still called juggernauts (Fig. 6, 0700).

The John Company set shown above has two different types of chariots, both types with roof coverings, but with considerable structural differences. Note that the opposing juggernauts are highly reminiscent of the Hindu temple cars of the Jagannath Temple (Fig. 7).



**Page before
Fond Memories**

This was my first John Co set with the Juggernauts, which I find to be outstanding works of art, and was very keen on having. Again it was sold to me by Garrick Coleman, in June 2005. Garrick was by far the most knowledgeable, resourceful, and with the best contacts I have known in my lifetime and my collection owes him a lot, having more than 50 sets bought from him. / 0700

Fig. 6: East India Company set, late 18th to early 19th century, on antique Indian board. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0700



Fig. 7: Juggernaut bishops from East India Company set. Image by Garrick Coleman, © António Horta-Osório. / 8002

Fond Memories

Big John Company set, with a 13cm king, which I bought from Sid Silverman in NY in May 2015. It has exceptional carving with juggernauts and Roman style chariots, and has two different types of pawns on each side. Sid previously bought it at Phillips in November 1999. I did not know Sid Silverman personally and had just been introduced to him by Thomas Thomsen over the phone, but he insisted I received the set before paying for it which deeply touched me. / 0722a

Fig. 8: East India Company set with juggernaut bishops, late 18th or early 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0722

East India Company Set with Juggernaut Bishops

The juggernauts in this set are so large in all dimensions that the height of the charioteers' heads exceeds that of the heads of the king pieces (Fig. 8 / 0722). This characteristic is extremely rare throughout antique Indian chess sets, and even antique chess sets in general.

Another interesting aspect of East India Company sets is the artistic design of the pawns. Most John Company sets have eight white pawns with rifles that are identical in appearance, and similarly, eight identical black pawns with swords or spears; but some of the highest-quality sets have a mixture of different poses of the sepoy. This set has three separate sepoy poses for the white pawns and also for the black pawns. It is rare, but does occur, that a John Company set can have even more than three sepoy poses for each side's pawns. However, it is not necessarily the case that multiple sepoy poses were intended to be mixed together for any particular set. Ivory craftsmen would typically make the same piece over and over and over in succession. Different piece types could be assigned to different craftsmen who specialized in the carving of those pieces. The assembly of any given chess set was a separate step, and was not necessarily done at the same time, or even in the same workshop.

Weaponry of the pawns in these sets may not be fully in sync with historical accuracy. The white pawns in John Company sets are, almost always, armed with rifles, whereas the black pawns are, almost always, armed with swords and spears. This strong tendency was presumably made to highlight the difference between one side representing the East India Company's army and the opposing side representing the Indian factions. But in most of the historical battles, including the Battle of Plassey, both sides were equipped with all of those types of weapons, including variations within type, e.g. lances and pikes for spears.

East India Company Set with Juggernaut Bishops

This set shows the two types of juggernaut bishops – closed carriage and open carriage – in almost lifelike form (Fig. 9, 9003). Another variant appears in this set: the use of animal figures as a substitute for one of the other pieces. In this set, water buffalo are pieces for one side, whereas lions are pieces of the opposing side.

Most antique chess sets do not have well-established provenance, but this set has a historical chain-of-custody that extends back into the 19th century: top chess collectors who owned this set, over time, include Messrs. Platt, Melson, Esbola, Hafler, Dean, and Horta-Osório. The set is also featured in Victor Keats' chess-collecting book.

This set has kings that are 12.7 cm tall, which is considered to be a large set within the realm of John Company sets. The size of the pieces in an antique chess set are considered to be an important, but not overly important, factor within the chess-collecting world. Of



greater importance are other factors, such as the level of quality of carving/turning, artistic value, rarity, condition of the set, and provenance of the set, if known. However, size matters, and a top-quality larger set is more sought-after than a top-quality smaller set.

East India Company Set with Cart Bishops and Indigenous Animals

This set also combines two variants: a cart form of the juggernaut bishops along with figures of animals representing one of the pieces. In this case, rhinoceroses are included in the battle formation (Fig. 10 / 0669).

A question arises, though. Specifically which chess piece are rhinoceroses supposed to represent? This set has cart juggernauts, which are usually placed as bishops; it also has camels with riders, which are usually placed as bishops; and animals. Lacking are both towers (usually rooks) and cavalry (usually knights).

Even more perplexing is the preceding set [fig. 9 / 9003]. Besides the king and queen, the white pieces have two juggernauts, two cavalry, a lion, and a water buffalo; while the stained-base pieces have two juggernauts, two camels with riders, a lion, and a water buffalo. Adding one more level of complexity, some John Company sets have juggernaut bishops, but also have camel bishops, adding up to a total of 36 chessmen rather than the usual 32!

These incongruences have met with different hypotheses within the chess-collecting world. Some collectors try to ascertain the most logical one-to-one correspondence for each given set, regardless of inconsistencies between different sets. But a simpler theory may be proposed as the solution, as evidenced by a detailed explanation of the Berhampore ivory workshops, per an article in a predominant weekly newspaper, *The Illustrated London News*, in its issue dated April 26, 1851. The theory, simply summarized: the ivory craftsmen did not assemble the sets themselves; they simply made individual pieces, and often the same piece over and over in succession. Only later were the sets assembled as a separate step. During this assembly, most sets followed the usual sequence of pieces: king (elephant), queen (elephant), bishop (camel or juggernaut), knight (horse), and rook (tower). But if additional figures had been carved, the assembler would substitute them in, with the objective of completing a 32-piece set, but without any strict adherence to which figure would represent which chess piece. (Alternatively, each assembler might adhere to a certain one-to-one correspondence, but another assembler might adhere to a different correspondence.) Thus, if animal figures were manufactured in different numbers from the other pieces, it would lead to precisely the situation in today's John Company sets: a sometimes-inconsistent matchup of animal figures to specific chess pieces.



Page before Fond Memories

From the two John Co sets acquired from the Victor Keats collection thanks to Emilio Ferre in June 2024, this is clearly my favourite, as I have always been fascinated by the "Roman" chariots on the English side (as rooks) and by the soldiers with the guns pointing forward. It is a highly unusual set, as it also has a water buffalo and a lion on each side but being the bishops on the English side and the knights on the Indian side. Jon explains these particularities very clearly in the main text. / 9003

Fig. 9: East India Company set, late 18th or early 19th century, on 19th century Indian board. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9003

Next page Fond Memories

This set, which I was fortunate enough to buy (in April 2005 at Bloomsbury) as a part set at auction but also the missing pieces separately, is one of my favourites given it has the rhinoceroses as rooks, which is very rare. It previously belonged to the Ernst Boehlen collection. / 0669

Fig. 10: East India Company set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório.



Fig. 12: Excerpt from an article in *The Illustrated London News*, 1851-04-26. Public domain. / 8004

This article from *The Illustrated London News* is of extraordinary interest, as the craftsmen are shown in the process of making East India Company chess pieces, as well as other figurines, in ivory (Chapter 3, Fig. 1 [8003]).

Excerpts from the illustration show the manufacturing of chess pieces (Fig. 12).

Only a few types of pieces are shown, and it makes sense that the craftsmen would carve the same type of piece over and over in succession, then switch to a different piece type.

East India Company Set with Rhinoceros and Water Buffalo

The mix-and-match of unusual pieces is seen in this set, with rhinoceros as the white knights and water buffalo as the opposing knights (Fig. 13 / 9026). The other pieces are carved in classic John Company style.

Next double page
Fig. 13: East India Company set, circa 1820-1860.
Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 9026





Fig. 15: Excerpt from an article in *The Illustrated London News*, 1851-04-26. Public domain. / 8005

Note a feature of this set: the opposing pieces are situated on red bases. A question arises as to whether these bases had been re-stained at some later point in time; the bright-red color, without indications of aging and patina, give that impression. It has not been uncommon for a dealer, or even a collector, to “touch up” the colors or embellishments of a set.

East India Company Set with Water Buffalo

This is another quintessential East India Company set, with water buffalo as knights (Fig. 14 / 0723). Note one unusual feature: the eyes of the elephants are highlighted in black. Whether this was an original feature or not is a matter of speculation. Some John Company sets appear to have had the bases re-stained at a later time, perhaps by a private collector or dealer, so it is possible that the black eyes were done at that time.

Based on its characteristics, this set may have been manufactured later, rather than earlier, in the reign of the East India Company. There is a general pattern of quality over

Page before Fond Memories

This set, which I bought at Sothebys NY in June 2004, I have always felt had some of the best carvings of all my John Co sets. Coincidentally there was a very similar set in the Charles Platt collection, described in the *Windsor Magazine* in March 1902 as “one of the finest sets in a unique collection, probably the best in the world.” For a reason it is the only set depicted with three pictures in the magazine. / 0723

Fig. 14: East India Company set, circa 1820-1860. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0723



Double page before Fond Memories

I bought this set at Maastricht in March 2007 from Trevor Philip, the first set I bought at this Antiques Fair. It is small but very well carved, and as Jon describes, has Clive of India riding the English horses. / 0733

Fig. 16: East India Company set, early to mid 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0733

time for John Company sets: the oldest ones (18th and early 19th centuries) tend to be of the highest quality, with a slight decrease of elaborate design occurring during the 19th century.

Regardless of any general pattern, the carving of John Company sets is so precise that one would assume that the craftsmen had used the most advanced carving tools available. In fact, the exact opposite is true. The following illustration is excerpted from the same ILN article (1851-04-26).

Another mid-19th-century source, Dickinsons' "Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851" (published in 1854), provides similar comments when referring to the Indian-made ivory items that were displayed in the exhibition:

The ivory carvers of Berhampore contributed a variety of specimens of their work, and deserved much credit for elaborateness of detail and truth of representation. To illustrate the facility with which they could carve the most minute objects, as well of those of larger size, – there was an elephant enclosed in the shell of a pea, – and that they were capable of doing new things, when required, was shown in the set of chessmen carved from the drawings of Layard's "Nineveh."

East India Chess Set with Water Buffalo and Green & Black Bases

This set has water buffalo as the bishop pieces for both sides (Fig. 16 / 0733). The set has an unusual feature in that one side has green-stained bases whereas the other side has black-stained bases, instead of one side remaining unstained. This anomaly could have been introduced during the assembly process, or possibly one side's bases could have been stained at a later point in time.

The facial features of figures in John Company sets are generic, for riders and soldiers alike. This set has a notable exception to the rule: the riders on the knight pieces for the British side appear to have specific facial features; indeed, the figures are reputedly the image of Robert Clive himself.

The date of manufacture of an East India Company set cannot be an exact science, but there are often clues that can point to its approximate dating. The pawns' uniforms are one such clue. This set must be no earlier than the 19th century, due to a compelling feature, as explained in Michael Mark's exemplary work, *Antique Indian Chess Sets* (©Förderkreis Schach-Geschichtsforschung e.V., 1997): the shakos (military caps) worn by the white side were introduced early in the 19th century and came to prominence in the period 1815-1830 (Fig. 17 / 8007). Hence this John Company set must not have been manufactured earlier than that date range.



Fig. 17: Sepoy uniform comparison. Sepoy image © Phillips Neal and Son, sepoy piece photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 8007

Other indicators of approximate dating of an East India Company set are the fabric patterns on elephants' ceremonial robes, a comparison of artistic features with other works of Indian art, and the general features of carving and craftsmanship of the times.

East India Company Chess Set with Bengal-Style Boats

The Berhampore/Murshidabad area was not the only place in Bengal where top-tier chess sets were made during the 18th and 19th centuries. Other locations manufactured sets of equally high quality, but these sets can be differentiated from John Company sets by certain features of the pieces, e.g. different piece shapes & dimensions, facial expressions, and carving styles. Piece representations are mostly the same as the East India Company sets: elephant, camel, horse, soldier – except for one piece, the rook, which is sometimes represented as a boat in Bengal sets (Fig. 18 / 0724).

However, it is not the case that boats for rooks is an ironclad indication that a set is from another place, e.g. West Bengal. There are a few sets that retain all features of John Company sets, including facial expressions and carving styles, yet have boats for the rook pieces. In fact, the aforementioned Illustrated London News article refers directly to boat figures, both in its text and its illustration (Fig. 19 / 8008):

"The subjects already carved are numerous, consisting of elephants, camels, bullocks, boats, palanquins, tigers, carts, a set of chessmen..."

Furthermore, there was cross-pollination between the ivory carvers in Berhampore and in other areas of Bengal. As the article states: "... several carvers are Bengalese, and can carve anything, however elaborate, of which a drawing or model is furnished."

This set is clearly of the John Company style; the pawns themselves are evidence enough to make that assessment, as well as the other pieces. And yet the set has finely-carved "Bengal-like" boat pieces for rooks.

Another interesting feature of this set is that the bases of both sides are stained; on one side, green stain with red stain as the flooring, and on the other side, red stain with green stain as the flooring. However, it is not clear whether this staining pattern was native to the set or was added later.

Michael Mark discusses this set in his book *Antique Indian Chess Sets*: "Usually the rooks are towers, but boats, which take the place of towers in Bengali chess, are also used in a few sets, as in illustration 38. This set is also the only set of this type which I have seen which uses both traditional Indian colours of red and green. The carving of the camels in particular is reminiscent of the carving of the Clive of India pieces shown in illustration



Fig. 19: Excerpt from an article in The Illustrated London News, 1851-04-26. Public domain. / 8008

Next double page Fond Memories

The most exquisite "Bengal" set (as I also call it given the boats representing the rooks) I have ever seen, with extraordinarily fine and thin carvings, and which I bought from Thomas Thomsen in October 2008. How long would the carvers take to make such an extraordinary set? And for me the "cherry on top of the cake" are the boats, especially the amazingly carved boats on the Indian side, replicating Indian style boats that I also have in the collection as single ivory carvings (not chess pieces). / 0724

Fig. 18: Bengal-style set, late 18th or early 19th century. Photo by Schacci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0724



34. These factors, together with the early style shakos on the East India Company pawns, suggests that this set was probably one of the earlier sets to be made, possibly dating from the 1780's, and represents a stage in the evolution of the John set.”

East India Company Chess Set with Bengal-Style Boats

Although the carving style is attributable to Berhampore, this set has several unusual features (Fig. 20, 0683). The king and queen pieces are accompanied by a second mahout, standing next to the elephant; riders of the king and queen pieces are unshielded from the weather, without canopies or umbrellas; and the rook pieces are fancy Bengal-style boats. Similarities are immediately apparent when comparing a boat from this set with one of the boats under construction in the aforementioned IILN article. The basic shape, dimensions, and bird-like decorations on the bow show remarkable resemblances.

The next several sets embody some of the mysteries that the chess-collecting community face when seeking to understand the origin, dating, composition, provenance, and other attributes of an antique set.

Probable East India Company Set

The set has all the normal features of a John Company set: canopied king on an elephant, queen with umbrella on an elephant, camels with riders for bishops, horses with riders for knights, towers for rooks, soldiers as pawns, stained red bases on one side, elaborately carved (Fig. 22 / 0676). But whether it is formally a John Company set – or alternatively a set manufactured elsewhere in North India – is an ongoing topic of discussion. A comparison of each piece with the corresponding piece of other John Company sets shows a distinctly different carving style. Just as perplexing, this different carving style is not seen in other extant John Company sets. But it is also unclear if there would have been any other business entity in India during the 19th century that would have sponsored and exported this set.

On a broader basis, the question becomes: precisely what is a “John Company” set? Is it a reference to the well-known design style, with some variants, or must there be a formal business association with the East India Company?

Experts may differ on some of the specific attributes of a John Company set, but these differences of opinion are not of major importance, because there is consensus expert agreement for a large majority of sets that could potentially be called John Company sets. Only a small number of sets would cause a difference of opinion. The difference is of two categories: [1] the set could have been made elsewhere (although almost certainly in North India, including Bengal); and/or [2] the set could have been manufactured after the East India Company was decommissioned in 1874.



Fig. 21: Comparison of Bengal boat with similar illustration. Photo by Pedro Lobo, Image in public domain, © António Horta-Osório. / 8009.a

Page before Fond Memories

This is another example of a John Co set made in the “Bengal style” with the rooks as boats. It is chunkier than the previous set (fig. 18 / 0724) and with more naïve carving, but still very attractive and with mahouts standing next to the kings/queens on both sides. I bought it directly (together with most of his Berne collection) from Ernst Boehlen in August 2009 after having visited him in Berne to see his collection. It had previously belonged to John Harbeson and was sold in auction at Sotheby’s NY in 1979. It is also illustrated in both Mackett-Beeson and Hammond. / 0683

Fig. 20: East India Company set with Bengal-style boats, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0683



Although questions may remain about the precise Indian origin of this set, its design, quality, and aged patina all point towards labeling this set as an East India Company set.

East India Company Half-Set with Rhinoceroses and Perplexing King and Queen Pieces

Another type of mystery for the collector is the question of completeness of a set. There are thirty-two chess pieces in a chess set; as time passes, the possibility increases that one or more pieces have become lost or damaged beyond repair. Some sets are displayed with gaps in place of the missing pieces. On other occasions, a very similar piece is substituted for the original lost piece; subtle differences can still be apparent, but the set is considered to be “whole” again, with the caveat that such sets are called “associated” sets, or “set with associated pieces”.

This set might have gone one step beyond that. The king and queen pieces are different from normal John Company pieces (Fig. 23, 0684). The rest of the pieces are spot-on, including the uncommon rhinoceros pieces; but the king and queen are very similar to those in a specific design of top-tier chess set that is almost certainly of European manufacture.



PLATE XXVI.
Half-set of 'John' ivory pieces made in Delhi about 1790, the opposing half being stained red. This is an ornamental set and probably specially commissioned; it was never intended for play.

**Page before
Fond Memories**

This is not a typical John Co set, and that is perhaps why I became so fond of it. The set is somewhat small but exquisitely carved and I bought it at Christie's at the Jean Claude Cholet chess sale in May 2007, needing restorations. This was my first "in-person" auction session, coached by Thomas Thomsen, where I met Jon Crumiller for the first time and where I bought approximately 20 sets and boards. / 0676

Fig. 22: East India Company or Northern Indian set mid 19th century. Image is public domain, photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0676

Fig. 24: The same set (Fig. 24) as shown in Alex Hammond's book. Image © Alex Hammond. / 8010



This set also has some provenance: it is pictured and described in Alex Hammond's "The Book of Chessmen", published in 1950 (Fig. 24 / 8010). Alex Hammond was, first and foremost, a dealer of antique chess sets. He had a habit of embellishing details about the chess sets he offered for sale, and his presentation of the set with its unusual king and queen may have been one of those embellishments. However, his description of the photo in his book includes the interesting comment, "Half-set of 'John' Company pieces... the opposing half being stained red." Hence he is implying that the set is complete, presumably with matching unusual king and queen pieces for the red side as well.

On the other side of the debate, the king and queen pieces are discussed in Michael Mark's scholarly publication *Chessmen Practical and Ornamental* (1986). Mark has the following to say about Hammond's pronouncements: "Despite the Indian appearance of one of the sets in Hammond, it has features such as the design of the king and of bases, and the presence of the beefeaters, which are not Indian, and which taken with the other factors referred to above suggest it is European, and probably English."

However, the mysteries posed by antique chess sets are seldom answered with certainty, hence there is still the question of whether these king and queen pieces could have originated in India; and if so, could they have been the original pieces for this set?

John-Company-Type Set of the Late 19th Century or Early 20th Century

A previous set was discussed based on the question of whether that set could have been manufactured elsewhere in North India. Another aspect of John Company sets is their dating.

Having been decommissioned in 1874, the East India Company ceased to be a sponsor of the manufacture and distribution of such sets. However, the same general patterns were used by the Indian craftsmen to continue to make chess sets, in order to make a living.

This manufacturing and marketing of sets continued well into the 20th century, and such sets were often marketed as "John Company" sets; but in general, the quality of such sets devolved over time, to the point where the term became meaningless.

This John-type set is a magnificent exception to that rule (Fig. 25 / 1103). Made in the late 19th or early 20th century, i.e., after the East India Company had ceased to exist, its carving and artistic beauty are of very high calibre.

Page before Fond Memories

As Jon discusses in the text, this set is probably an associated set, where the king and queen do not belong to it. But it also has fascinated me and is a core set in the collection; why would Hammond depict an associated set in his book and refer to "the other side in stained red"? And Hammond illustrated most of his sets by showing just one side of the opposing forces. I found it at a country side auction in Bordeaux in France 50 years later (October 2015), how did it get up there from Hammond's book? So enough of a mystery to fascinate me... / 0684

Fig. 23: John Company set with unusual or replacement kings and queens. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0684

Next double page Fond Memories

I bought this set at auction in the US and I could hardly believe when I saw the size of its pieces written. A 12 inch king set, each piece made from a single tooth and with incredible carvings. Normally I would not buy a set like this given I believe it is early 20th century but I did not hesitate a second to buy it. Not easy to ship it to Lisbon with almost 20kg in weight! / 1103

Fig. 25: Intricately carved set from the post-East India Company time frame. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1103



East India Company Set with the theme of Clive of India

This chapter rounds out with a classic East India Company set on the theme of Clive of India, consisting of elephants, camels, horses, towers, and soldiers (Fig. 26 / 0728).

All told, John Company sets encompass centuries of history: from the Battle of Plassey in 1757, to the battle's representation in the chess sets manufactured in the latter 18th century and the first three-quarters of the 19th century, to their artistic appreciation today by chess collectors worldwide, the East India Company sets have embraced nearly three centuries of humankind's experiences. And the John Company sets will be enjoyed and appreciated for centuries yet to come.



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The Illustrated London

Page before Fond Memories

I bought this set from Thomas Thomsen when I bought most of his figural antique sets in ivory, bone and wood in 2008, it is a beautifully carved set, with especially distinguished knights. / 0728

Fig. 26: East India Company set, probably mid-19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0728a



CHAPTER 6

Other Sets from Murshidabad and Berhampore

Ulrich Schädler

Murshidabad is a city and a district situated about 220km north of Kolkata, not far from the border to Bangladesh in former West Bengal. The ivory and wood craft industry there, favoured by the then abundant indigenous elephant population, goes back to antiquity, but flourished especially since in 1716 the Nawabs of Bengal shifted their capital from Dhaka to Murshidabad. After the British East India Company had built a Cantonment at Berhampore in 1767, the British to a certain extent replaced the Nawabs as patrons and clients. Expert master craftsmen both Muslim and Hindu handed over their knowledge within their families from one generation to the other. They specialised in combs, paper knives, bracelets, fans, chessmen and other small items. Among the centres where ivory carving developed were Murshidabad itself and neighbouring Motara, Berhampore and Kasim Bazar to the south, Azimganj-Jiaganj to the north and Sylhet in modern Bangladesh. However, during the first half of the 19th century, Murshidabad and Berhampore remained the main centres. In 1903, the director of the exhibition in Delhi George Watt observed that the main centres of ivory carving in India were Delhi in the Punjab, Murshidabad in Bengal, Mysuru and Travancore in South India.

As a garrison town for the EIC it had a permanently changing population of British officers and their families, who formed a favoured clientele for souvenirs from India. The products could be easily shipped via the port of Kolkata, which was not far from Murshidabad and Berhampore. The artistic expertise of the craftsmen was such that in 1851, on the occasion of the Great Exhibition in London, the Illustrated London News published an article together with an engraving showing Berhampore ivory carvers at work (see Chapter 3, Fig. 1 / 8003).

Next double page
Fond Memories

From Ernst Boehlen, the best/most elaborate set of this type I have, only comparable to one Dr George Dean has in his collection. I bought it from Ernst in 2010 upon a visit to his home in Berne, when I bought approximately 30 sets and boards from his collection. / 0682a

Fig. 1: "Kashmir" style set with double-headed camels, mid-19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0682



A look at sets n. 0664 and 0705 (reviewed in Chapter 7, figs. 15 and 16 respectively) from Visakhapatnam shows that turned and carved ivory sets from Murshidabad belong to the same artistic environment. These similarities appear on different levels: Firstly, one observes a comparable preference for exuberant and detailed ornamentation. Secondly, the similarities concern the general designs of some pieces such as the bishop's "mitre" surrounded by flames, the horse's protomes of some of the knights, and the use of galleries as structural parts. And finally, the ivory carvers applied the same ornamental elements such as overhanging or upright leaves or openwork. However, in contrast to turned Murshidabad sets, Visakhapatnam sets are generally distinguishable by their slender proportions.

Other stylistic elements point to the makers of John sets. Common iconographic features are the architectural towers as rooks and the pawn in the shape of a standing guard. Compare for example the nearly identical soldiers presenting their gun of the John Company set n. 0684 (Chapter 5, fig. 23 / 0684) and the following two sets (fig. 1 / 0682) and (fig. 2 / 9007).

The turned and carved pieces are composed of several parts that are screwed together: usually the base, the stem and the top. The ivory carvers disposed of a rich repertoire of ornamental forms to choose from. Many such elements are floral in style such as upright leaves running around flat bases, wreaths of hanging or overhanging leaves, calyxes, buds, open flowers, garlands, and floral scrolls, others are architectural such as balustrades. By selecting and combining them in various ways, they created sets of a similar general appearance that are however never identical.

Sets n. 0666 (Fig. 3), 0682 (Fig. 1), 0685 (Fig. 6), 0689 (Fig. 7), 0706 (Fig. 5), 9007 (Fig. 2) and 9014 (Fig. 4) belong to the same group of chessmen from Murshidabad, the style of which has sometimes, though misleadingly, been labelled "Kashmir". They should date to between 1820 and 1860.

Sets n. 0682 and 9007 (figs. 1 and 2 above), both with green and white plinths to distinguish between the two sides, have nearly identical figural pawns in the shape of standing infantrymen wearing the uniform of the period, i.e. a red coatee, white trousers, and a shako. The bishop of set n. 0682 is a remarkable piece with its double-headed camel protome, while the bishop of n. 9007 has the usual shape of a „mitre“ surrounded by flames. The white king of n. 9007 seems not to belong to this set, maybe because a lost piece was replaced by a similar one.

The following sets made of ivory with one side stained red have non-figural pawns. They repeat the same basic shapes, but the plinths of n. 0666 follow the shape of the two sets we have already seen, while those of set n. 9014 (fig. 4 above) have a balustrade around



Page before
Fond Memories

A highly elaborated set in white ivory one side with green bases and with figural pawns; one of the best I have seen. Bought in France online and needing restoration, but well worth doing it! / 9007

Fig. 2: "Kashmir" style set, mid-19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9007

Next single page

Fig. 3: "Kashmir" style set, mid-19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0666

Next single page
Fond Memories

Red and White Kashmir-style set, very high quality, bought from Franz Josef's daughter Claudia in November 2024. There were two chess sets I wanted to buy from Franz Josef that I had agreed to buy from him, but we had never managed to conclude. Several months after he passed away, and given his heirs wanted to sell the sets, I visited them with Thomas Thomsen to buy these two sets and in the end I returned with 16 sets ... (which have added to the ones I fondly had already from Franz Josef). / 9014

Fig. 4: "Kashmir" style set, mid-19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9014





the base and the plinths of sets n. 0685 and 0689 are relatively massive discs. Both sets show a predilection for garlands hanging from the balustered galleries.

The designs of the galleries of the king and the queen as well as the upper parts of the pawns are practically identical. This shows that the single elements could be put together in various combinations to form complete chess pieces. The craftsmen chose to screw a horse's protome or a horse's head on top of the base, a "mitre" with or without flames, or to add a standard bearer, a flag, a knob or nothing on the top of the rook's turret.

Aside from the care taken in the execution of the small-scale decorative elements, the Indian craftsmen paid particular attention to the architectural design of the towers representing the rooks. The relevant piece of set n. 0685 is built in the same way as the rest of the set. The distinctive element on top of the tripartite body is composed of a crenellated crown. Similarly, the rook of set n. 0666 consists of an ashlar masonry tower with a crenellated crown and a surrounding ring of small arcades on top of the base. A different approach showing more interest in architecture was used to design the rooks of other sets. The turret of set n. 0682 consists of a basement made of ashlar masonry with open arcades, an upper storey made in the same way but lower in diameter to give room for what in Hindu temple architecture is a balustered walkway around the inner chamber for circumambulation by devotees, and an onion-shaped dome from which garlands hang. The turret of set n. 9007 is designed in a comparable way. The turret of set n. 9014 is also conceived as a two-storey building: The basement with its oriental-style doors is surrounded by a balustrade, as is the upper storey made of ashlar masonry. The flat top is in the shape of a frieze of overhanging leaves instead of a crenellation, and a knob added in the center. With its tall slender proportions rising to the same height as the king, the turret of set n. 0689 differs from the former. It consists of three parts separated by protruding balconies and a small dome on the top. Its design is inspired by minarets of Indo-Islamic mosques, as for example the Jama Masjid in Delhi, constructed in the 17th century during the reign of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan.

Set n. 9024 (fig. 8) is of the (erroneously) so-called Kashmir pattern in red and natural ivory. It is similar to set n. 0685 (fig. 6), with which it shares not only the general architecture of the pieces but also the decorative details. Compare the kings for example: the shape of the crown, the two galleries with the hanging garlands, and the base divided into segments running like the ribs of a melon upon the massive plinth. The same can be said for the other pieces. Only the rook differs slightly in that it is crowned by an onion shaped dome instead of a crenellated top. It is however very likely that both sets come from the same workshop.

Sets n. 0717 (Fig. 9) and 1682 (Fig. 10), made from ivory with one side red, one side left in its natural colour, are inspired by British chess sets. These so-called Anglo-Indian

Page before
Fond Memories

Red and Green chunky set from the Kasper collection, sold at Christie's in May 2004. It was the first auction I participated at Christie's and I did it through Garrick Coleman who was present on my behalf. Very high quality set and I have never seen another one so chunky. It previously belonged to the Amos Smith Collection, sold at Christie's King Street, June 1979, and previously to Stanford University California, ex-Paul Hanna Collection. / 0706

Fig. 5: Berhampore set, mid-19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0706

Next single page
Fond Memories

Green and White ornate non figural set that my dear friend Jon Crumiller and I bought together and I kept in my collection; on an online auction in Switzerland, and that Jon told me several times he would be keen to buy should I want to part with it! / 0685

Fig. 6: "Kashmir" style set, mid-19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0685

Next single page

Fig. 7: "Kashmir" style set, mid-19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0689

Next double page

Fig. 8: Kashmir-pattern chess set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9024





“monobloc” chess sets were made for daily use probably around the middle of the 19th century in Berhampore. They are built from a “British” body to which an “Indian” top is attached. With its bulbous, protruding profile and smooth surface, n. 0717 is reminiscent of the so-called Dublin pattern chess sets. The heads of the king and the knight resemble those of their counterparts in n. 0689. We find the same hanging garlands, and even the hanging arcades around the turrets as in n. 0666.

With its hemispherical profiled bases, above which rises a stem consisting of a slightly compressed ball and hemispherical discs stacked on top, n. 1682 reminds one of the easily distinguishable chessmen of St. George’s pattern sets.

Another turned and carved set from Berhampore is n. 9012 (Fig. 11), made from ivory in red and white. The conical shape of the pieces divided into multiple discs again seems to be inspired by British playing sets of the 19th century.

At the end of this chapter, the figural set n. 1710 deserves a more detailed examination (Fig. 12). It is made of ivory, one side natural, the other with the plinths coloured red. The female queen pieces and the bishop of the white side make it clear that the set was produced not without European, and more precisely British inspiration. The two sides represent Europeans (white) and Orientals (red), designed in an eclectic style using classicising and orientalising elements. The red king looks to his right and holds a sword in his right hand. He wears long baggy trousers gathered in at the ankles under a long mantle and a Fes fastened by turban bands on the head, which makes him look like an Ottoman turk. His queen gathers her long, pleated robe with her left hand while holding a fan in her right hand. The bishop is a man in a long robe, grasping his long beard with his right hand. The knight is designed as a cavalryman charging an enemy in Roman armour fallen in battle and shielding himself from the horse’s hooves — a well-known motif from ancient Greek and Roman battle scenes. The rook is given as a turret with two storeys and surrounding balustered balconies topped by an onion-shaped dome, typical for Hindu temple architecture (compare the turrets of sets n. 0682 and 9007). Finally the pawn is represented by a foot soldier with spear and shield.

The figures of the opposite European side are not very different from their Oriental counterparts. In a mixture of historicising and contemporary fashion, the king is represented in a similar posture, clothed in long wide trousers, a jacket with a front button placket and an open long-sleeved mantle wearing a voluminous crown. The queen at his side is also depicted in the same pose as the other, except that her long dress is belted just below her chest, has long, close-fitting sleeves and short upper sleeves, as it was fashion in Europe in the 1810s and 1820s. The bishop is depicted as a priest clothed in a long tunic covered by a sleeveless mantle. He wears a mitre on his head and reads from the Bible. The knight is now

Next page

Fig. 9: Berhampore monobloc chess set, 19th century.
Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0717

Next single page

Fig. 10: Berhampore chess set, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 1682

Next single page

Fig. 11: Berhampore monobloc chess set, 19th century.
Photo by Paulo Alexandrino e Masayuki Kondo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9012





a cavalryman in ancient Roman armour, and the pawn a foot soldier presenting his arms. The design of the rook is inspired by Indo-Islamic tomb architecture: five steps lead to the square building with an overhanging flat roof and crowned by a dome.

Both types of architectural rooks reappear in an Indian figural chess set kept in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (IS 01218). This set comes from Berhampore/Murshidabad and dates to the early 19th century, which holds equally true for our set n. 1710.



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Before page
Fig. 12: Indian figural chess set, mid-19th century.
Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório./0710a



Classic Board Games and Chess sets from Visakhapatnam

Ulrich Schädler



Fig. 1: Drawing by Peter Anker, Visakhapatnam from the North, 1804, courtesy Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, cat.n. UEM4478. / 8011a

Visakhapatnam is situated some 600 km north of Chennai on the East-coast of the Northern Circars in the state of Andhra Pradesh (Fig. 1 / 8011). Sheltered by the “Dolphin’s Nose” promontory, it had a natural harbour sometimes called “the harbour for the Central Provinces”. Nearby is the Hindu temple of Simhachalam, dedicated to the 4th incarnation of Vishnu as a lion.

The Dutch, the French and the English (since 1668) all had trading posts there. Between 1689 and 1724 Visakhapatnam was part of the Mughal Empire, before it passed to Nizām al-Mulk of Hyderabad. In 1757 it was occupied by the French. At that time the French general De Bussy counted 450 inhabitants, of which 150 were Europeans including

50 from England. In 1765 the British East India Company armies took the town. In the following years the number of inhabitants increased as well as Visakhapatnam's importance as a commercial port.

From the late 17th century on, Visakhapatnam became known as an important centre of manufacture of textiles, furniture and different kinds of cases and boxes in ebony and ivory. Gaming tables, game boards, game boxes for chess and backgammon with their respective chess sets and backgammon counters became part of the repertoire. Skilled artisans used ivory inlay and veneer techniques to create fine motifs and images contrasting with the dark wood. Three techniques can be distinguished: inlay, veneer, and application of decorative ivory or bone sheets in openwork technique to a wooden surface.

While ebony was locally available, ivory had in most cases to be imported from Mumbai or Kolkata. By using exotic materials and referring to European style shapes, the Visakhapatnam craftsmen produced hybrid Indo-European objects, which soon became popular among Europeans residing in India, who eventually brought or sent them back to Europe. The term 'Anglo-Indian' is often used to label these products, since the major customers appear to have been the British.

Material and Technique

Visakhapatnam boxes and game boards are characterised by a specific, easily recognisable design. A wooden carcass is covered with thin layers of ivory, tortoiseshell, sandalwood, or horn that are either inlaid or applied (veneer). Between 1760 and 1780, ivory carvers in Visakhapatnam began to gradually replace ivory inlay by easier to produce veneer.

Decorative details in the form of floral motives or images are engraved (sgraffito) in the ivory and filled with black lacquer. This results in the typical black and white design. In his monograph on ivory carving "Monograph on the ivory carving industry of Southern India", published in 1901, Edgar Thurston gives a detailed description of the technique (p. 9): "Melt 4 tolas (c. 46 grams) of good red wax (lac) with ½ tola (c. 6 grams) of lamp black, or soot from a gingelly (*Sesamum indicum*) oil lamp. Let the melted composition become somewhat thick, and draw it out into thin threads about six inches long, and allow them to become hard by cooling. Take a portion of one of these threads, and place it on the already engraved portion of the ivory. Then beat it with a red hot poker till it becomes liquid, and fills in the engraved lines which then become black".

Two high-quality examples of such game boards with inlay work and engravings from Visakhapatnam are Nos. 0891 (Chapter 15, Figs 24-26) and 1838 (Chapter 15, Figs 27-28), which belong to the 2nd half of the 18th century. The playing surfaces for chess and backgammon are inlaid into a wooden body in ivory and rosewood. They are framed by

a broad ornamental zone of meandering foliate motifs inlaid in ivory, the details of which are engraved and highlighted with lac in the technique described above. A similar frieze of floral motifs forms the frame around the folding chessboard n. 0857, also seen in Chapter 15 (Fig. 34).

Another type of hinged boxes for chess and backgammon, in ivory veneer with delicate engravings, is designed to hold exactly three smaller boxes inside, one for the white and one for the black chess pieces and one for the backgammon pieces, dice and dice cups. (Fig. 2 / 1320). Some of these boxes have the shape of a two-volume book set, i.e. when folded, the board could be placed vertically in a bookshelf (Fig. 3 / 1613), thus hiding its true frivolous character.

The fact that some of the chess sets come as part of such a box set or together with a game board is important for determining their origin, since the style and technique of the ivory work is clearly recognisable as from Visakhapatnam. For the dating, two elements are particularly relevant: the two game boxes, which Henrietta Clive supposedly acquired on the occasion of a visit to Visakhapatnam in 1801 and took to Powis Castle on the one hand and those games acquired by the India Museum on the occasion of the Universal Exhibitions in the 1850s and 1860s and now preserved in the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Chess pieces made in Visakhapatnam

The chessmen which accompany the boxes and boards are characterised by a combination of forms derived from European models and Indian elements. They come in only a few types with minor variations. Normally they were made in ivory for the white side and in horn or wood for the black side, sometimes the "black" side is stained green or red ivory. The black and white contrast we already met with when looking at the game boards boxes is a European feature.

The structure of the chessmen follows a certain logic. Basically, the figures consist of two parts: a turned high pedestal and a distinguishing feature on top of it, which identifies the individual figures. The pedestal or stem consists of several elements: a spherical, rugby ball-shaped or double-conical form sits on an either flat or slightly conical base, above which follows a series of discs or rings, sometimes also a gallery (similar to the nest in so-called Selenus figures). In many cases, this base is more or less identical for king and queen and for bishop, knight and pawn and differs only in its dimensions. Attached to it — and in fact often made separately and screwed on — is the element that characterises the figure, such as a crown, a mitre, a horse's head or a turret. In some sets, the turret-shaped rook stands directly on the chessboard, without an ornamented base. The surface of the pieces can be plain or additionally ornamented.

Next double page
Fig. 2: Visakhapatnam board with three matching boxes, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1320A



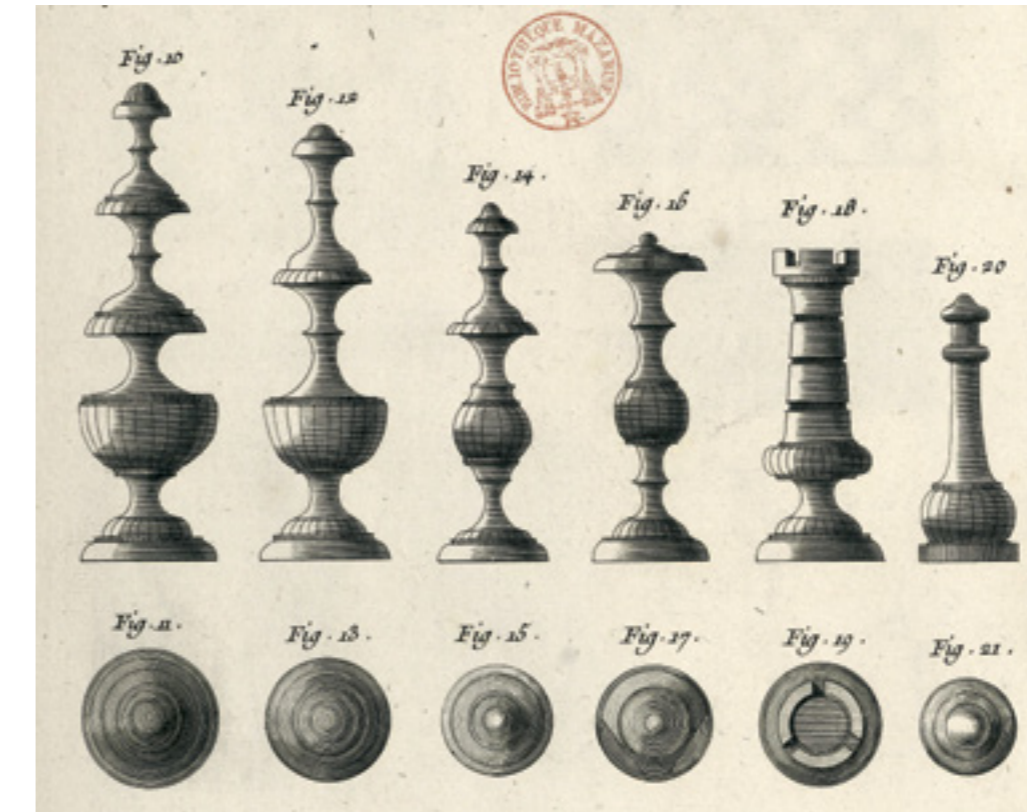


Fig. 4 : Diderot and d'Alembert, Encyclopédie méthodique (Planches vol. IX, pl. 1 fig.9). / 8012

When looking for the models to which the Indian artisans could have referred to, one tends to look into British chess sets from the 18th century, especially of the so-called Washington type and other elegantly proportioned types of the time. British chess sets in the 19th century tend to be of heavier proportions and the stem is made up or of multiple densely stacked discs as in Barleycorn, Lund and St. George patterns, or on the contrary of a plain, column-like element as in the Northern Upright, Dublin and Staunton patterns.

Visakhapatnam pieces on the contrary stand on flat or conic plinths and are of slender or even delicate proportions. These features, the sequence of elements that form the stem, and the two-part structure of the pieces reminds one of French chess sets, especially those illustrated 1771 in Diderot and d'Alembert's Encyclopédie Méthodique (Fig. 4 / 8012).

Moreover, a particular type of Visakhapatnam chessmen is characterised by petal galleries (sometimes also called birds' nests) as they appear on Central European Selenus type pieces, especially of the Biedermeier era, and Danish chess sets. In fact, a Danish colony existed at Tharangambadi (Tranquebar) on the South-East coast of Tamil Nadu from 1620

Before page
Fig. 3: Visakhapatnam chess set with matching board as a folding book, 19th century . Photo by Paulo Alexandrino e Masayuki Kondo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1613

to 1845. The idea of adding small elements in the opposite colour to some of the pieces can often be seen in Danish and Dutch chess sets of the period in question. The round element above the base followed by series of small rings is a typical feature of Dutch chess sets of the 18th century. Other elements seem to be Indian: so for example the flame-edged bishop's mitre, i.e. the prabha which is the aureole encircling Hindu gods and holy men, or the sepoy on the turrets. It seems therefore that the Indian ivory turners took their inspiration from various European models. The fact that for many of these games boxes, game boards and chessmen considerable numbers of nearly identical exemplars are preserved in various collections shows that there was a serial production of these objects over two centuries.

It seems clear that no ivory turner or carver produced alone a complete chess set. It can be assumed that there was a division of labour within a workshop among the craftsmen specialised in certain tasks: some craftsmen only turned the shafts, others carved the horse heads or other figures, still others took care of the brick decoration of the turrets, and finally there was someone who took care of the staining and painting.

A certain standardisation of shapes can be observed in many of the chess sets. A beautiful example of what one might call the classic Visakhapatnam style is n.1320 (Fig. 2). These chessmen come with a box set consisting of a folding chess and backgammon board box and three smaller boxes for storing the pieces, all made of sandal-wood. The chess board is veneered with ivory and tortoiseshell, while the points of the backgammon board are inlaid with blackwood and ivory. Board and boxes have frames of delicate sgraffito ornaments in black and white. The elegant chessmen rise upon a conic, ribbed base with a slender stem consisting of an egg-shaped ball between small rings, upon which the distinctive elements such as crowns for king and queen, mitre for the bishop, horse's head for the knight, and a bulbous top for the pawn are fixed. The rook is fashioned as a brick-wood turret crowned by a gallery and a conic roof and stands directly on the board without a base as the other pieces. As far as the dating is concerned, the two very similar game boxes in Powis Castle (Powys), brought to England from India between 1801 and 1803 give an important clue. The folding chess and backgammon board n. 0493, examined in Chapter 15 (Figs. 29-30), is of the same type and style, the chess board framed by a fine undulating frieze of convolvulus, eyebright and roses. Curious are the inscriptions in the medallions made by another hand pretending that the board was made in 1711 and belonged to the Russian empress Catherine 1st (1684-1727). However, Catherine became empress only after Peter the Great's death in 1725.

No. 1588 (Fig. 5) has an additional feature: the king wears a Maltese cross. The same type of chessmen accompanies n. 1613 (Fig. 3), a games box made of in the shape of a two-volume book, also equipped with three smaller boxes. The box is made of sandalwood and veneered in ivory and ebony. The same etched s-shaped floral motifs run around the

edges of the board, of the boxes and inside the backgammon board. The false book bears the English title "History of Persia", while a fleur-de-lis appears in the central medallions on the lids of the small boxes as well as inside the backgammon board. Comparable book-boxes with the same type of chessmen are preserved in Tyntesfield, North Somerset, and in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (Acc.n. 0244).

As a difference to the two-games boxes for chess and backgammon, Visakhapatnam craftsmen also conceived folding game boards with only one box for storing the pieces. N. 0858 (Fig. 6) is a typical example holding the same type of chessmen as the ones described above. Some of these boards are double-sided, others lack the backgammon, as the one in Polesden Lacey, Surrey (National Trust n. 1246439), a gift to Margaret Greville (1863-1942) by Queen Mary. These boards are made of sandalwood veneered in ivory and ebony, and characterised by a large ornamented frame covering completely the space between the chess board and the edges of the board and consisting of engraved decorative floral motifs etched and filled with lacquer in the usual technique. The boxes are also lavishly decorated with surrounding floral patterns. These boards seem to date to the middle of the 19th century.

A fretwork technique of game board has been applied for two miniature chess tables (Fig. 7 / 1134 and Fig. 8 / 1587) that are both equipped with the same type of chessmen. The main differences are in the shape of the table base and the table top (round or octagonal). The table plates consist of sandalwood overlaid with panels of ivory fretwork in the form of intricate flower tendrils around a central chess board of alternating ivory and horn or tortoiseshell plaques. On each side of the chess board there is a medallion showing a Hindu deity engraved and filled with black lac. This style originates in the 18th century and was used in Visakhapatnam until into the 20th century. Such miniature tables are usually dated to c.1860-1880.

Ivory workshops in Visakhapatnam also developed a more elaborate style of chessmen. They are harmoniously proportioned, the stem of king and queen consists invariably of a gallery above a rugby ball-shaped element, and their surfaces are often lavishly decorated with engravings and ornamentation in openwork technique. These sets seem to have appeared as early as the 18th century and were produced throughout the 19th century.

With n. 1789 (Fig. 9), dating to the late 18th century, we have before us a group of chess pieces whose forms are a kind of hybrid between the standard style discussed above and the elaborate style we turn to in the following. However, this hybrid form should be viewed from a purely formal point of view and not as a sign of an evolution from one form to another. The galleries have disappeared giving way to a pair of small rings between the sphere and the top. The folding board, the exterior configured for chess and the interior for backgammon, is made using the same technique and design as the miniature tables n. 1134

Next single page
Fig. 5: Visakhapatnam chess set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1588

Next single page
Fig. 6: Visakhapatnam chess set with matching board and counters, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0858

Next single page
Fig. 7: Visakhapatnam miniature chess set and board, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1134

Next single page
Fig. 8: Visakhapatnam miniature chess set and board, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 1587

Next double page
Fond Memories
From Franz Josef Lang's collection. Particularly appealing in terms of quality of the board and pieces, and complete with the boxes and counters. Only saw another one during the last 25 years. / 1789

Fig. 9: Visakhapatnam Games Compendium with chess set, board, counters and shaker, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 1789







and 1587 discussed above, with the sandalwood board overlaid with panels of ivory fretwork and engraved ivory straps fixed with bosses. The lid of the box is equipped with a Cribbage board, so there can be no doubt that the ensemble was made for British consumers.

N. 0729, equally dating to the late 18th century, is another fine example of this hybrid style (Fig.10). The queen's gallery has been replaced by two discs. Noteworthy elements are the „flames“ on top of the crowns of the kings and queens, the little flags on the rooks and the curls of the horses, coloured green for the white pieces and red for the black ones. We will come across similar details in another chess set below. The chess board is veneered with ivory and horn.

A further interesting feature are the Chinese sceneries in the incised frieze around the chess board, indicative of the commercial and cultural connections that spanned the entire East Asian region. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that Visakhapatnam style chessmen were also produced in China (fig. 11 / 1839). Or were Chinese craftsmen employed in Visakhapatnam workshops?

Probably the same workshop produced the set n.0718 (Fig. 12), a beautiful example of the ornate style. The white and green chessmen stand safely on large plinths; their shafts are almost identical, only the king figure is particularly enhanced by a gallery in openwork. The graceful horse's head of the knight is fitted with a halter and sits on a strong neck adorned with a chest strap and pendant. The bishop is characterised—as usual — by an element resembling a mitre, surrounded by a stylised wreath of flames. The rook's emblem is a small turret mounted by a flag. A bulbous little ball on the top marks the pawn. The crowns of the king and queen are modelled on the royal crowns of the British Empire: the frame is built by two arches over a wreath, the spaces in between are filled with four fleur-de-lis, the whole topped by a monde and cross pattée (flames in the case of the queen).

The ivory set n. 1730, in white and green, was probably turned and carved in the 2nd half of the 18th century in Visakhapatnam (Fig. 13). It shares some common stylistic and typological features with other sets made in the east-Indian harbour town. The general architecture of the pieces is analog to the sets n. 0718 (Fig. 12) and especially n. 0729 (Fig. 10). The pieces rest on a slightly conical, profiled plinth, upon which rises a stem, which is built of a rugby-ball shaped element followed by one or two discs. Only the king-piece has a gallery instead of the discs. Also the flames on top of the king's and the queen's crowns are comparable. However, the twofold tower designating the rook as well as the horse's head with its slender neck and the nose pointing downwards can be found in the "Pepy's" set n. 0680 (Chapter 8, Fig. 1).

The ivory set n. 0716 (Fig. 14) is very similar, but practically all parts are covered with engraved ornaments.



Before page
Fig. 10: Visakhapatnam chess set with matching board, 2nd half 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0729

Next single page
Fig. 11: Anglo-Indian chess set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1839

Next single page
Fig. 12: Visakhapatnam chess set, 2nd half 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0718



N. 0698 (Fig. 15), generally dated to the 19th century, is of the same general type, but differs from the former in some interesting details: the king piece is topped by two flat discs, the queen has now also a gallery and an unusual crown, the knight is made in the shape of a horse protome, i.e. with the forefeet added, and a flag bearer stands on the turret as an additional, purely decorative symbol. Moreover the flag bearers and a curl on the horses' heads are given in the opposite colour — a feature we already met with in the set n. 0729 (Fig. 10).

N. 0664 is extraordinarily delicate with the decorative elements not only engraved but standing out in relief from the surface (Fig. 16). The most interesting feature of this set is the seated person on top of the queen piece. Again, the knight is made in the shape of a horse protome. Perhaps the same workshop produced the set n. 0705 (Fig. 17). With their bouquets of overhanging leaves, the crowns of king and queen resemble column capitals. The playful design of these two sets, which might date to the mid-19th century, shows that the craftsmen have already moved a long way away from the original model.

Some of the elements that characterise these two sets reappear in the pieces of set n. 9005 (Fig. 18), which have been worked out in extraordinarily detailed filigree work and on which there are no longer any plain undecorated surfaces left (Fig. 17 / 0705).

Less elaborate but similar in style is set n. 1525 (Fig. 19), which has been integrated into an English Victorian cased games compendium. Once the doors of the case opened, the front and the doors reveal the white and green chess pieces held in their proper places. Such compendiums for several board, table and card games, also called „Royal Cabinet of Games“, were very popular especially during the last quarter of the 19th century, but usually they come with a Staunton type set.

Something similar can be said about the following n. 1839 (Fig. 11), various decorative and structural elements are already familiar, but the structure of the king and queen in particular differs significantly from what we have seen so far.

Some chess sets are puzzling. As we have seen, although chess sets were not yet industrially produced in 18th and 19th centuries India, but hand-made, they were produced in large numbers often according to the same pattern transmitted within a workshop from one generation of craftsmen to the other. Therefore, it is usually possible to find comparative examples. This is particularly important when we are dealing with out-of-context games that are offered on the art and antiques market. In such cases it is helpful to be able to use pieces for comparison whose origin and dating are reasonably certain through documents. Ideally, they should refer to the maker or the original patron or owner, but this is only rarely the case. As far as set n. 1170 (Fig. 20) is concerned, however, it is difficult to find informative comparable pieces in terms of motif and style. It was auctioned in 2013 as

Next page
Fig. 13: Visakhapatnam chess set, 2nd half 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1730

Next single page
Fig. 14: Visakhapatnam chess set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0716

Next single page
Fond Memories
I bought this from Robin Wood, a fellow collector who did many joint deals with Garrick Coleman. One of the highest quality sets of this type I have seen. / 0698

Fig. 15: Visakhapatnam chess set with figural rooks, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0698







originating from Rajasthan and dating to the 19th century (Bonhams, Asian and Indian Art, 18/06/2023, lot 269). It is a lacquered ivory and gilt chess set, one side stained purple, the other side left natural, both with floral motifs highlighted in gold. The attribution to Rajasthan is certainly due to this painted decoration in gold, which is frequently found on sets attributed to this region. The pieces rise from unusual square bases on a turned stem in the shape of vasiform balusters (except for the rook), crowned by a distinguishing element: king and queen have large spherical tops consisting of four fleur-de-lys between arches decorated with a Christian cross. The bishop has his usual split mitre, however also decorated in relief. The horse's head of the knight rises on a slender neck and is bent downwards, similar in shape to the knights in 'Pepys' sets. The rook has a conical turret with brickwork and battlements on a profiled stem. The pawn is made of a slim baluster stem topped by knob and a tear drop finial.

The tops of king and queen referring to the British crown and the bishop's mitre make it clear that the set is Anglo-Indian. A comparable set, albeit without an indication of origin, has been illustrated by Michael Mark in his book „Antique Indian Chess sets“ (p. 37, fig. 26), for which he suggests a date to the second half of the 18th century. A similar set, made by the same hands, is preserved in Jonathan Crumiller's collection.

**Before page
Fond Memories**

This was one of the first sets I acquired from Bill Levene, a dentist living in upstate NYC and a great chess player, married to Hope. We became friends since we met at a CCI auction in Florida and competed for the same set (an ivory figural Japanese set, that Bill proposed to buy from me after the auction). I visited him several times at his home and acquired most of his best sets over time. This set was particularly appealing to me given to is the only one I have ever seen with figures on the king/queen tops. In terms of provenance it has first been sold at Sotheby Park Bernet, from the Harbeson Collection in October 1979, and later at Freeman's in May 2002, where Bill bought it. / 0664

Fig. 16: Visakhapatnam chess set with figural king-queen, mid-19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0664

Next single page

Fig. 17: Visakhapatnam chess set with figural rooks, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0705

Next single page

Fig. 18: Visakhapatnam chess set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9005a

Next single page

Fond Memories
English Compendium with a Visakhapatnam green and white Set inside, the only one I have ever seen and which I bought at a charity auction online! / 1525

Fig. 19: Visakhapatnam chess set, 19th century. Photo by Paulo Alexandrino e Masayuki Kondo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1525

Next single page

Fig. 20: Indian polychrome playing set, 2nd half 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1170





Other Board Games and Chess sets from Visakhapatnam

Ulrich Schädler



'Pepys' Sets

Also from Visakhapatnam workshops come the so-called Pepys sets, a group of elegant, extremely slender and decorative chessmen. They owe their name to a tradition within the Pepys Cockerell family that a set preserved in the Museum of London since 1931 was a gift from King James II to Samuel Pepys, the diarist. However, as Michael Mark pointed out, there are no documents to support this presumed gift, which is indeed unlikely. Moreover, the 1660s would seem far too early for such an intricate style of chessmen. A better candidate to link the set to the family would be Samuel Pepys Cockerell, the architect, who in 1805 designed Sezincote House in Neo-Mughal style and therefore was interested in Indian art and culture. By the way, Samuel Pepys the diarist was not a chess player at all. He mentions the game only once (diary of September 16, 1664), when a certain Francis Pargiter told him of the game as an indoor pastime of the Russians in wintertime.

These pieces are built in a particular way; see n. 0680 (Fig. 1) and 0688 (Fig. 2): Upon a circular plinth, the long and slender shaft rises from a sphere being slightly compressed by the weight over it. The pieces of king, queen and rook give the impression as if on this multi-faceted support an entire chess piece is mounted with a spheric element in openwork as its base. The long neck of the knight's horse ends in a graceful head, whose nose points vertically downwards.

Different in its structure is n. 0699 (Fig. 3), in that the sphere above the plinth is missing, and the shaft consists of a series of stacked discs turned in a variety of shapes. This structure as well as the rook's turret on a high base reminds one of certain Barleycorn type chess sets, especially those made by Charles Hastilow in the 1840s-1870s.

Next double page
Fond Memories

Huge set (n. 0680) from Doug Polumbaum, with a 20cm tall king, bought in May 2005, when I first was asked by Doug if I would be keen to acquire his collection. From the Allen Hofrichter Collection, sold at Christie's in September 2000. / 0680

Fig. 1: 'Samuel Pepys' style set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0680





Different in its overall design but stylistically similar is n. 1360 (Fig. 4). It consists of very carefully turned figures, which are characterised by a plain vasiform baluster shaped shaft and a defining element on top. King and queen have ribbed openwork ball tops. The horse's head, bent almost vertically downwards, sits on a slender, towering neck whose mane is depicted in relief. The rooks' turret consists of a slightly concave cylindrical lower part and a beehive shaped roof.

While the shape of king and queen are unusual, several features remind one of Pepys sets such as n. 0688 (Fig. 2).

Compare for example the style of the split flamed bishop's mitre, the horse's head and the two-part structure of the turret. Even the ribbed balls of king and queen reappear on top of king and queen n. 0680, only smaller. Moreover, one may point to the moulded finials on the very top of some pieces and the zig-zag-decorated ring separating the shaft from the top, which all appear nearly identically in all three sets. The baluster profile of the shafts on the other hand resembles more closely that of Dublin pattern chess sets, which would suggest a date in the second and third quarters of the 19th century.

The red and green ivory set n. 1112 (Fig. 5) reveals the intricacies connected with the study and identification of antique chess sets. It is a basically non-figural set of a pattern usually labelled "Burmese". However, experts in the field came to the conclusion that most of these so-called Burmese type chessmen were actually made for export in China, and supposedly in Canton during the early 1800s.

Typical features are the bulbous crowns of king and queen, the cylindrical tower on a high stem surmounted by a flag of the rook, or the oval "head" of the bishop with one side showing a face, and the abundant use of open work technique. Cantonese sets of this pattern are usually made of natural and stained red ivory.

As I mentioned before, most of these sets are considered to be of Chinese workmanship, i.e. most, but not all. As a matter of fact, sets of the same pattern were obviously turned and carved also in India, apparently to compete with the Chinese for the lucrative European, in particular British market. Workshops in Delhi, Jaipur (Rajasthan), and Visakhapatnam with its commercial relations with China are considered the most plausible producers of such "Indo-Burmese" chess sets.

Our set n. 1112 indeed features a number of uncommon characteristics, compared to sets thought to be of Chinese fabric: the bases are conical, not flat; the crowns of king and queen are not understood as such but shaped as spherical balls in open work covered by a wreath of leaves and surmounted by a small crown-shaped symbol viz. a cross; the top of the pawns is fashioned as a head of a soldier with his cap, a characteristic feature taken over

**Before page
Fond Memories**

Another huge set (n. 0688), with a 20.5cm tall king, from Gareth Williams' collection, bought in May 2009, when I bought most of the sets in Gareth and Veil's Collection. "Pepys" type set, depicted in "Master Pieces", pages 103/4. / 0688

Fig. 2: 'Samuel Pepys' style set, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0688

Next single page

Fig. 3: 'Samuel Pepys' style set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0699

Next single page

Fig. 4: 'Samuel Pepys' style set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1360





Fig. 5: Indo-Burmese' style set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1112

from Chinese so-called “Macao” type chessmen. If we accept these differences to “Burmese” pattern sets attributed to China as indicative for a non-Chinese origin, then set n. 1112 is certainly one of those Indo-Burmese sets of type II (with bishops’ faces). At the time of writing an ivory chess set is kept in Jon Crumiller’s collection identified as “Anglo-Indian” (Fig. 6 / 8061), which bears some interesting analogies to the set discussed here. Especially the stems of the king and queen pieces are nearly identical with their bases decorated with hanging leaves and brick motifs, the hanging leaves covering the spherical element resting on the base, and the fence of what looks like upright blades of grass in place of the usual gallery. Even the carving of the horses’ heads is very similar. Some of these decorative motifs reappear in “Pepy’s” sets such as n. 0680 (Fig. 1) and 0688 (Fig. 2).

Next page
Fig. 7: ‘Central Provinces’ style set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0693





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. / 8013

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

Next double page
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)].









Fig. 13: 'Central Provinces' style set, 19th century.
Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório./ 1095

Before single page
Fig. 11: 'Central Provinces' style set, 19th century.
Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório./ 1982

Before single page
Fig. 12: 'Central Provinces' style set, 19th century.
Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório./ 0692

Some sets such as n. 0665 and n. 0726 (Figs. 15 and 16) have the king and queen of Great Britain fashioned as figurines wearing the typical royal crown. Both wear the royal mantle draped over their shoulders and falling down their backs, the king over a contemporaneous dress, the queen of n. 0726 over a garment referring to classic Greek statues of Aphrodite.

Set n. 0692 (Fig. 12) is an unusual set, since the king and the queen pieces are fashioned as elephants with and without a driver, while the king and his vizier sitting in their howdahs are astonishingly missing. The chessmen are beautifully painted in red and green with some elements highlighted gold or left in natural white of the ivory.

N. 1095 (Fig. 13) in white and stained green ivory has purely Indian pieces: the king and the vizier reclining in their howdahs upon an elephant driven by a mahout, a flag bearer riding a dromedary as bishop, the knight on his horse, the brickwork tower and the Indian sepoy as pawns.



Fig. 16: 'Central Provinces' style set, 19th century.
Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório./ 0726

Next double page
Fig. 14: 'Central Provinces' style set, 19th century.
Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório./ 1487

Set n.1487 (Fig. 14), carved in natural white and stained green ivory, opposes the forces of an Indian king to those of a Roman emperor with a seated female goddess inspired by ancient statues of Cybele or Minerva at his side. However, it is very likely that the two pieces allude to the British king, depicted as in official monuments as a Roman imperial cuirassed statue, and Britannia, the personification of Britain with the head of the British lion beside her, modelled according to the archetypical image known from coins and classicist statues. All the other chessmen are identical on both sides. The caparisons covering the elephants are finely decorated with engraved floral motifs.

It seems that only few workshops produced such sets. There are neat stylistic similarities between several sets, compare for example n. 0665 (Fig. 15) with nos. 0726, 1095, and 2014 (Figs. 16, 13, and 17, respectively) suggesting that they were made in the same workshop.





There is always an exception to a rule. One such exception is the white and green ivory set n. 9020 (Fig. 19). The rule says that boats representing the rooks in chess usually appear in sets made in Bengal; compare nos. 0678 (Ch. 11, Fig. 11), 0679 (Ch. 11, Fig. 7), 0683 (Ch. 5, Fig. 21), 0724 (Ch. 5, Fig. 19), and 1390 (Ch. 11, Fig. 9). The chessmen of the set in question, however, have a number of stylistic features that make it likely that the game was produced in the same area as the so-called “Central Provinces” games.

But let us start from the beginning. An impressive elephant guided by a mahout kneeling on his neck represents the king, while the vizier is given as an elephant without anything mounted in his back. The bodies of the elephants, which wear no blankets or other adornment, cf. n. 0733 (Ch. 5, Fig. 16), are executed with great care for anatomy.

Fig. 17: ‘Central Provinces’ style set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório./ 2014

Before page
Fig. 15: ‘Central Provinces’ style set, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório./ 0665





Fig. 18: A Bengal Morpankhi boat, from F. Balthazar Solvyns, *Les Hindoûs*, vol. 3, Paris 1811, pl. 1. / 8063

As a bishop, a European-dressed rider (compare Fig. 11 / 1982 and Fig. 17 / 2014) with impressive sideburns and what looks like a Scottish bonnet on his head rides a camel with its head held high. The sideburns take us back to the advanced and late 19th century, when this form of whiskers was fashionable in India as well as in Europe and the United States.

The rider on the horse once held an object, perhaps a sword (cf. for example nos. 0665, 0692, 1095; Figs. 15, 11, and 13, respectively), in his right hand. The horse only raises its right forehand, similar to the horses of sets nos. 0693, 0726, and 1095 (Figs. 7, 16, and 13, respectively), all to be attributed to the workshops of the so-called “Central-Provinces” sets.

Before double page
Fig. 19: ‘Central Provinces’ style set, 19th century.
Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9020

The green foot soldiers threaten with their bayonets, while the white ones hold a sabre in their right arm.

One would expect an elephant as a rook, but in its place stands a boat, the only figure on a profiled base. The bow of the boat ends in a raised peacock’s head, while in its center is a four-columned canopy with a porch. The helmsman sits in the stern, but no rowers are on board. Because of the peacock insignia such boats are called ‘Morpankhis’ boats. An example is shown in Fig. 18. Ornate ‘morpankhis’ were made of wood and had a dome, canopy or other type of shelter on the boat. Mostly owned by royals of India, they were used on the River Ganges during the 17th and 18th centuries. Detailed models of ‘morpankhis’ were made by ivory carvers at Murshidabad independently from chess sets.

Further reading

FIFTY-ONE PHOTOGRAPHIC ILLUSTRATIONS taken by order of the government of India of some selected objects shown at the third exhibition of native fine and industrial art opened at Simla..., 1881, London 1883, p. 14.

BARBARA HOLLÄNDER, *Chinese Chess Set 18th-20th Century*, Chess Collectors International / Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden 2012.

F. BALTHAZAR SOLVYNS, *Les Hindoûs*, vol. 3, Paris 1811, pl. 1.

THE CRYSTAL PALACE, and its contents : being an illustrated cyclopaedia of the great exhibition of the industry of all nations, 1851: embellished with upwards of five hundred engravings, with a copious analytical index, London 1851-52, p. 101.

ROBERT L. HARDGRAVE, *Boats of Bengal (Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns)*, Manohar Publishers 2001.



CHAPTER 9

Chess Sets from Rajasthan (18th and 19th centuries)

Ulrich Schädler

Some types of chess sets are ascribed to the Northwestern Indian region of Rajasthan, the former region of Rajput, with cities such as Udaipur, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Jaisalmer. Rajasthani chess sets are usually figural and colourful, made principally from ivory, wood or often camel bone, but also from silver or gold. Many of these sets were clearly show pieces made for European clients, while some simpler sets were made for real play.

As far as the dating of these chess sets is concerned, one can rarely make a relatively precise proposal. In most cases it is difficult to get beyond a rather general date range. This applies in particular to those sets where the formal quality is not sufficient for a more precise stylistic analysis and comparison. Another reason is the fact that Indian craftsmen, who often inherited their know-how from their fathers, used “to keep forever to the same beaten track”, as Baden Powell put it somewhat harshly in his “Handbook of the Manufactures and Arts of the Punjab” in 1872 (p. 215).

In some cases newly introduced uniforms or uniform parts or changing clothing styles allow an upper time horizon to be defined, i.e. ‘not before ...’. On the other hand, ivory carving in Rajasthan seems to have declined in the 1880s, which in a certain sense represents a lower, though somewhat blurred time limit.

Although different typologies, techniques and styles can be described, it is not easy to attribute them to certain local schools, which would permit to link a particular set more precisely to a certain region or city within the wider geographical area that makes up Rajasthan. Contemporary sources about Indian arts and crafts as for example the catalogues

Next double page

Fond Memories

A figural set with gold polychrome representing Men against Women, a rare theme, that I bought from Garrick Coleman c. 20 years ago. This set was in the collection of Victor Keats who sold it through Garrick as I found out many years later when I saw his chess collection inventory (including sold sets). / 0694

Fig. 1: Mogul men versus women set, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0694



of the various industrial exhibitions mention chess boards and sets rather casually among other small items such as boxes, combs, paper-cutters, toy figurines and the like, and if they do, then without detailed descriptions of their designs or even illustrations, so that it is difficult to grasp an idea of their shapes and styles. Therefore, it is not always possible to distinguish Rajasthani chessmen from others made in the neighbouring regions such as the Punjab in the North (especially in Amritsar), Delhi in the North-East, Uttar Pradesh in the East, or Gujarat in the South-West. Moreover, craftsmen sometimes moved from one area to another if they hoped for better sales or were in fact transferred by the ruler. In order to arrive at better results, detailed comparisons would have to be made with objects from other crafts such as wood-carving, stone-carving, embroidery, and metalwork, but this would be beyond the scope of this book.

Astonishingly, the observers of the Indian arts and crafts industry mention mostly small workshops or a small number of craftsmen as production centres. T.N. Mukharji for example, in his “Art manufactures of India” compiled for the Glasgow International Exhibition 1888, says that “ivory-carving is now very little practised in the North-Western Provinces” and that it “is practised to a limited extent” in various places. Therefore, one wonders, where the relatively great number of preserved chess sets was made.

Perfectly preserved chessmen, especially when coloured, do not reveal all the details of the manufacturing technique. The pieces look as if they were made in one piece, which is often not the case, especially not with highly elaborate filigree pieces. Less well-preserved sets show that the howdahs on the elephants, as well as the enthroned kings, were in many cases carved separately and attached. On the other hand, it is easy to recognize that attributes such as swords in the hands of the pawns or knights, for example, were usually made separately and inserted into the hand.

One such group of chessmen from Rajasthan, which might serve as a typical example, is the figural set Thomas Hyde (1636-1703), the famous orientalist and historian at Oxford, received from his friend Daniel Sheldon and which he illustrates and describes in detail in his “Historia Shahiludii” (“History of Chess”), published in 1694 (see Chapter 2, Figs. 1 and 2). The value of Hyde’s description lies in his detailed explanations of the equipment and armour of each single figure as well as of the terms in different Oriental languages. Therefore, he gives us important clues to understand and recognise the shapes of Rajasthani chess pieces. As a matter of fact, many chess sets from Rajasthan resemble more or less closely or are variations of Hyde’s chess set. We learn from this that this type of chess set was produced at least since the 2nd half of the 17th century. Indian craftsmen continued to follow this model throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, which makes it difficult to give a precise date to these sets.

There are, however, some curious features in his description, since his designations of the figures and their positions in the game do not correspond to contemporary Indian sources. In Nilakanṭha Bhaṭṭa’s encyclopaedia of law, ritual and politics “Bhagavantabhās-kara” (“Sun of Bhagavanta”, for whom the encyclopaedia was written) from the 17th century, the author included a long paragraph on chess, which the German indologist Albrecht F. Weber has brought to our notion in 1873. Here, it is said that the Camels (ushṭra) stand beside the king (rājā) and the counsellor (mantrī, the modern queen), i.e. they occupy the position of the modern bishop, while the rook in the corner would be represented by an elephant (kuñjarā). Hyde on the contrary identifies the rook (ruch) with a drummer riding a dromedary, and the elephant with the two flags as the bishop (pīl). It seems that Hyde was misled by his knowledge of Oriental languages, in that in Persian and Arabic the modern bishop was called elephant (fil), as it represented the war elephant. A further curiosity in Hyde’s description is his identification of the vizier or counsellor (pherz) with a mounted horseman holding a sword in his hand. As sets n. 0681 (Ch. 12, Fig. 1), 1544 (Ch. 11, Fig. 16), 1995 (Fig. 15), and 2097 (Ch. 12, Fig. 2) show, this is not impossible, however, in this way his vizier (pherz) resembles the knight (asp or suār), identifiably only by the Risha, i.e. a feather attached to his turban, so that it would be difficult to distinguish both pieces in a game. Therefore, it seems possible that Daniel Sheldon has not correctly assembled the chess set he sent to Hyde: it has perhaps two knights, but no vizier (queen). With this in mind, we can now present the rich collection of Rajasthani chess sets.

Warring States

First of all, let us look at n. 1143 (Fig. 2), an ivory set of the 19th century with one side stained red, representing Europeans, while the other side of the Indians is left in natural colour. The decorative elements such as the patterns of the clothing and the panels of the elephants’ armour are highlighted in gold.

The king — 14cm in height! — is traveling on a cataphract elephant, driven by the mahout, who sits in front of him on the elephant’s neck with an ankusha (the elephant goad) in his hand and a club under his arm. On the elephant’s back the howdah, a structure originally constructed out of wood, is fastened, to which a high canopy is attached. Thus protected from the sun, the king is sitting on a throne placed inside the howdah, accompanied by a servant behind him, who was responsible to chase the flies with the help of a flywhisk. The war elephants are about to trample down a tiger under their tusks. A huge shaffron protects their head, front and trunk and includes flaps for the ears, while their flanks are also protected by decorated side panels. The place beside the king is of course for the counsellor or vizier (the modern queen). He is fashioned in the same way, except that he has no servant and his elephant is slightly smaller. The bishop is represented by a drummer riding a dromedary, to which a pair of drums is fixed. A soldier with signal flags is sitting behind him. The knight is a cavalryman on horseback holding a lance. The rook is

Next double page Fond Memories

A very intricately carved polychrome figural set from the collection of Sid Freer, with elephants holding «loose» tigers in their trunks. The king is 14cm tall. Freer bought it at Bonhams, 17th September 96, lot 337. It previously belonged to Harvey Preen F.C.A. 1919, William Newsom Walker and thence by descent. William Walker was Scottish chess champion on at least three occasions including in 1897. This was the first chess set I bought from Sid, whom I sadly only met in the last years of his long life. / 1143

Fig. 2: Classic Rajasthan set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1143

Next double page

Fig. 3: Rajasthan large figural set, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0731





represented as a standard bearer: holding a military flag in his hand, he sits on the back of an elephant behind the mahout. As in Hyde's set, the pawns are fashioned individually, some with lances, others with sword and shield.

The ivory carvers have used small details to distinguish the two sides: the kings' mahouts wear different hats. The knights and the standard-bearers wear different costumes: the white riders wear a traditional Indian long coat (jama), while the red ones wear European clothing. Their flags are also different. The drums are Indian kettledrums on the white side, British cylindrical tom-toms on the red.

Set n. 0731 (Fig. 3) of polychrome ivory is very similar in motifs, style and dimensions (height of the kings: 15cm); so that one may think of both sets having been made by the same hands: Compare for example the open work decoration of the howdahs, the tigers under the elephants' tusks, the shape of the dromedary and the horse as well as the overall iconographical concept of the pieces. As a difference to the former set n. 1143 (Fig. 2), all the elephants carry cannon barrels attached to their flanks. The red side represents Europeans, the green side Indians, as can be detected by the helmets and the jamas and Indian drums on the green side.

Set n. 0732 (Fig. 4), also of polychrome ivory and dating to the 18th century, shows two Indian armies going to war, one stained red, the other green, with decorative details highlighted in gold, red and black. King (height of the kings: 10cm) and vizier are sitting in their howdahs under high canopies. Each side has two different bishops, both riding a dromedary, but one is a drummer, the other one holding a gun or club. In this set, all animals — elephants, dromedaries and horses — wear armour for protection. The foot soldiers are equipped with flags, swords and shield, bows or guns.

The multicoloured set n. 0760 (Fig. 5) is one of those extremely detailed show pieces produced for European clients already at the end of the 18th century. Again, two Indian armies meet here in the form that the craftsmen imagined a Mughal army would take. One side is stained red, the other green, with decorative details painted in black, red and gold. The cataphract elephants with the cannon barrels attached to them, the two different bishops, and the plinths with the hanging leaf moulding remind one of n. 0731 (Fig. 3), but otherwise the set differs from it in various aspects. The kings' and viziers' war elephants are relatively small in proportion to the high rising slender canopies. Moreover, archers kneeling on the flat bases are added to each piece, and cannon barrels added to one of each side's bishops, which makes a somewhat crowded impression. Swordsman, archers, musketeers and standard-bearers make up the infantry. With all that quantity of different elements, the quality of the carving is sometimes a little inferior, especially the horses and dromedaries are a little clumsy.



Next page
Fig. 4: Small Rajasthan set, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0732

Next Double page

Fond Memories

This is the best Rajasthan typical style set I have ever come across, having a superb carving and painting. Also the major figures have soldiers standing on the bases on the sides of the figures which makes it especially rare and delicate. It is an 18th century set and depicts Indians against Indians as was the case on the early sets of this type. From the collection of Halvor Jaeger, bought at his sale at Waddington's in Canada. Previously bought at Cooper and Owen, 4/11/2002, cover page lot, and previously sold at Sotheby's Belgravia, 15th April 1980, lot 55. Two similar sets are at the Metropolitan Museum from the Pfeiffer Collection. / 0760

Fig. 5: Rajasthani polychrome set, late 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0760





Another show piece is set n. 0721 (Fig. 6), the Indian army in red, the European army left in its natural creamish-white colour. Small details such as the shape of the drums and the types of helmets suffice to distinguish the two armies. A characteristic feature of this set is the fact that the horses, dromedaries, and elephants are relatively small in proportion to the foot-soldiers. Otherwise the set is impressively rich in its carved and painted details: particularly elaborate are the pieces of the kings and viziers, with their canopied howdahs, the guns attached to the war elephants each grabbing a tiger or a garland (as in n. 0731, Fig. 3) with their trunk, the armours protecting the elephants, horses and dromedaries, and the soldier kneeling inside the howdah on the rook's elephant. Attention must also be drawn to the painted decoration, in particular the fine golden ornaments on the soldiers' uniforms, and on the awnings of the canopies.

The foot soldiers of the Indian army carry sabres, bows, and flags, while their opponents lack the bows and flags, but have fife and drums. Wearing the same Indian coats, but

Fig. 7: Small Rajasthan figural set, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 1620

Before page
Fond Memories
 The first Rajasthan set I bought in the early 2000's, from Mallet. A 16cm tall king, in white and red depicting the British army (in white) against an Indian army (in red). / 0721

Fig. 6: Classic Rajasthan set, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0721

with the belts crossed over the chest as an element taken from English uniforms, they are characterised as natives in the service of the British.

A less complex set is n. 1620 (Fig. 7) from the 19th century, made of ivory coloured red and green with painted decoration. The pieces stand on flat oval bases with a leaf moulding and are relatively uniform in size — the king measures 13,5cm in height — and motifs. The animals are all covered with caparisons painted with flower motifs, and equipped with necklaces and other ornaments. The king, the vizier, one of the riders on the dromedary (the bishop), the horseman (the knight) and the rider on the elephant (the rook) all hold sabres upright in their right hand. On both sides, one rider on the dromedary is depicted as a drummer with Indian kettledrums. The rider (rook) is curiously sitting on the back of his elephant as if he was riding a horse. The foot soldiers wear firearms, bows and sabres. All the men wear the same type of headwear, which resembles the so-called Sikh helmet composed of a primary elliptical bowl with a secondary smaller dome-shaped bowl on top of it.

Thomas Hyde concluded his description of Indian chess sets by saying that “in this way you see the ancient army of the Eastern Indians: namely, with these placed in just order on the chessboard, the army is arranged, armed and prepared and girded for battle; whence you will imagine them all shouting and waving arms, and demanding and eager for the battle to start”.

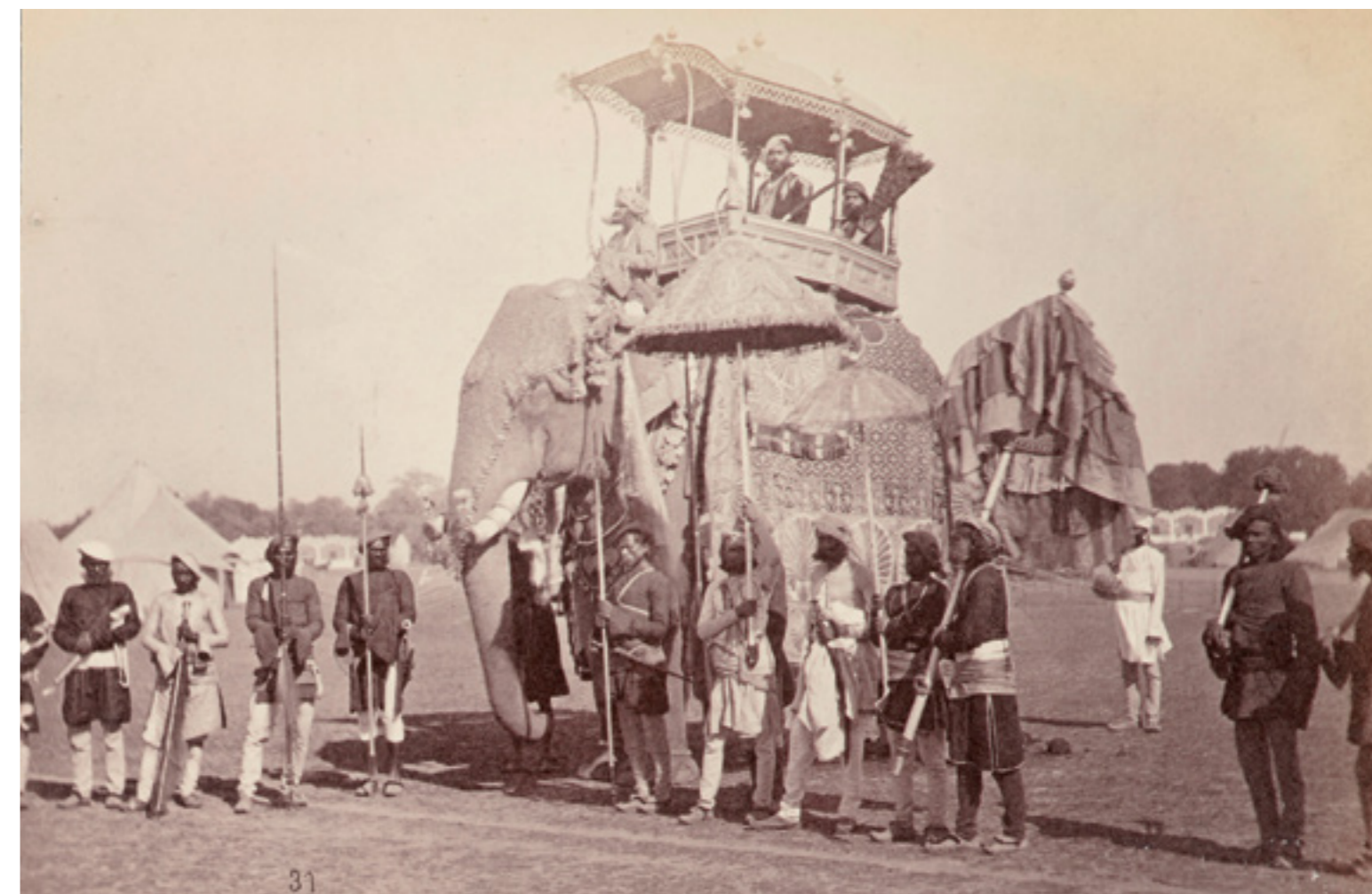
Processions and hunting parties

Quite different from these warring armies is the colourful group of chess pieces n. 0713 (Fig. 10), perhaps still belonging to the 18th century, to which we will now turn. One side is red, the other green, except for the camels, with the decorative elements highlighted in gold. Elephants, camels and horses are not equipped for war, but adorned with richly decorated caparisons, referring to embroidered trappings. No-one carries weapons except the foot soldiers. One might therefore think of a procession or a high-ranking party leaving for a hunt accompanied by the personal guard.

Sitting in their howdah the vizier with a companion does without sun protection, while the king is more comfortably placed under a canopy.

The bishop is depicted as a camel with two riders, the knight is a standard-bearer on horseback, the rook a kettledrum player on a mahout-guided elephant. In contrast to the sets we have seen so far, the camels and horses are nicely differentiated in terms of their physique and colour.

A hunting party is set no. 1494 (Fig. 11), one of the rare chess sets made of bronze and dating to the 18th century. The king and his vizier, both seated in simple howdahs



mounted on elephants, carry hunting falcons on their right. On the other side it is the king, his mahout and the foot soldiers, who carry the birds. This time the bishop is depicted as a camel rider beating the drums, one knight carries a flag, the other has even dismounted from his horse, and the rook is an elephant rider. A curious feature are the postures of the mahouts, who ride the elephants as if on horseback.

In more than one respect set n. 0694 (Fig. 1) is unusual. It shows men on one side and, surprisingly, women on the other. Made in the 18th century of polychrome ivory, with an impressive height of the kings of 10cm, several features of the set are remarkable: The pieces of both parties are essentially identical, only discernible through their physiognomy and head-wear: Sikh turbans on the side of the men, hemispherical Punjab helmets on the female side. The design of the thrones of kings and viziers is rather specific. And as a special

Fig. 8: Sir Pratap Singh, Maharajah of Orchha (1854-1930) on State Elephant: Prince of Wales Tour of India 1875-6 (vol. 6) 1875-76, courtesy The Royal Collection Trust, London. / 8064

Next double page

Fond Memories

A very rare ivory (looks painted wood at first sight) figural Rajasthan set of a different style that I had never seen before and that belonged to Lothar Schmid's collection. / 0713A

Fig. 10: Rajasthani figural set, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório.





Fig. 9: Howdahs and Elephants at the Great Exhibition, London 1851 (from Dickinson's *Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851, London 1854*). / 8065

gesture the warriors including the vizier, the knight and the rook present their short swords or daggers horizontally in both hands, while the bishops hold a scroll or gun; the kings hold their sword upright, as do the kneeling pawns.

There are indeed reports about female warriors in 18th and 19th century India. In 1772, the East India Company (EIC) had invaded the South Indian kingdom of Sivaganga. It took Rani Nachiyar eight years of preparation before she regained her kingdom. With her army of warrior women (named after Udaiyaal, a village woman killed by the British) she managed to destroy the EIC's weapons and ammunitions and inflicted an unexpected defeat on the EIC. However, these events took place in Southern India, and therefore it may be unlikely that the warrior women in our chess set really refer to this episode. But there was another group of female warriors in Mughal India — the so-called Urdubegis. They were



Fig. 11: Bronze figurine set, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1494

female warriors, trained in the use of bows and arrows, spears, short daggers and swords, and would not only protect the queen, the princesses and the other women in the harem but the king as well. These women usually came from Kashmiri, Habshi, Tartar, and Turk tribes, since they would not be allowed to wear the veil. They served as guards of the emperor's harem, even during military campaigns or travels, as represented here.

Set n. 0697 (Fig. 12) is made of ivory, one side stained red, the other left in its natural creamy colour. All the details are carved, there are no painted elements. Lacking any warlike features, this set may represent a procession. Its particularity lies in the iconography: The king is depicted as simply riding an elephant, and the vizier piece is an elephant without any person on its back — no mahout, no howdah, no canopy, no vizier. The elephants are adorned with a caparison, wreaths, a girth around the middle, and foot-rings with bells, as

in a procession. All these trappings for an elephant are described in detail in the “Ain-i-Akbari” (“Administration of Akbar”), the 16th century document about the administration of the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great (1542–1605). Next comes the bishop: a drummer riding a dromedary. The knight is a man in European clothes riding a horse, which is shaped not very differently from the dromedary. The rook is represented by an elephant mounted by a mahout and a second person.

Set n. 1716 (Fig. 13), probably made in the 18th century, is a very unusual set, depicting two Mughal parties going out for hunt, not for war. Both sets are made of identical figures, distinguished only by the colours: one side predominantly red, the other green. The painting of the oval plinths with their indented moulding was not done very carefully, so that the colour also covers the lower parts of the pieces. All the men wear the same long girdled mantles. The king and his vizier sit without a sunshade nor a servant in howdahs that are more robust than representative. The king’s elephant fends off an attacking tiger with its trunk. The bishops are given as camel riders equipped with a lance, the pawns as standing foot-soldiers armed with a sword. The most interesting pieces are the knights and the rooks. The former is a rider on horseback; one on both sides looks towards the side and once held an object (a sword?) in his right hand. His horse is carved in an astonishingly naturalistic style with its head bent towards a small tiger at its side. The rooks also are depicted as unmounted horses, covered by a saddlecloth draped over the saddle. The style of these horses is remarkably naturalistic, and very different from the more stylised horses we have seen in other Rajasthani chess sets.

In sharp contrast to these elaborate chess sets are n. 0672 (Fig. 14), 1995 (Fig. 15; illustrated in Michael Mark’s book “Antique Indian Chess Sets” from 1997, p. 23 fig. 11), and 1738 (Fig. 16). The pieces are more compact without protruding parts and reduced to the essential — certainly because these sets were intended for real play and not as show pieces.

Set n. 0672, probably dating to the early 19th century, in red and green shows the usual iconography with easily recognisable pieces: king and vizier in howdahs mounted on elephants, a rider on a dromedary (the bishop), a rider on horseback (the knight), another mahout-driven elephant (the rook), and standing foot-soldiers (the pawns) equipped with a sword and the Dhal, the typically Northern Indian shield surmounted by four bosses.

Several stylistic features distinguish this set from the ones we have seen so far: especially the rendering of the elephants (eyes, ears, the prominent bulges on the head) and the conical headdresses of king and vizier, which resemble a jewel-studded mukuta, a crown worn by kings and deities; compare also sets n. 1395 (Ch. 13, Fig. 5) and 1431 (Ch. 13, Fig. 3).



Before page

Fond Memories

This is a white and red figural set that brings me very fond memories given it has been a gift from a group of my dearest friends for my 45th birthday. It was secretly organized by my wife who bought it on their behalf from Garrick Coleman. / 0697

Fig. 12: Rare white vs red ivory set, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0697

Next double page

Fond Memories

This is a very chunky polychrome figural very rare set depicting a tiger hunt beautifully carved and painted. It has several tigers attacking the kings and other pieces, and has the singularity of having horses (without riders) as rooks, which I have never seen before. It belonged to the collection of my dear friend Emilio Ferré, who bought from Garrick Coleman in February 2000. / 1716

Fig. 13: Figural polychrome tiger hunt set, late 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1716





Fig. 14: Rajasthan-type set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0672



Fig. 15: Rajasthan-type figural naïve green and red set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1995

N. 1995 (Fig. 15), made of ivory coloured red and green, has a king sitting in his throne which is fastened directly to the back of the elephant. The vizier is a mounted horseman — similar to the one in Thomas Hyde's set. bishop, knight and rook are simply represented by the relative animals: a dromedary, a horse and an elephant, but without riders. The kneeling foot-soldiers are equipped with muskets.

Coral is the material which the unusual set n.1738 (Fig. 16) was made of. All the pieces are made of one piece, which posed narrow limits to the carver. Nonetheless, the kings have an impressive height of 7,5cm. Rather similar are the kings and queens(!) of both sides, depicted as sitting on armchairs with high back-rests. The pawns are soldiers crouching on their knees and holding arms such as bows, shields or sabres close to their bodies. Both sides differ, however, in the rendering of the bishops, the knights, and the rooks: One side has riders on a dromedary, a horse and an elephant, whereas the other side has only the animals without riders standing on high cylindrical bases.

Next page

Fond Memories

A beautiful small digital coral set, from the collection of my dear friend Thomas Thomsen. Coral is a rare and precious material and I always tried to collect sets on this material which are very rare (I only have four such complete sets). It comes in a silver box with pins that hold each piece. Thomas bought in India a long time ago. / 1738

Fig. 16: Coral figural traveling set in silver box, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1738



Enamelled sets from Jaipur

Another group, distinguished by their materials and colourful designs is constituted by the sets n. 2040 (Fig. 17), 1259 (Fig. 18), 2151 (Fig. 19), and 1785 (Fig. 20): These sets are usually attributed to Jaipur and dated to the late 19th until the middle of the 20th century. In the 19th century, enamelled wares were produced in several centres such as Lucknow, Benares, Multan, Lahore, Kangra, Kashmir, and Delhi, but Jaipur was considered the centre where the highest quality enamel work was produced. Maharaja Man Singh (1550-1614) is said to have brought five Sikh enamellers from Lahore, and the tradition of enamelling remained in the hands of their descendants. The technique is called *Minakari*, an originally Persian method of applying coloured designs to a metal surface by enamelling. Introduced to India by the Mughals, Rajasthan and Gujarat are especially known for their *Minakari* art. Gold is preferably used since it holds the enamel better than silver, lasts longer, and brings out the colours much brighter.

Thomas Holbein Hendley, the chairman of the Jaipur Exhibition 1883, described the process of enamelling of jewellery — which would also apply for chessmen — for the *Journal of Indian Art* (n. 2, 1883, p. 1-5) in the following way:

“There are two kinds of encrusted enamels — the *Cloisonné* or *flagree* enamel, and the *Champlevé*, in which the outline is formed by the plate itself, while the colours are placed in depressions hollowed out of the metal to receive them and are made to adhere by fire. The design is prepared by the *chitera*, or artist, generally a servant of the master jeweller, who also keeps books of patterns, some of great age, from which customers can make a selection, generally with a very good idea of the result to be obtained in metal. The *sunar*, or goldsmith, then forms the article to be enamelled, and afterwards passes it on to the *gharai*, the chaser or engraver, who engraves the pattern. These men are not Sikhs, but ordinary members of the goldsmith or carpenter sub-castes of Hindus. (...) The enameller or *minākār* now applies the colours in the order of their hardness, or power of resisting fire, beginning with the hardest. Before the enamel is applied, the surface of the ornament is carefully burnished and cleansed. The colours are obtained in opaque vitreous masses from Lahore, where they are prepared by *Muhammadan manihars*, or bracelet-makers. (...) The enamellers rarely work directly for the public, but execute orders for the rich jewellers, who usually send them the article to be enamelled ready for the process.”

Set n. 2040 (Fig. 17), probably dating to the period between 1830 and 1880, is made of enamelled gold decorated with diamonds and precious stones applied to the surface after enamelling. Green swordsmen and red archers, placed on domed oval bases, face each other here. The general typology of the pieces follows the traditional pattern of Rajasthani chess sets: the king sitting in a canopied howdah on the back of his elephant, the vizier, depicted as a warrior, is also riding an elephant, but without a sunshade. bishop and knight are de-



picted as warriors on a dromedary viz. a horse, while the rook is a mahout-driven elephant. The pawns are depicted in lively action, the green infantrymen attacking with their swords, the red ones shooting an arrow.

Another extraordinary example of such enamelled and bejewelled chessmen are the precious pieces collected under no. 1259 (Fig. 18). This magnificent set deserves a closer look. The general theme seems to be a procession, perhaps in occasion of a marriage. The predominant colours are blue (elephants, peafowls), red (horses, canopies, trappings, bases), and green (feathers, dresses, bases), so that the two sides are distinguished essentially by the main colours of the bases: green and red. All the pieces are lavishly decorated with painted flower motifs sometimes completed with precious stones and standing on flat moulded bases, which are surrounded by a frieze of floral scrolls filled with precious stones.

Fond Memories

This is a beautiful and complete enamel and gold Indian figural set that I had kept on my wish list for c. 15 years! It had been sold at Sotheby's NY in November 1994, now we know it was bought by Anne and Gordon Getty, and it came out for sale in October 2022 when their collection was put up for sale at Christie's NY. Apparently this same set had been offered in 1988 at Sotheby's NY as well, estimate at 15-25k\$, according to the 1988 CCI magazines that stated it has been sold in April that year for 20,900\$. The value in October 22 has been 60.5k\$, 34 years later. It is the best complete figural enamel and gold set I have come across. / 2040

Fig. 17: Figural gold and enamelled set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 2040



The green king is sitting in a canopied howdah on a caparisoned elephant guided by a mahout. A second king has taken the place of the vizier: The piece is similar to the former, but the base with the chevron frieze on a black plinth indicates that this piece does not belong to the same game. The bishop is represented by a majestic peafowl displaying his magnificent train of green feathers filled with rubies and diamonds. The peafowl (*pavo cristatus*) is the national bird of India, associated with the war god Kartikeya, but also with love, a theme we shall meet with in this set. The birds were often kept in menageries and as ornaments in large gardens, thus displaying imperial splendour. The knight is a rider in Mughal dress on a horse that elegantly lifts its right forefoot; the golden reins are lost (or perhaps put around the necks of two horses on the red side). The rooks are slightly different: one is a rider sitting behind a mahout on an elephant standing on an octagonal base, while the other one is sitting on a canopied elephant standing on an oval base. The pawns are mahout-driven elephants, only three of them with identical bases. Two of the mahouts are dressed in white, the others in white and green.

The red king is similar to his green counterpart, and is accompanied by his slightly smaller vizier. The knights are again similar to the green knights, as are the rooks, except for one with his rider sitting in a howdah without canopy. All the pawns are horsemen except for two represented by horses without rider. The bishops, given as the usual camel riders, deserve special attention, since this time they carry a female companion. The lover carrying his beloved away on a camel is a common trope in Indian folktales and is often found depicted in Rajasthani painting. It is also common for the groom to arrive at the wedding on a camel and carry his bride away on it. Therefore, it seems that the couples on a camel of the red side correspond to the green peafowls, both referring to romantic or perhaps even divine love.

A closer look reveals some interesting details: Especially the bases betray a great variety of shapes and colours. Most bases are oval in shape except for three octagonal ones. The bases of the “red” horses have light blue borders and a green surface as if they belonged to a green set. One of the “red” pawns has a similar colouring. And one elephant-riding pawn has a red base. All this suggests that we are dealing with an assembly of chessmen that do not necessarily belong to the same game, but have been put together in this way or by the client, who originally purchased them, or by a dealer.

In some respects the heterogenous set n. 2151 (Fig. 19), also made of enamelled gold, is similar to the former. Typologically we find the same pieces as in n. 1259 (Fig. 18), such as the canopied elephants, the couples riding on camels and the peafowls. And again, we are confronted with a variety of pieces standing on variously shaped bases. While one side follows the usual pattern of Rajasthani sets quite exactly, the other side surprises with completely different types of figures: There are no elephants, since the king and his queen (!) ride horses, held by the bridle by a servant. The knight also is depicted as a horse lead by

Before double page Fond Memories

Associated enamel and gold set. For c. 20 years, and given I had never seen a complete enamel and gold set for sale, I patiently collected single pieces or small groups of pieces to assemble an associated set. This has been completed c. 5 years ago and the set includes all the normal pieces with camels as bishops on one side and peacocks on the other side. Also one side has all small horses as pawns and the other small elephants. / 1259

Fig. 18: Enamel and gold figural part-set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1259



a handler. It seems that in this case, the peafowls were intended to serve as rooks. As pawns we see a variety of partly unusual figures of different sizes, including geese.

It appears that European customers could assemble their own individual chess set out of a variety of single pieces according to their personal gusto. Thus, the elephants, which were chosen as pawns for set n. 1259 (Fig. 18), could serve as rooks in another game.

As a difference to what we have seen, set n. 1785 (Fig. 20) was definitely conceived as such. It is made of enamelled gold and decorated with precious stones. However, from an iconographical point of view, it is rather different from the previous sets. In particular, king and vizier, dressed in long, splendid cloaks, are depicted standing on round bases, not sitting in howdahs on elephants — clearly referring to European chess sets. As in set n. 1995

Fig. 19: Associated gold and enamel figural set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 2151







Before double page
Fond Memories

A figural enamel and gold set with the king and vizier being standing people and not sitting on elephants as usually on these sets. This set belonged to the Al-Thani collection and was sold at Christie's London in October 2019 for 35.1k£. By repute, previously in the Collection of the Maharaja of Indore. Together with the Anne/Paul Getty sets these have been the only two complete enamel and gold sets I have seen at auction in c. 25 years of collecting. A very similar set, having belonged to King Faruk of Egypt is "The Royal Golden Chess of King Farouk, which was a gift from his ex-sister-in-law Shah of Iran Reza Pahlavi, and is at Egypt's Royal Jewelry Museum in Alexandria". / 1785

Fig. 20: Gold and enamel figural set, 1840-1880. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1785

Before double page

Fig. 21: Ivory figural set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9023

Next page

Fig. 22: Rajasthani chess set with enthroned kings, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0703

Next single page

Fig. 23: Figural bronze polychrome set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 2127

(Fig. 15), bishop, knight and rook are simply represented by a dromedary, a horse and an elephant, but without riders. The animals are splendidly decorated with ornamented bridles and blankets. The foot soldiers, distinguished by their headdress and the colours of their uniforms, have lined up on square bases and present their rifles. The whole thing is less a display of two warring factions than an ostentation of royal splendour and dignity.

Set n. 2151 (Fig. 19) is comparable to set n. 9023 (Fig. 21), which, however, is made of ivory rather than enamel. Both sides are identical and distinguished only by the red and green colour of the bases. The iconographical concept is that of chess sets made in Rajasthan. The king piece is represented by a caparisoned elephant guided by a *mahout* and equipped with a canopied, though empty *howdah*. The vizier piece is fashioned in a similar way, but smaller, and the counsellor sitting in the *howdah* must manage without sun protection. The "bishops" are unarmed camel riders, the knights evenly unarmed horsemen, and the rook is a man on an elephant presenting with both hands the same object as the counsellor's *mahout*. All the men wear Indian turbans. Not so the foot-soldiers, who wear Sikh helmets, and hold a sabre and a lance in their hands, having strapped their shields on their backs. While the foot-soldiers stand still presenting their arms, camels, horses, and trumpeting elephants stride forward. The whole company is therefore not going to war, but is participating in a festive event, perhaps even the coronation of the ruler, who is yet to arrive. Some of the described iconographical and stylistic features such as the raised



trunks of the elephants, the ornamental headdress of the horses, the riders holding the reins in both hands, the shields on the backs of the soldiers, the oval and round shapes of the profiled bases and the floral painted ornaments reappear in sets such as n. 2151, which was likely produced in Jaipur.

The next group of chess sets we turn to now consists of two very particular sets that differ from the previous ones. Let us first look at set n. 0703 (Fig. 22), made of polychrome ivory in a rather coarse style of carving. The bishop and the knight are conceived in the usual way as warriors on dromedary and horse, the rook as a mahout riding an elephant, and the pawns as foot-soldiers presenting their arms. The beardless Greens are depicted with terrifying wide open mouths, perhaps to represent Africans. The kings and viziers are of a completely different type as their counterparts in the sets we have discussed so far: They are sitting under a square shrine supported by four columns and erected on a raised platform. The kings have the privilege to be protected by a sentry, standing on the said platform.

The figure types of set n. 2127 (Fig. 23), made of polychrome bronze, are essentially the same, and also the crude style of carving is similar. The warriors are dressed in what should look like British uniforms. The kings are themselves armed with a shield and are protected by two sentries.

Animal protome sets

A further group of Rajasthani chess sets is characterised by the particular design of the bishop, the knight and the rook, all in the shape of animal protomes on bases. A typical example of this kind of set is n. 1717 (Fig. 24), made of ivory and coloured as usual in red and green with ornamental details given in black and gold. We see two practically identical sets of chessmen dressed in traditional Indian coats. While the kings are depicted crouching on their knees, the slightly smaller vizier and the pawns are standing on square moulded bases. Except for the vizier, who holds his right arm outstretched along his side, the king and his foot-soldiers hold both hands — the object they once held is now lost — in front of their bodies. The protomes of elephant, camel and horse, both equipped with precious bridles, rise vertically from their bases. They are covered with the same painted ornaments as found on the clothes of the men.

The same workshop must have produced set n. 1392, (Fig. 25) made of ivory and stained red and black with decorative details added in white and gold. Again, the kings, wearing typical Mughal headdress, are depicted crouching on their knees, holding an object (perhaps a sceptre and a flywhisk) in each hand, of which one is missing. The viziers, the pawns and the animal protomes of bishop, knight and rook on their moulded bases are practically identical to their counterparts in set n. 1717 (Fig. 24). Both sets may date to the early 19th century.



Set n. 0710 (Fig. 26) is another variant of this style. Made of ivory painted in red and green with very carefully executed flower decoration, its figures betray a strong classicist influence, which speaks for a production date still in the 18th century. Among the differences to the two sets we already described are both kings wearing golden garments, only distinguished by the colour of their throne. They once held a sceptre, sword or flywhisk in their left hand, which are now lost. The viziers stand on high profiled bases, their posture being similar to the viziers of the two games n. 1717 (Fig. 24) and 1392 (Fig. 25). Each holds a dagger in his left hand (the one of the green vizier is not preserved). The foot-soldiers stand on octagonal bases and present their sabres, while their shields are strapped to their backs. The protomes of camel, horse and elephant are placed on high pedestals with base and cornice mouldings, covered with a decorative pattern referring to 18th century wallpaper designs, another European feature.

Fond Memories

A second example of a set with seated kings, this time polychrome one side red and the other green, from the collection of Emilio Ferre. I have only seen three more sets like this in my years of collecting; one polychrome in mostly white colors in the collection of my dear friend Michael Melching, one in my collection as well previously in the collection of Franz Josef Lang (described separately), and a third one is in the Metropolitan Museum, from the Pfeiffer collection. / 1717

Fig. 24: Rajasthan polychrome set with seated kings, c. 1800. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1717





Before double page**Fond Memories**

I bought this set from my dear friend Jon Crumiller several years ago. Jon kindly asked me if I wanted to buy some sets from him that I had always liked and this was one of them. It is a beautifully carved and painted figural set, with seated kings and viziers. I had been offered this set c. 15 years ago by Garrick Coleman but had declined to buy it (wrongly...) as I thought the price was too high. Fortunately it was only a c. 10 year interval... Also a few years later I was able to buy a very similar set from Franz Josef Lang and these are the only two of their kind I have ever seen. / 0710

Fig. 26: Rare Rajasthan set with seated kings, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0710

Before single page**Fond Memories**

A very rare set, with seated kings in red and black, from the collection of Franz Josef Lang. I have only seen three more sets like this in my years of collecting; one polychrome in mostly white colors in the collection of my dear friend Michael Melching, one in my collection as well from the collection of Emilio Ferre (described separately), and a third one is in the Metropolitan Museum, from the Pfeiffer collection. / 1392

Fig. 25: Rajasthan-type red vs black set with seated kings, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 1392

Before single page**Fond Memories**

A beautifully carved and polychrome Rajasthan figural set with seated kings that I have some doubts could also have been made in Goa given the design of the clothes and the fact the vizier is a queen in this set. From the collection of my dear friend Emilio Ferre who bought it from Garrick Coleman in March 1997. / 1703

Fig. 27: Figural polychrome set with seated kings, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1703

Fig. 28: Jujhar Singh Bundela kneels in submission to Shah Jahan', painted by Bichitr, c. 1630, courtesy Chester Beatty Library. / 8057



Also possibly dating to the 18th century is set n. 1703 (Fig. 27), made of ivory and painted, one side predominantly red, the opposite side green. The kings, dressed like a Mughal emperor are sitting on a chair (see Fig. 28 / 8057).

They are accompanied not by a vizier, but by their queens — female figures, dressed in regional style in wide long trousers under a long skirt with a shawl around their shoulders. The bishop is depicted as a bearded man dressed in a long coat over long trousers and wrapped in a mantle. The pawns are also standing men dressed in a long coat girded at the waist with a waistband. knight and rook are fashioned as a horse's and an elephant's head placed — not very elegantly — on a high octagonal pedestal.

Various Rajasthani chess sets

We will now turn to chess sets with different characteristics that distinguish them from the sets we discussed so far. The first set we would like to look at is n. 0725 (Fig. 29), a beautifully carved wooden set, which may belong to the 18th century and was perhaps carved in Jaipur. Apart from king and queen depicted as Hindu gods sitting in magnificent thrones surrounded by flames, the typology of the figures follows the standard scheme: a drummer riding on a dromedary as bishop, a horseman as knight, a rider on an elephant as rook, and bare-footed musketeers as pawns. The animals are carved in a remarkably naturalistic style with great attention paid to the details of their ornamental trappings. The whole set betrays a strong European influence, especially the moulded and decorated bases, and the uniforms of the knight, the elephant rider and the foot-soldier. On the other hand, in the South Indian set n. 0686 we observe a similar ornamental element below the horse's fore-feet as well as the Hindu god (see Ch. 12, Fig. 7), which might speak for a Southern influence as possible source of inspiration.

Finally we would like to conclude our chapter with the fine chess set n. 9000 (Fig. 30) made in Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) from polychrome ivory, dating to the late 19th or early 20th century. Both sides are distinguished by the red and green colours of the headwear and the bases. The figures are designed as male busts growing out of lotus calyxes, with their faces being identical on both sides. They rest on disc-shaped plinths with foliate mouldings. The crown topped by a cross worn by the red vizier resembles the British crown. The set makes the impression of being inspired by non-figural Muslim pattern sets such as n. 1546 (Ch. 10, Fig. 13).

The various toy figurines collected under n. 2111 (Fig. 31) are made of painted ivory probably in the 19th century in a rather crude style. One group is mostly of a creamish colour, while the other group is painted red. The group of real and fantastic animals includes apes, cows, a peafowl, buffaloes, rams, dogs, hares, giraffes, tigers, and centaurs among sometimes hardly identifiable others, but also a meditating Indian yogi. Frank Greygoose illus-

Next single page

Fig. 29: Wood figural set with seated kings, 18th or 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0725

Next single page

Fig. 30: Varanasi Ivory polychrome set, late 19th or early 20th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9000



trates three such figurines in his important reference book “Chessmen” published in 1979 (p. 131 fig. 140), which he identifies as from an animal chess set from „Madras“, i.e. southern India. „Madras“ is however quite a vague designation, which could refer to the city (today Chennai), to the British Madras Presidency or even to a larger Southern Indian region including Travancore. Moreover, the buffaloes, with their heads tilted downwards and turned to the side, remind one of similar buffaloes in John Company Sets from North-East India (compare n. 0723, 0733, 9003, in Chapter 5, Figs. 14, 16, and 9, respectively). In addition, I would also like to point out that some of the animal pieces stand on narrow flat plinths glued onto larger flat bases, which shows that these figurines were not originally meant to serve as chess pieces, but adapted for this purpose. On the red side, it looks as if the sitting ape was intended to represent the king with the peafowl as his vizier, while the centaurs stood for the bishops and the bulls for the rooks. The positions of the pieces are less obvious on the creamish side, only the guru should be seen as king and the crouching ape as vizier, while the reddish animals are likely to have been intended as rooks.

**Before double page
Fond Memories**

These Rajasthan animal figures have always intrigued me; would they have been toys for children to play? (But in ivory that was an expensive and rare material?). Or would they be other gaming pieces? Or chess pieces, as Greygoose says in its book as Ulrich mentions? We leave the question open, but I was very pleased to be able to collect 32 associated figures, first from Michael Mark's collection and then from several auctions and a final important lot from Manfred Eder's collection. They are quite unique and most pieces are beautifully carved and painted. / 2111, 2111b

Fig. 31: Thirty-two animals as chess pieces, 19th century.
Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. /
2111, 2111b

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CHAPTER 10

Islamic Pattern Chess Sets

Grandmaster Raymond Keene OBE

Professor Jackie Eales

Chess and Islam

Over the past 1000 years or so, chess has from time to time been banned in the Islamic world, and then the prohibition has been lifted. When the Ayatollahs came to power in Iran, one of their first acts was to ban chess; the prohibition has now been relaxed and chess is permitted once again.

This periodically hostile attitude towards chess is curious, given that chess first flourished in the Baghdad Caliphate over 1,000 years ago and that Harun al-Rashid, the Abbasid Caliph of Islam from 786 to 809, was known to be a chessplayer. The problem derives from a verse of the Koran which reads: 'Oh true believers, surely wine and lots and images and divining-arrows are an abomination of the works of Satan, therefore avoid ye them that ye may prosper.' Although chess is not specifically proscribed in the Koran, in about 800 some Muslim lawyers extended the condemnation of lots or dice and images to chess and chess-players.

Ash-Shafii, the 9th century Arab jurist, put forward counter-arguments, claiming that chess was an image of war and that the game could be played, not just for a stake or for pure recreation, but as a mental exercise for the solution of military tactics. This view has tended to prevail, not least because the Caliphs themselves were often avid chess-players, and during the late 9th and early 10th centuries in Baghdad, kept a court retinue of aliyat, Grandmasters, who regularly conducted competitions for their amusement. Tradition states that the oldest chess problem on record was composed in 840 by the Caliph Mutasim Billah, third son and successor of Harun al-Rashid.



Fig. 1: Islamic-pattern green and red chess set, 18th or 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0744

Islamic chess pieces consisted of two opposing armies, each with a king, counsellor or vizier, elephant, horse, rook and infantry. The initial array of shatranj is identical to our modern game and most of the piece moves are also identical. Rook, knight and king are exactly the same. Pawns advance and capture in the same way, except a double square option for the pawns' initial action is forbidden. The bishop (elephant) moves diagonally and can leap over intervening obstacles, but its range is limited to two squares. Hence an elephant on c1 can only ever maximally reach the squares e3, a3, c5, a7, g5 and e7; a total of seven, including the starting square.

The greatest difference is with the queen (vizier) which can move just one square diagonally in each direction. Finally, the modern ruling that stalemate, the reduction of the opponent's possibilities to zero, results in a draw, was sensibly interpreted as a win for the



Fig. 2: The age-old shapes of the Islamic Chess pieces, per this 18th-century set. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1655

paralyser. Ditto, any situation where one side had lost all units, apart from the king, since a player was declared victor, if king plus another unit remained on the board. This was described as a win by bare king, and avoided those anomalous situations arising in contemporary chess, where even possessing not just one, but two extra knights might not suffice for the full point.

I find the restrictions imposed by Shatranj intellectually challenging, rather like having to adhere to the straitjacket of Iambic hexameters when writing poetry. If you wish to venture away from chess, try shatranj. You won't even need to acquire a new board or pieces. Both remain the same. You may surprisingly discover that this accessing of an ancient Islamic resource is quite mentally refreshing.

**Next double page
Fond Memories**

This decorated red and green polychrome Islamic ivory set came together with a very rare Indian chess board, made of ivory and wood with floral motifs (ch. 15, fig. 1 / 0671), which I bought from the same dealer that sold the rock crystal set and velvet board (fig. 15 / 0747) to Thomas Thomsen. / 0742

Fig. 3: Islamic green and red chess set with decorative design, 18th or 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0742



The first chess/shatranj grandmaster, the first mental sportsman, the first genius of mind sports, was the Baghdad chess player as-Suli. Of course there were players who came before him, but none of them had attained his top-class level of skill. as-Suli was a resident at the court of the Caliph where his reputation was that of an excellent conversationalist. Players of his status were known as Aliyat. It might be difficult for Western audiences to grasp that Baghdad, as-Suli's home city, was once the world capital of chess; indeed it was the pre-eminent metropolis of the planet for some time from the 9th century onwards.

Baghdad was founded in 762 by the Caliph Al-Mansour, who reputedly employed 100,000 men to build it. This circular city, with a diameter of 8,655 ft (2,638 m) and surrounded by a rampart of no fewer than 360 towers, almost immediately proved to be too small for the burgeoning population. By the time of the Caliph Haroun Al Raschid, Baghdad had expanded, taking in quarters for commerce and artisans, and by 814 it was almost certainly the world's largest conurbation.

The stupendous growth of Baghdad was a most astonishing global phenomenon. By 814 it covered an area approximately 40 sq miles (100 km²) — the equivalent of modern-day Paris within the outer boulevards. Baghdad was the dominant megalopolis and as-Suli was the multi-talented mind sportsman, poet, politician, and chess grandmaster who exemplified the glittering culture of Baghdad at that time, a most convincing and powerful testament to the astonishing force of Islam, during its Golden Age.

Baghdad was to shatranj what Moscow became to the modern game — the world epicentre of chess. A chess genius lives on in his published studies and puzzles. as-Suli set one puzzle which he described as: 'old, very old and extremely difficult to solve. Nobody could solve it or say whether it was a draw or win. In fact there is no man on earth who can solve it if I, as-Suli, have not shown him the solution'. This was his proud boast and it held good until recently, when the Russian Grandmaster Yuri Averbakh finally cracked the puzzle, with modern computers completing the finishing touches to the long hidden solution.

as-Suli was the strongest player of his time, a composer of chess puzzles, and the author of the first book describing a systematic way of playing shatranj. For more than 600 years after his death, the highest praise an Islamic player could bestow on a colleague was to say that he played like as-Suli, who won every chess match that he has known to have contested.

His knowledge was encyclopedic. He owned an enormous library, and wrote many history books as well as his two textbooks on chess. He was also a revered teacher of the game, with the next outstanding Arabic player of shatranj, Al-Lajlaj, being one of his pupils. But in 940 as-Suli uttered an indiscreet political comment, and had to flee from Baghdad. He died soon afterwards in Basra at the grand old age of 92.

as-Suli can be seen as a symbol of the superlative Islamic culture that flourished in Baghdad, possessing extraordinary qualities of mind, thought and intellect at a time when

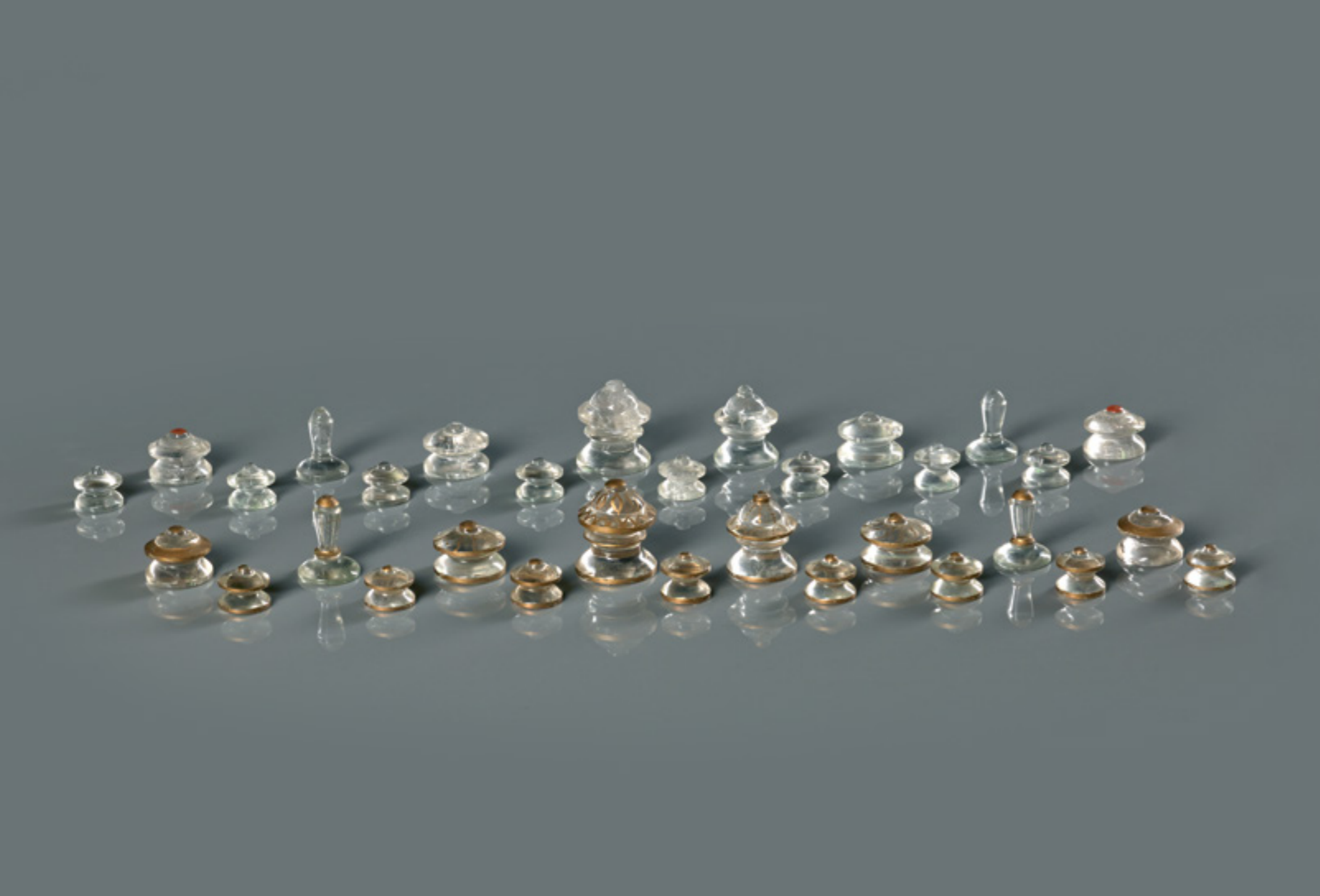
Europe itself was in the scientifically less advanced early medieval period. The parallel western Carolingian imperium was in many respects impressive, but it is said that the Emperor Charlemagne himself struggled to read or write, leaving such onerous tasks to his amanuensis Alcuin. As Suli, as a human embodiment, represented a pinnacle of urban sophistication and culture, not to be attained by rival civilisations for centuries to come.

Islamic Chessmen and boards

Distinctively Islamic abstract shapes for the pieces had developed by the early 9th century onwards. The use of these non-figurative forms makes the precise dating of early excavated pieces problematic, as there are none of the obvious visual clues provided by the clothing or military costumes adorning sets made in the Western figurative tradition. Nevertheless, we know that Eastern Iran - including part of modern Afghanistan - was one of the key centres of production of Islamic chessmen until the 11th century.

Fig. 4: Islamic green and red chess set with decorative design, 18th or 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0750





Fond Memories

This rock crystal set came with an Indo-Portuguese board that a friend of mine in Portugal had bought. She is a collector of Indo-Portuguese items like games or chess boards, but has no special interest in chess pieces, and when she saw our collection she kindly gave us these pieces saying, "They would be much better together with your other sets!" It is most likely 17/18th century (the board she bought was 17th century) and one side is gilded. The rooks on the "non gilt" side have red painted finials to distinguish them from the bishops! / 0746

Fig. 5: Rock crystal Islamic-pattern set, 17th or 18th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0746

The earliest chess pieces of this non-figural type, which possibly date to the 9th century, have been excavated at Nishapur in northeast Iran. The early ivory pieces found at Nishapur, and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, include representations of the elephant with vestigial tusks and the horse with a recognisable head, while the other pieces are more abstract. This emphasises that the ban on creating images of living beings did not always extend to animals, and/or possibly chess pieces, at this time. The horse head can be found in later representations of Islamic chess, although the elephant tusks became ever more stylised. The rook in the Nishapur pieces already bears the notched top that became standard in Islamic sets.

Luxury chessmen were carved from rock crystal and from elephant tusks, and the use of such expensive materials reflected the popularity of chess as an elite game. Pieces made from less durable animal bone have also been excavated from this region and glass,



semi-precious stones and ceramics were also used. As the popularity of the game spread, chessmen were also produced in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and India. White and black were often used to distinguish the two armies, with the black pieces simply being stained or made from dark materials, including teak and jet. Gold and silver tracery and other, brighter stains such as blue, green and red were also used.

Murray believed that green and red had always been the favourite colours for the pieces in India and this tradition persisted into more recent times, as can be seen from some of the ivory sets here. Set 1735 (fig. 6) is Indian and may be dated to the 17th century.

Set 1495 (fig. 12) may also be Indian and is dated to the 18th century; and set 0734 (fig. 7) shows evidence of gilding and may be dated to the 19th century.

Fig. 6: A classic Islamic-pattern chess set, 17th or 18th century, with board. Photo by Paulo Alexandrino e Masayuki Kondo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1735

Next double page

Fig. 7: Islamic-pattern set in the classic red and green colours. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0734





The red and green 17th century Persian set 0948 (fig. 8), from the Thomas Thomsen Collection, is also made from ivory, which lends itself particularly well to staining. The lacquered wood board with the set is lavishly inlaid with semi-precious stones and squares of rock crystal.

The use of green and red is emphasised in an important origin myth about the spread of chess from India to Persia. The anonymous *Chatrang-namak*, the book of *chatrang*, is a middle-Persian work known from a 9th century manuscript, but it may have been written as early as the 7th century. It contains the earliest written evidence that *chatrang* was played on a board of 64 squares between two opponents, and tells the story of a mythical, or unidentifiable Indian king, called Devasharman, who sent a magnificent set of '16 emerald and 16 ruby-red men' to Nushirwan (531-578, known formally as Khosrow I Anushirvan, "the immortal soul"), the king of Persia, and challenged him to explain the rules of the game. Much later, in the early 11th century, an emerald and ruby set was described as one of the treasures of the Persian king Parwiz (590-628).



**Before double page
Fond Memories**

This extraordinary red and green Islamic ivory set came together with this lacquer board with rock crystal chess squares and inlaid semi-precious stones inside in octagonal form. It belonged to the Thomas Thomsen collection and is depicted in Wichmann (sold at auction by David Hafler who bought it from the Manoury collection). It was by repute a gift from the Sultan of Bukhara to Prince Gallitzin and has a seal of Prince Gallitzin dated 1612 (or 1712?) on the back of the board. A fascinating story! / 0948

Fig. 8: Sultan of Bukhara gift to Prince Gallitzin, with matching Islamic chess set. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0948

**Before page
Fond Memories**

This extraordinary late 18th/early 19th Islamic set is made of pure gold with emeralds and rubies inlaid on the pieces and belonged to the Al Thani collection, having been sold at Christie's in NY some years ago. According to a source close to the Sheikh it was bought from an Indian Royal family. When the Sheikh's Collection was sold in 2019, it had two gold chess sets (the other figural, in enamel and gold, set 1785 in chapter 9), and we were lucky to be able to buy both of them. / 1725

Fig. 9: Al Thani's Maharaja gold, ruby and emerald Islamic set. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1725

Fond Memories

This Muslim red and green ivory set, which I bought from Gareth Williams c. 20 years ago, has the particularity of being hollow and having sand inside the pieces! It is illustrated in Gareth's book on page 92, and Gareth's wife Veil told me they bought it from Garrick Coleman. It was exhibited in 1993 at the British Museum. / 0741

Fig. 10: Islamic-pattern set with rare feature: sand is inside the pieces. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0741





Luxurious sets would certainly have been decorated with precious gemstones such as emeralds and rubies, and both are used here on set 0747 (fig. 15) made from rock crystal in India in the 17th century. The remarkable set 1725 (fig. 9), also of Indian origin, is more obviously encrusted with emeralds and rubies which are set in 22 carat gold, as tested by Christie's.

Red and green staining was almost certainly a nod to the upper end of the market for those who could not afford great luxury while blue was another popular colour for Islamic pieces. Incised dot and circle motifs also made attractive, albeit cheaper, decoration and continued to be used on Islamic sets into modern times. This form of embellishment can be seen on the 17th century Indian ivory set 0741 (fig. 10), originally from the Gareth Williams Collection.

The dots could make abstract patterns and could also represent stylised flowers, as seen here on the Indian ivory set 9015 (fig. 11).

Fig. 12: Green and red Islamic-pattern set with floral designs. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1495

Before page
Fig. 11: Islamic-pattern set with circular dot motifs. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9015



Fig. 14: The Chessboard (Ashtapada) Carpet. Central Asia or India (Timurid or Delhi Sultanates), early 15th century. Museum of Islamic Art, Doha CA.19.1997, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. / 8058

**Next page
Fond Memories**

This Muslim "red and green finials" ivory set has the particularity of having a beautiful "floral" style. I bought it from Franz Josef Lang c. 10 years ago. / 1546

Fig. 13: Islamic-pattern Ivory set with artichoke designs. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1546

**Next single page
Fond Memories**

This set I bought c. 17 years ago from Thomas Thomsen. It is an amazing rock crystal Islamic set, 17th century, with emeralds and rubies in the top of the pieces, and comes with a velvet board dating from the 16th century. Thomas had bought it, by coincidence, many years before (in the 1980's) from a Portuguese dealer I know well and who specialises in Indo-Portuguese items. He had bought it on one of his trips to India (as he later told me). / 0747

Fig. 15: 17th or 18th century Rock Crystal set with matching board. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0747

The 18th century green and red ivory set 1495 (fig. 12), originally from the Franz Josef Lang collection, bears more elaborate floral flourishes in the form of delightful petals and rosettes on the heads of the pieces. There was no Islamic ban on depicting flora, and tulips and carnations were particularly popular forms of decoration on Muslim art in other contexts, such as decorative tiling and embroidery.

Artichokes were another frequently seen motif from the 16th century onwards, and the delicately carved 18th century set 1546 (fig. 13), also from the Lang collection, is adorned with the most exuberantly realised green and red artichokes to denote the two armies.

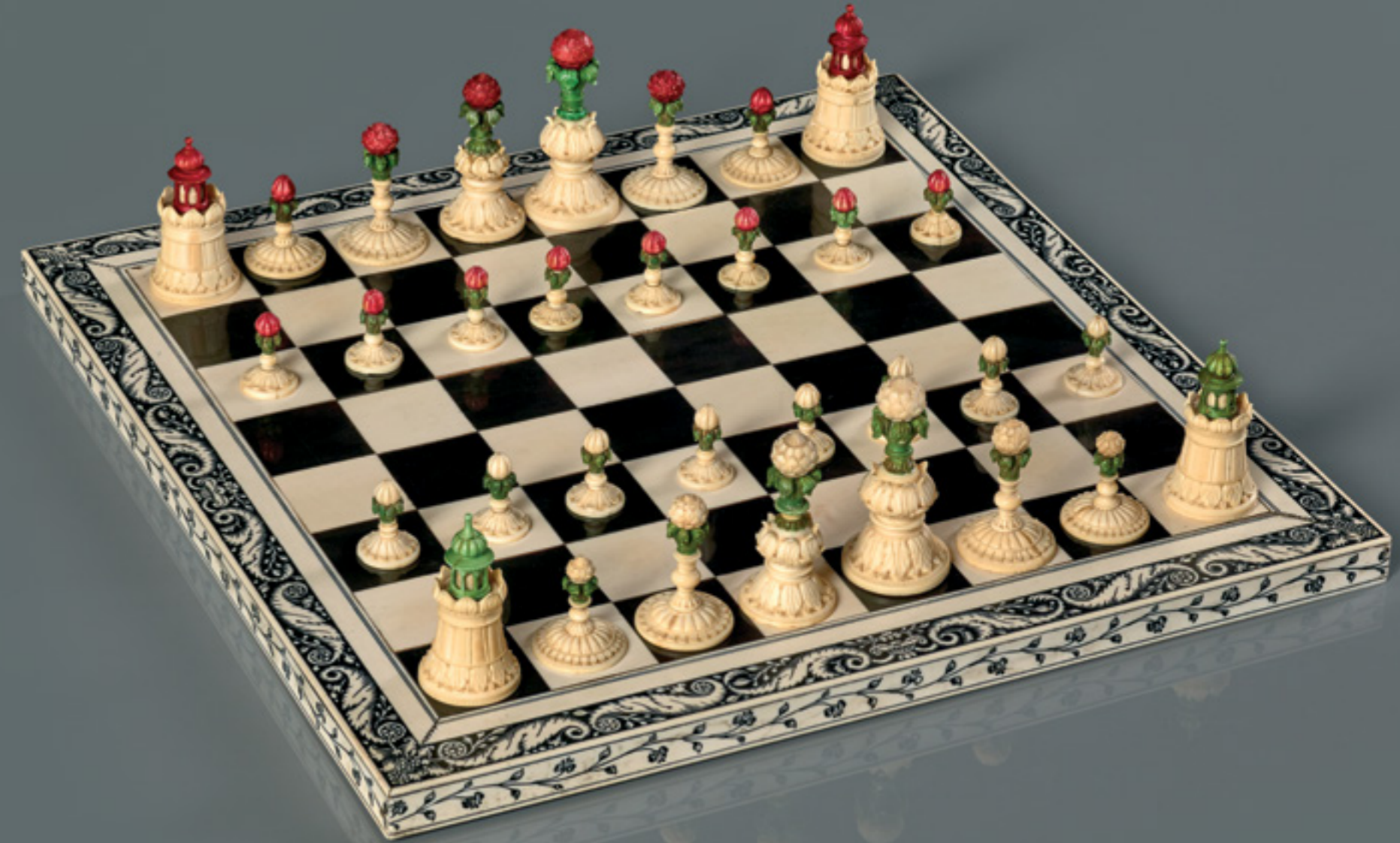
Boards from the earliest eras of chess play have not survived, because they were made from materials that were prone to decay. The earliest surviving examples of western boards date to the 13th century, but Islamic boards were often made from leather or cloth, which while easily portable, was much less likely to survive from this early period. Cloth boards could be quite elaborate, as the Middle East was a region renowned for the production of luxury textiles made from silk, gold and silver thread.

A unique example of a 64 square board for chess or other games is woven into a 15th century silk carpet made in central Asia or India and now in the Doha Museum of Islamic Art (fig. 14 / 8058). The carpet measures 1.63 x 3.71m and the squares at the edge of the board are depicted in yellow silk, with the inside squares in red and the four central squares denoted by a star shape set in a lighter beige colour. The board is slightly offset from a central octagonal design, which was a traditional Persian motif found in paintings of the 14th century Jalayrid school of western Iran and surviving in a few 15th century carpets of which this is the earliest. This placement would have allowed the owner to sit honorifically at the centre of the carpet with an opponent on the other side of the board.

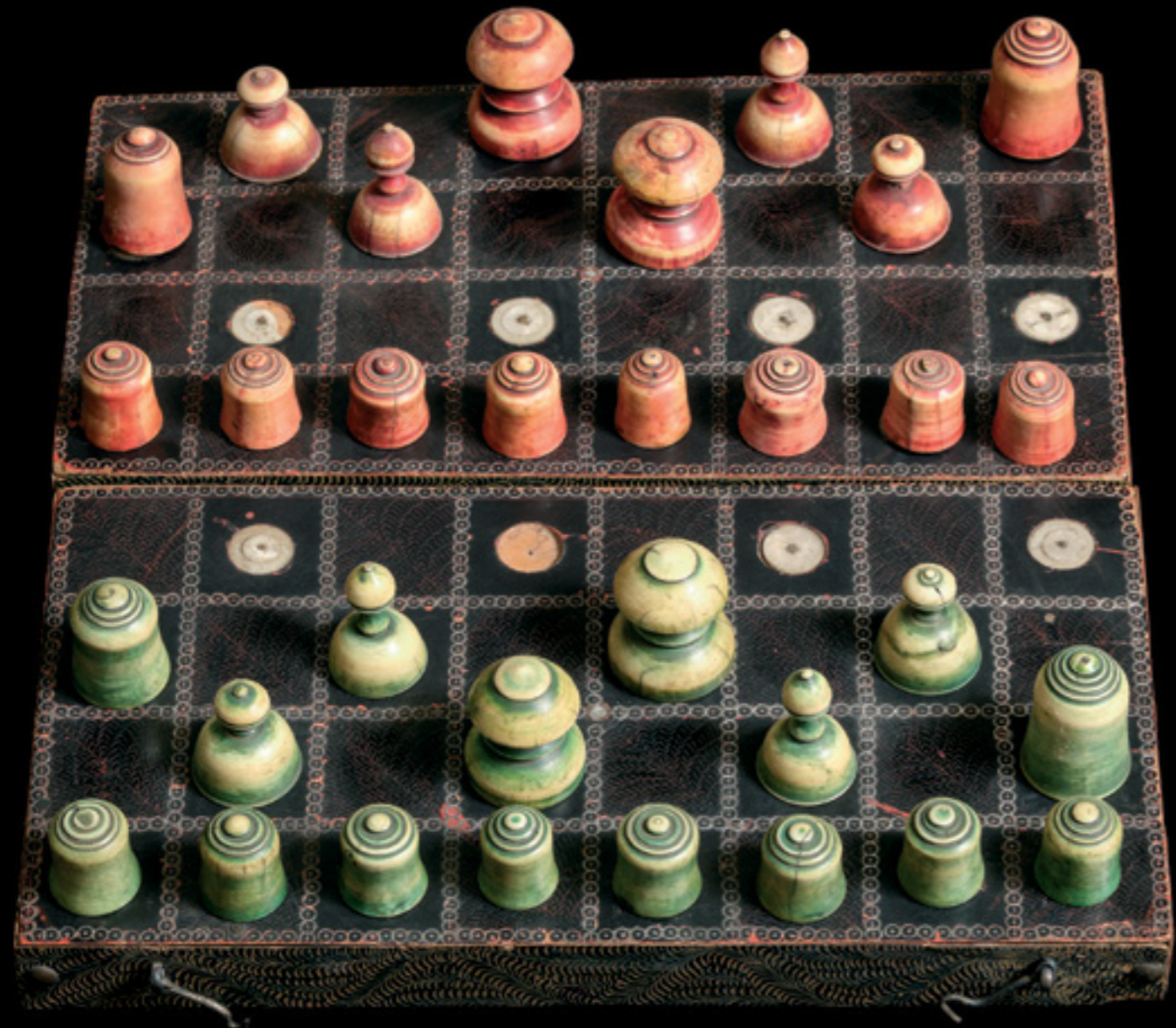
The use of textiles continued into the modern period, as can be seen here from the boards for set 0747 (fig. 15), made from fabric with gold threads.

Such was the value of pieces made from rock crystal that several other examples can be found in the treasuries of monasteries in both Spain and Germany. The Ager pieces are made from the finest rock crystal and are exquisitely executed to show the purity of the crystal and to reflect the light falling on the pieces. They were likely to have been made in eastern Iran, a centre of glass and stone carving, although Egypt has been suggested as an alternative provenance. Fifteen of these beautiful pieces from Ager are now part of the al-Sabah collection in Kuwait.

Another set in the collection, set 0737 (fig. 16), is made of citrine, a type of quartz that is usually colored yellow to brownish-orange. Here the set is shown on a board made of silk.







Boards were also made of inlaid wood and ivory, and by the late fifteenth century these were increasingly patterned with elaborate borders, which might include intricate marquetry. Such ornate boards are represented here by the ebony board inlaid with ivory and silver shown with set 0739 (fig. 18).

As contacts developed between Christian societies and Islamic countries in the 10th and 11th centuries, abstract Islamic sets were traded to the West or were made in western workshops. The earliest references to chess sets in western Europe date from Catalonia in the mid-11th century and they include the famous Ager rock crystal pieces then owned by Arsenda and Mir de Tost and bequeathed to the church of St. Pere d'Ager on Mir's death in 1072.

As chess became more popular in European countries, the pieces were reimagined to reflect the social order of western society. The major pieces were renamed as king, queen, bishop, knight and rook or castle and, without any koranic prohibition, elaborate figurative forms began to appear. Amongst the most famous are the Lewis Chessmen, a trove found in 1831 on the Isle of Lewis, in Scotland, which are believed to have been carved in Scandinavia from walrus ivory between 1150 and 1200. Here we find the now familiar king, queen and bishop (all seated) and the knight on horseback, while the pawns are still depicted as abstract forms, since this was easier to carve from the tusks. The rook is an armoured man biting his long shield and he has been compared to the berserker, or mythological Norse warrior, who fought in a trance and was immune to the blows of the enemy.

The so-called 'Charlemagne' chessmen in the French Bibliothèque Nationale are carved from large blocks of ivory, with the kings weighing nearly a kilogram each and situated within frames that recall the religious icons of the period. They were probably made in Italy in the 11th century and are thus earlier than the Lewes pieces. They are intensely figurative and were influenced by a mix of European and Indian styles, with the kings and queens dressed in the Norman style familiar from the Bayeux tapestry, while the bishops are represented by elephants ridden by mahouts.

While artefacts such as the Ager, the Lewis and Charlemagne pieces tell us much about the influence of trade and other cultural contacts between western and eastern societies in the middle ages, we can also examine the growing number of visual depictions of the game. A prime source here is the *Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas* – a compendium of board games, including chess, prepared in 1283 for the Spanish king, Alfonso X, also known as 'the Wise'. Work on the book was stopped after the King's death in April 1284, and left the book slightly unfinished. [Schädler/Calvo 2009]

**Before single page
Fond Memories**

This was one of my first Islamic chess sets and the first in rock crystal! It is gilded, has green and red painted bases, dates from the 18th century and is in excellent condition. It belonged to Doug Polumbaum's collection and I was fortunate that Doug let me buy it, together with most of his collection, c. 20 years ago. / 0737

Fig. 16: 17th or 18th century Moghul Citrine Rock Crystal set with silk board. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0737

**Before single page
Fond Memories**

A beautiful rock crystal 19th century Islamic set that I bought from the collection of my dear friend Emilio Ferre, who bought it from Asprey in 1994. It comes with an 18th century velvet board and has emeralds and rubies on the top of the pieces. Grandmaster Ray Keene, who I am honored wrote this chapter, has illustrated it in his book "Chess, an Illustrated History", on page 54. / 1416

Fig. 17: 19th century Mughal jade and hard stone chess set with matching board. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1416

**Before single page
Fond Memories**

I bought this red and green ivory set and board from Doug Polumbaum's collection around 19 years ago. It is depicted in *Asian Games: The Art of Contest* by Colin Mackenzie and Irving Finkel and there is a very similar set and board illustrated in Wichmann; attributed to Persia and dated 18th century. / 0739

Fig. 18: 17th or 18th century Islamic chess set with matching board. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0739



The magnificent coloured miniatures in the book depict both Christian and Muslim men and women playing chess and other games (fig. 19 / 8059). The influence of Islamic design is clear from the abstract chessmen on the boards, which include the vestigial tusks of the elephants, the horse head and the divided top of the rook, all found on the early pieces excavated at Nishapur. This work, now in the Escorial Palace in Madrid, exemplifies the cultural crossovers between Christian and Muslim societies in the Iberian peninsula, which was a key point of contact between the two throughout the Middle Ages.

Another celebrated source for the development of the game is the first English publication on chess, William Caxton's *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* printed in Bruges in 1474. Based on a 13th century moralising sermon by the Dominican friar, Jacobus de Cessolis, *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* also depicts the pieces in their stylised Muslim forms.

Fig. 19: People playing chess, with musician and serving women, from *Libro del axedrez, dados e tablas* (Book of Dice and Games. Royal Library of the Monastery of El Escorial (RBME). National Heritage. / 8059



Fig. 20: Illustration of chess pieces from *De ludo scachorum*, Luca Pacioli, circa 1500. Image in public domain. / 8042

Next page Fond Memories

I bought this set with a matching board from Doug Polumbaum in 2013. It had been sold the year before at Bonhams, classified as 19th century and is made of jade and hardstone. The board is described as "Mughal inlaid hardstone and koftgari steel chess board and matching set". I found the colour combination and the quality of both the set and board outstanding. / 0735

Fig. 21: Mughal jade and hard stone Islamic-pattern chess set with matching board. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0735

The Renaissance: Expansion of Possibility

Not until about 1470 did chess begin its transformation from the slow Islamic form to the quick-fire game we know today. Castling was introduced at this time, pawns gained the privilege of advancing two squares on their initial move, and the queen switched from being a waddling cripple (the Arabic vizier, allowed to move only one square at a time) to the most powerful piece on the board.

Recorded games of the time show all the exuberant naivety of excited novices – the queen pursuing joyous adventures all across the board, giving check regardless of whether or not it offered the player any advantage. As chess is a game which symbolises warfare, it is reasonable to suppose that the increased fire-power of the queen reflected the introduction of field artillery in the late 15th century.

The sudden advance of chess as a whole must also have been a product of the Renaissance. Intellectual developments at the time were distinguished by an increasingly urgent perception of distance, space and perspective. Parallel developments included the innovatory use of siege artillery to batter down the walls of Constantinople in 1453, scientific advances such as the telescope and the microscope, and the application of perspective in art.

Quite recently a fabled, but long-lost manuscript from the Italian Renaissance, *De ludo scachorum* (about the game of chess; fig. 20 / 8042), resurfaced in the 22,000-volume library of Count Guglielmo Coronini. It was long rumoured that the famous mathematician Luca Pacioli, a friend of Leonardo da Vinci in Milan, had produced a series of educational positions and chess puzzles featuring the new style of chess. But the book had been lost and doubts were raised that it had even been written at all. Then, suddenly, a facsimile of the book was in preparation, showing the strange and rather beautiful diagrams in red and black, and illustrating the powers of the pieces in action. Leonardo had provided illustrations for Pacioli's work on the mathematics of the golden mean, *De divina proportione*, and the hope was that he was also the hand behind these illustrations.

Sadly the pieces in the diagrams were somewhat crudely drawn. They were so rudimentary that several experts, myself included, were unable to decipher the solutions. Eventually, I was able to solve one of the puzzles, which involved a fiendishly difficult forced checkmate, so obviously the product of a chess genius, only to discover that I had confused the symbols for the king and the queen. Nevertheless the pieces in the diagrams clearly demonstrate the continued influence of both Islamic and figurative chessmen in Italy,



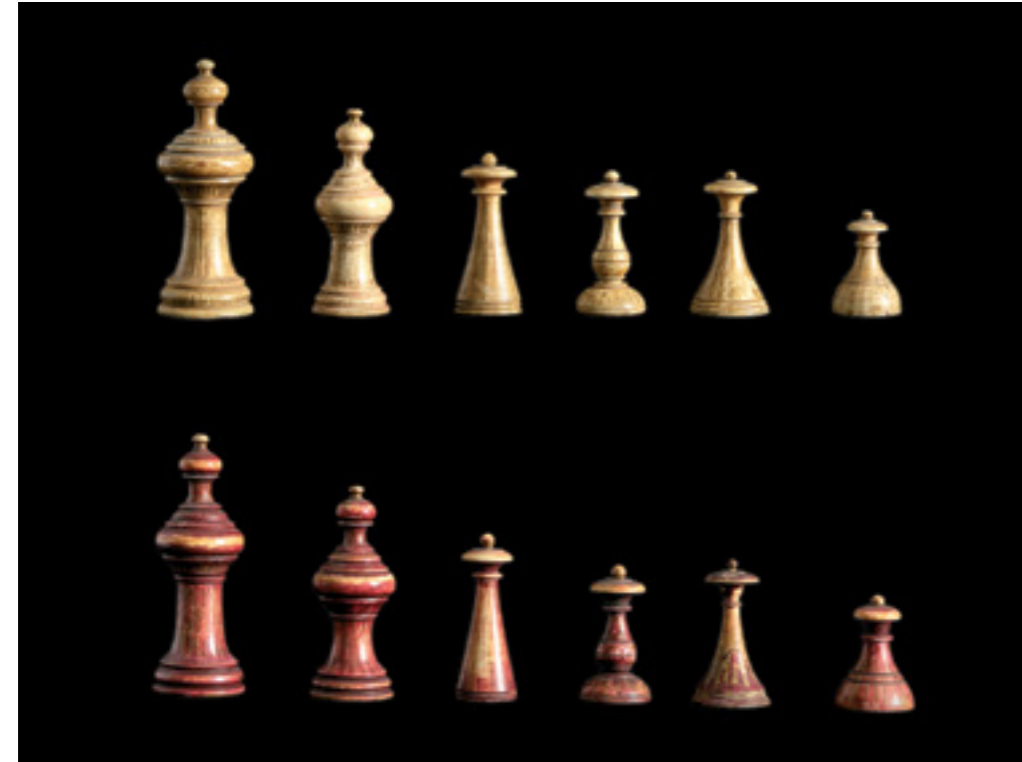


Fig. 22: Slightly unusual geometric-shaped Islamic pieces, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0749

with the heads of the kings sporting a cross while the knights were depicted as flattened abstract forms, akin to a mushroom.

The next country to exert decisive influence on the new chess was Spain. After 1492 Spain rapidly became the dominant force in world communication, and the new form of chess spread across the world through Spanish explorations and conquests. The conquistadores were keen players of a game that mirrored their combative lifestyle, and they taught it to the defeated Inca and Aztec kings in the New World.

As the new form of chess, the version we now play, spread throughout the world, it attracted ever new depictions of the chess pieces themselves. However, the Staunton pattern, developed in the mid 19th century in London, was to become

the dominant form in the west. Balanced between abstraction (bishops and pawns) and pared down figurative elements (king, topped by a cross, crowned queen, rook, and knight) this classic design still tilted towards real life imagery, thus infringing Islamic prohibitions against graven images, dating from their shared Mosaic heritage with Judaism and Christianity.

Therefore, in Islamic lands, abstraction continued to be the order of the day. The chessmen and boards depicted in the collection here reflect the traditional materials and embellishments of the earliest Islamic sets. Made from precious elements including rock crystal, ivory, gold and precious stones, or from more everyday substances such as bone and wood, conceptually, these chess sets mirror the abstract messages of devotion to be found on the decorated walls of such immense Moslem religious edifices, as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. Great beauty is still to be discovered in such sets, emanating from the geographical locations where chess had first arisen. To a significant extent Islamic chess pieces continue to mirror the dazzling ruby and emerald bedecked elegance of that traditional, if mythological, first chess set, despatched as a test from the royal court of Hind to the Peacock Throne of Sassanian Persia.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Professor Jacqueline Eales, President of the British Association for Local History and former President of the UK National Historical Association for her expertise.



CHAPTER II

North Indian Chess Sets

Jacob Schmidt-Madsen

The superior craftsmanship exhibited by East India Company chess sets, also known as John Company sets, produced in 18th- and 19th-century Murshidabad and Berhampore in the modern state of West Bengal cannot be disputed. Yet there were several other, if less prominent, centers of ivory carving across North India from Bengal in the east to Punjab in the west. While the chess sets they produced can rarely be traced back to specific workshops, the styles and themes can sometimes help us identify the regions from which they originated. This chapter provides examples of several such sets with discussions of their distinguishing characteristics.

Boats of Bengal

The quality of ivory chess sets from Bengal is only matched by the esteem in which the game was held by the Bengalis themselves. The philologist William Jones, who wrote the seminal article *On the Indian Game of Chess* in 1790, was told by his informant Radhakanta Tarkavagisha that “the Brahmans of Gaur, or Bengal, were once celebrated for superior skill in the game.”¹ And the author Lal Behari Day, who wrote an article on Bengali games and amusements in the *Calcutta Review* in 1851, claimed that “the *Shatranj* [chess] is universally prevalent in Bengal,” and that it is “held in high repute” and considered emblematic of the “entanglements of political schemes.” He also noted the perhaps obvious but nonetheless intriguing fact that “the shrewd Bengali, averse to extravagant expenditure, usually draws his figure of sixty-four squares on a common sheet of paper.”² Clearly, as has already been

¹ Jones 1790: 161.

² Day 1851: 336-37.

shown in Chapters 5 and 6, the elaborately carved sets from Murshidabad and Berhampore were meant for a European rather than a Bengali audience.

The most conspicuous feature of Bengali chess sets is the substitution of boats for rooks. When exactly the substitution first happened is not known with any accuracy. The earliest direct evidence is found in the 16th-century *Tithitattva* on four-handed chess written by the Bengali scholar Raghunandana.³ The Persian polymath al-Biruni had already described four-handed chess in his *Kitab al-Hind*, or book on India, five centuries earlier, but while he places a rook, capable of moving three squares diagonally, in the leftmost position of each army, Raghunandana places a boat, capable of moving two squares diagonally, in the same position.⁴ This would seem to indicate that boats were introduced sometime between the writings of al-Biruni and Raghunandana, but since al-Biruni only bases his description on west and north-west Indian sources, it cannot be used as evidence against the early presence of boats in Bengali chess. There remains, however, a third source which may shed additional light on the subject.

The *Charyapada* is a collection of tantric Buddhist songs composed by various authors between the 8th and 12th centuries. It is the earliest known text written in the regional vernaculars of north-eastern India. The most widely represented poet is Kanhapa whose language is clearly reminiscent of later Bengali and Odia. One of his songs (no. 12) uses chess as a metaphor for spiritual liberation, invoking not only the board itself but also the figures of the king (*thakur*), minister (*mantri*), elephant (*gaja*), and foot-soldier (*bare*).⁵ Though the song fails to mention either a rook or a boat, the very next song in the collection uses the metaphor of the human body as a vessel crossing the ocean of existence, previously identified as the sixty-four squares of the chessboard. In fact, the imagery of the boat is prevalent throughout the entire collection, suggesting that Kanhapa chose chess as a metaphor exactly because the version of the game known to him included a piece in the shape of a boat.⁶ If this assertion is correct, the boat may already have replaced the rook in Bengali chess when al-Biruni was writing in the 11th century.

The reason for the substitution of boats for rooks has been a matter of much scholarly debate. William Jones found that “the intermixture of ships with horses, elephants, and infantry embattled on a plain, is an absurdity not to be defended.”⁷ The chess historian H.

³ Claims that the *Tithitattva* was based on the *Chaturangadipika*, allegedly written by the 15th-century Bengali scholar Shulapani, has been challenged by the late Andreas Bock-Raming, who argues that it was in fact the *Chaturangadipika* which based itself on the *Tithitattva* (Bock-Raming 2018: 11).

⁴ For al-Biruni, see Sachau 1910: 183-84; for Raghunandana, see Weber 1873: 64-66.

⁵ Shastri 1916: 22-23 and commentary, pp. 12-13. A translation into English can be found in Sen 1977: 133.

⁶ Tapo Nath Chakravarti, writing on early sources for the study of games and pastimes in Bengal and Assam, agrees that the song implies a boat piece, but does not provide any explanation for his assumption (Chakravarti 1956: 59).

⁷ Jones 1790: 162.

J. R. Murray, writing in the early 20th century, argued that the inability of Bengalis to grasp the meaning of the Persian word *ruk* resulted in its adaptation as Sanskrit *roka*, meaning ship or boat.⁸ Yet another possible explanation is the physical shape of the rook itself, which does indeed sometimes resemble that of a boat. There is, however, no need for any such convoluted arguments when we consider that the original chariot, which only became a rook in Persia, had been absent from Indian warfare since before the invention of chess, and that boats played a far greater role in Indian and especially Bengali warfare than acknowledged by western scholars at the time of both Jones and Murray (fig. 1 / 8021).⁹ In other words, including boats as an integral part of armies operating in the riverine delta of north-eastern India, is by no means an absurdity in need of defense.

John Company sets from Murshidabad and Berhampore usually substitute towers for rooks, but two sets described in Chapter 5 substitute boats instead [nos. 0683 (ch. 5, fig. 20) and 0724 (ch. 5, fig. 18)]. The boats are indicative of influence from Bengali chess and can also be found in a more crudely carved John Company set which may have originated from a less prominent workshop (fig. 2 / 1597).

Fig. 1: Naval battle on the Ganges between Shuja'at Khan and Asaf Khan in north-eastern India. Illustration by Tulsī the Elder and Jagjivan in a manuscript of the Akbarnama by Abul Fazl, c. 1590-95. Victoria & Albert Museum, London. / 8021

⁸ Murray 1913: 71.

⁹ See, for example, Chakravarti 1941, especially the chapters on chariots (pp. 22-32) and naval warfare (pp. 58-66).







Fig. 3: Boats belonging to the Nawab of Murshidabad, including a peacock-headed mayurpankhi. Illustration from the Hastings Album by Sita Ram, 1814-15. San Diego Museum of Art, California. / 8022

The sets all have *mayurpankbis*, or peacock boats, on the Indian side and *bajras*, anglicized as budgerows, on the British side.

Two paintings from a larger series made in 1814-15 by the Bengali artist Sita Ram provide important historical context for the choice of boats. The first painting shows several vessels belonging to Ali Jah, Nawab of Bengal from 1810 to 1821, with the peacock-prowed *mayurpankhi* featuring prominently at the centre (fig. 3 / 8022), while the second painting shows the flotilla of Lord Hastings, Governor-General of India from 1813 to 1823, dominated by several large pinnacle budgerows (fig. 4 / 8023). Pinnaces, in this context, represent a mix between a budgerow and a sailing boat and were often preferred because of their greater speed and comfort, though they were less adept at navigating the rivers than the traditional budgerows.

Beyond obvious ideas of state and power, the boats carry a deeper symbolic meaning linked to stereotypical European perceptions of India as an unchanging and ahistorical country in need of a strong civilizing hand. The elegant peacock boat is not only associated with Indian royalty and elites, but also with myth and legend invoking elements of romantic love and the supernatural. When the trickster god Krishna disguised himself as a boatman to ferry his beloved Radha across the Yamuna river, he is often depicted doing so in a peacock boat evocative of their divine love (fig. 5 / 8024). And when Behula sailed her hus-

Before double page Fond Memories

A wonderful Bengal polychrome set, depicting the English army against an Indian army. A very similar example is at the Metropolitan Museum from the Pfeiffer Collection. I had a few pieces from this set and was fortunate enough to find many more in the collection of Elena and Roberto Innocenti, who kindly allowed me to buy them. It has undergone restoration as several of the pieces were in poor condition and some pawns were missing. The set is depicted in Mackett-Beeson's book *Chessmen* (1973). / 1597

Fig. 2: Bengal polychrome figural set, 1820-1860. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1597



Fig. 4: The flotilla of Lord Hastings, including several pinnacle budgerows. Illustration from the Hastings Album by Sita Ram, 1814-15. British Library, London. / 8023

band's funeral raft to heaven and pleaded with the gods to bring him back to life, that raft, too, is often equipped with all the attributes of a peacock boat.¹⁰ The spacious and comfortable budgerow, on the other hand, was associated with practicality and rationality. Emma Roberts, writing in 1833, remarks that the boat, despite its clumsy appearance, is "usually chosen by European travellers, to whom time and expense are objects of importance."¹¹

Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India, elevated the boat to a symbol of empire when he had the *Sonamukhi*, or the golden-faced pinnacle budgerow, built in the late 18th century for the considerable sum of forty-five thousand rupees (fig. 6 / 8025).¹² Viewed through this lens, it becomes clear that John Company sets should not only be seen as models of the British colonial encounter in India, but also as models of the colonial gaze that informed it.

Another crudely carved John Company set from Bengal is unusual in having budgerows on both sides of the board (fig. 7 / 0679). They appear as simplified versions of the ones in the previous set, with oarsmen instead of sails and a distinct lack of ornamentation. The officers and soldiers in the two sets are similarly dressed with uniforms and tricorne hats on

¹⁰ For a brief summary of this popular Bengali folk tale, see Roy 2024: 36-38.

¹¹ Roberts 1833: 13-14.

¹² Williamson 1813: pl. 12 and accompanying text.

Next double page Fond Memories

This is a "Bengal" set, with the typical boats as rooks, both on the English side and the Indian side. I bought this set from Doug Polumbaum in 2005, having been the first "Bengal" set I have acquired. I now have more elaborate examples but keep being very fond of this set and of the Bengal sets in general! / 0679

Fig. 7: John Company-style set with Bengal-style boats, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0679





Fig. 5: Krishna ferrying Radha across the Yamuna River. Kolkata, c. 1890. The Cleveland Museum of Art, US. / 8024

Fig. 6: Boatman in front of the Sonamukhi built under Warren Hastings in the late 18th century. The smaller vessel in front is the Philchhara, or elephant-faced boat, attending the Sonamukhi. Painting by Charles Doyley. Reproduced from Williamson 1813: pl. 12. / 8025

the company side and *jama* tunics and cummerbund sashes on the Indian side, likely dating them to the late 18th or early 19th century.¹³ Both sets have the bases painted in the usual red and green of Indian chess sets, and one of them even has the figures painted as well. Considering the relatively simple craftsmanship and the fact that sets intended for European customers usually only had the bases of one side stained, it seems likely that the two sets, despite their obvious imitation of the John Company style, were made for the local rather than the overseas market. This raises the interesting question of how exactly John Company sets made for a European audience impacted Indian sets made for an Indian audience.

¹³ Reid 2009: 16; Mark 1997-98: 49.



Two other sets from Bengal, carved in local styles different from the John Company style, include a simpler type of boat which might be identified as a *pansi* (also spelled *pan-sway*). *Pansis* are light river vessels with a single pavilion or cabin used to transport cargo or passengers (fig. 8 / 8026). In the first set, dating from the 19th century, the boats appear long and elegant with a pavilion in the center and animal heads at the stern and bow (fig. 9 / 1390).

Similar designs can be found in numerous terracotta reliefs decorating village temples across Bengal and thus reflect an everyday lived reality (fig. 10 / 8027).¹⁴ As is standard in Bengali chess, the boat takes the place of the rook, but where John Company sets usually have camels for bishops, this set has elephants, differentiated by their single rider from the two riders of the queen elephant and the three riders of the king elephant. The foot-soldiers are unarmed and sitting on their haunches in typical Indian fashion with the knees pressed against the chest and the backside almost touching the ground. The two sides are identical except for the red and green coloring typical of most Indian chess sets, and conjure up images of village life rather than warfare. As suggested by Michael Mark, the set was likely used for actual play, contrary to many John Company sets which were solely used for display.¹⁵

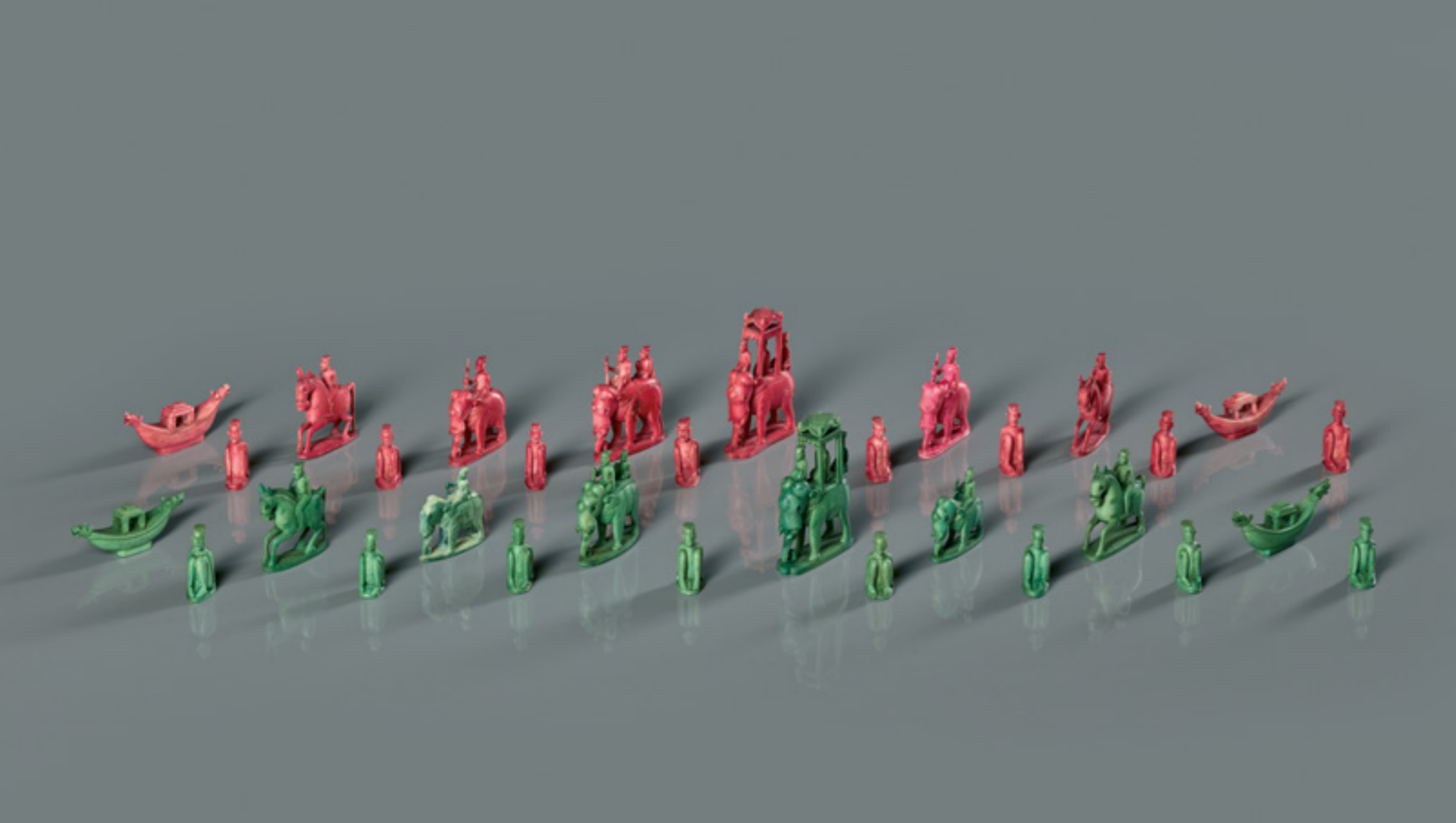


Fig. 8: Panswae (*pansi*) boat. Colored etching by Frans Balthazar Solvyns. Reproduced from Solvyns 1808-12: III, pl. 5. / 8026

The boats in the second set have neither pavilions nor animal heads, but carry a shrine between the two oarsmen (fig. 11 / 0678). The foot-soldiers are kneeling with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other, as are the larger generals which take the place of queens. The knights and bishops are represented by horses and elephants with a single rider each, while the king is represented by two elephants side by side with a shared howdah across their backs. One side, stained red, depicts Hindus with turbans and curved swords, while the other, left natural white, depicts Muslims with *topis*, or skullcaps, and short, pointed swords. Curiously, the red side appears to have been stained before the carving was complete. This can be seen from line tracings of various details which only appear fully carved

¹⁴ See Deloche 1991.

¹⁵ Mark 1997-98: 23.



Fond Memories

A red and green figural set from Bengal, again with the rooks as boats, naively carved but with a lot of charm. I bought this set from my friend Franz Josef Lang about 7 years ago. Franz Josef had bought it in 1988 at a Chess Collectors International (CCI) auction in Munich handled by Phillips. It has been exhibited at the Munich CCI event in 2006 and a very similar set is at the Metropolitan Museum in NY, having belonged to the Pfeiffer collection. / 1390

Fig. 9: Bengal red and green figural set with boat rooks, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 1390

Fig. 10: Pansi boat with pavilion. Terracotta relief in abandoned temple in Janglapara near Kolkata. Late 18th century. Reproduced from Deloche 1991: pl. II. 4. / 8027



on the white side. The lack of color in the tracings indicates that they were made after the stain was applied, suggesting that the carver intended to upgrade the set from a simpler to a more ornate style.



The set is believed to originate from 18th-century Bengal, but has several characteristics in common with sets from Myanmar. The overall similarity in style becomes apparent when comparing it with a Burmese set also from the 18th century (fig. 12 / 8028). In both sets, the pieces are distinguished by the same headwear and weaponry, and the foot-soldiers and generals are kneeling in the same position. Though the Burmese set represents the king piece with horses rather than elephants, it is telling that there are still two of them and that they are still supporting a single howdah. The Burmese set also replaces the boat with the shrine that was merely the cargo in the Bengali set. While this appears to be a common iconographic development in Burmese sets, some do still place the shrine in a boat, and sometimes even in a wheeled boat associated with the original chariot piece, showing the entire line of evolution from chariot over boat to shrine.¹⁶ It should come as no surprise that Burmese carvers would have influenced Bengali carvers or migrated across the border, as the two regions have enjoyed close relations throughout history and even been joined as part of the British Empire. It should also serve as a reminder that ivory workers traveled between regions according to the ebb and flow of trade, making it less certain whether a specific style should always be equated with a specific region.

Fond Memories

Another "Bengal" set, which I also bought from Doug Polumbaum in 2005, who had bought it from Dr. Irving Finkel, a curator at the British Museum. It has the particularity of having double elephants as the kings. / 0678

Fig. 11: Bengal-style set with double-headed elephants, 18th century. Photo by Paulo Alexandrino e Masayuki Kondo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0678



Fig. 12: Burmese chess set. Reproduced from Sanvito 2000: 134, no. 72. / 8028

¹⁶ See <http://history.chess.free.fr/sittuyin.htm>

Across the Gangetic Plain

Moving westward from Bengal across the Gangetic plain, it becomes increasingly hard to determine the exact origin of Indian chess sets. Ivory workshops were found in several major urban centers, such as Lucknow, Varanasi, Delhi, and Amritsar, but their styles were not sufficiently marked to be easily distinguished. Their most conspicuous stylistic and thematic differences from John Company sets are the frequent use of painted figures and opposed Indian armies. The sets discussed below can all be traced to 19th-century North India, with one possible exception from the early 20th century (see fig. 18 below).

The set closest to typical John Company sets with its canopied elephants and spear-wielding native soldiers is believed to derive from outside the main ivory workshops of Murshidabad and Berhampore (fig. 13 / 0695). Gone are the East India Company soldiers and the implicit references to the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the beginning of British rule in India. Instead we have two Indian armies fighting each other, distinguished solely by their style of headwear and beards. The clean-shaven foot-soldiers on the red side should probably be identified as Hindus, while the bearded foot-soldiers on the green side should probably be identified as Muslims. While any attempt at an easy dichotomy between the two religious groups is largely false when seen from a historical perspective, increasingly sharp lines were being drawn between them throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, as reflected in many Indian chess sets from the period.

Another set is believed to derive from Murshidabad, though being at an even further remove from John Company sets proper, it likely originated outside the workshops controlled by the East India Company (fig. 14 / 0687).¹⁷ Here the two sides are largely indistinguishable, except for color, in their traditional Mughal dresses with long *jama* tunics, *patka* sashes, and *top* helmets. The foot-soldiers carry blunderbusses, the cavalry swords, and the camel riders muskets, indicating an increased reliance on guns and gunpowder. The only clear distinction between the two sides is found among the major pieces, where the king, queen, and rook elephants carry bearded riders on the red side and moustachioed riders on the green side. Though the difference is less pronounced than in the previous set, it is likely that this set, too, should be seen as representing a battle between Hindus and Muslims.

A third set lacks any figurative distinction between the two sides, but paints them in inversely mirrored blue and red (fig. 15 / 9019). One side wears red tunics and blue turbans, while the other side wears blue tunics and red turbans. Similarly, the cushioned howdahs on the king and queen elephants are painted blue on one side and red on the other, as are the decorative covers over the backs of the camels, horses, and smaller rook elephants. The use of inversely colored pieces is commonly seen in South Asian four-player games, such as *chau-*

¹⁷ See <http://history.chess.free.fr/india.htm>

par and *pachisi*, where players form teams across the board. The two players with inversely colored red and green pieces will be seated across from each other and team up against the two players with inversely colored black and yellow pieces. It seems a missed opportunity that the present set contrasts red bases with green instead of blue bases, but this probably owes to the fact that Indian chess bases traditionally come in red and green. The dynamic postures of the animals should also be noted, as they add a sense of realism often associated with John Company sets.

The production of John Company-like sets with opposed Indian armies not only indicates their stylistic influence across North India, but also the circumstance mentioned above that ivory carvers and other artisans were wont to travel wherever trade was flourishing, bringing their ideas and their craftsmanship with them. This is borne out by several other North Indian sets showing similarities with the sets discussed above. One set, which may derive from either Varanasi or Lucknow, repeats the Mughal theme of the previous sets with foot-soldiers carrying blunderbusses and camel riders carrying what appears to be broken-off muskets (fig. 16 / 1544).

Here again the pieces are truly identical between the two sides, or at least as identical as any hand-crafted product can be, without any deliberate variation in headwear, beard, or other characteristics. According to Michael Mark, the style of dress can be identified as Muslim court style from about 1815 to 1830, further indicating that the set was meant to represent two Muslim armies facing off against each other.¹⁸

A closely parallel set (fig. 17 / 0730) has the pieces standing on a variety of round, square, oval, and rectangular bases, which might indicate that some figures have been re-based or added from other sets in the same production line. It is also worth noting that, contrary to many John Company sets proper, the animals in the sets discussed here are mostly portrayed as standing perfectly still. This suggests that they were produced at greater speed and lower cost, and possibly in larger quantities.

Another set, likely produced in Lucknow, returns to the theme of Hindus versus Muslims, albeit with several important differences in style (fig. 18 / 1595).

The most striking is that the set, contrary to most other North Indian sets, is not painted. Instead one side is kept in natural ivory, while the other is stained red. This is reminiscent of John Company sets where, however, only the bases are usually stained. Interestingly, the set is almost identical to a set gifted to the Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck on his 70th birthday in 1885 and now kept at the Bismarck Museum in Friedrichsruh,

Next double page Fond Memories

One of my all-time favourite sets, which I bought from Garrick Coleman in 2007 (Garrick bought it from an English dealer/collector living in Germany). I fondly described it as "a polychrome John Co set," and love the polychrome, the patina and the foot soldiers on the base of the kings. / 0695

Fig. 13: Polychrome John Company-style set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0695

Next double page Fond Memories

This wonderful set is one of my favourite sets that I bought from Gareth Williams and is depicted in his book *Master Pieces* (2000) as made in Murshidabad (page 100), "representing a Mogul army, probably that of the Nawab of Bengal, whose seat of Government was at Murshidabad." I bought it in 2009 and Gareth had bought it many years before from "an old chess-playing friend." / 0687

Fig. 14: Northern Indian figural set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0687

Next double page Fond Memories

Fig. 15: Northern Indian figural set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9019

Next double page Fond Memories

Bought from Franz Josef Lang in 2018, and originating from Benares (or possibly Lucknow). I love the polychrome and the quality of these pieces, with the vizier mounted on a horse and the king on an elephant. / 1544

Fig. 16: Figural polychrome set, possibly from Benares, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1544

Next double page

Fig. 17: Figural polychrome set, Northern India, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0730

Next double page Fond Memories

A very interesting ivory set with kings and viziers seated on thrones on both sides. Michael Mark believes it has been made in Lucknow and calls it a "Bismarck set" as "a similar set was presented to Bismarck for his 70th birthday." I bought it from Elena and Roberto Innocenti around 7 years ago. / 1595

Fig. 18: Figural set with seated kings, Lucknow or possibly Benares, late 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1595

¹⁸ Mark 1997-98: 55.















Fig. 19: Chess set gifted to Otto von Bismarck on his 70th birthday in 1885. Bismarck-Museum Friedrichsruh, Germany. <https://3d-tour.linsenspektrum.de/tour/bismarck-museum./8029>

Germany (fig. 19 / 8029).¹⁹ The Bismarck set, also believed to have been produced in Lucknow, is unstained, leaving both sides in natural ivory. Since the pieces would only have been distinguished by headwear, beards, and their facing on the board, it seems evident that the set was intended for display rather than actual play. According to an oral testimony given by the Indian civil servant Yusuf Ali in 1901, the set belongs to a specific type “common to all parts of India, being as it is much the same in Amritsar, Berhampur and Bombay.”²⁰ It is difficult to know what exactly Ali meant when he said that the type was “common,” but given that only two examples of the type are known to exist, he was probably speaking about finely carved ivory sets in general, which, as demonstrated by the present book, can indeed be found in many different parts of India.

¹⁹ Ibid. 56 and fn. 116.

²⁰ Ibid. 57. Mark quotes from a book on ivory carving by L. M. Stubbs who paraphrases the opinion of “Mr. Yusuf Ali, C. S.” The person in question is probably the Indian-British civil servant and barrister Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872-1953), best known today for his highly influential translation and exegesis of the Koran.

The Lucknow set also stands out by having the kings and ministers seated on thrones. Contrary to common assumption, elevated seating has a long history in India, and Mughal rulers in particular are known to have spent fortunes on their thrones. The best known example is the Peacock Throne, built from 2,600 pounds of solid gold during the first seven years of the reign of Shah Jahan (r. 1628-58) and said to have cost twice as much as the Taj Mahal in Agra (fig. 20).²¹ The thrones carved for the king pieces are more moderate, but follow the same principle of a royal seat - whether in the form of a *gaddi* cushion or a chair and footrest as here - placed upon a raised dais known as a *chowki*. Chess sets with seated kings appear in several examples from western India discussed in Chapter 9.²² One of them (ch. 9, fig. 25 / 1703), dated to the 18th century, shows the king sitting on a chair not unlike the chair in the Lucknow set. Moving further south along the western Indian coast, and going further back in time to the 17th century, we find an Indo-Portuguese king piece also sitting on a chair, though more in the style of a European piece of furniture than an Indian throne (ch. 4, fig. 4 / 1215).

John Company sets made for a European audience were inherently British in theme, but other finely carved sets with similar aesthetics were also made for audiences with other thematic tastes. One such example is a lavishly produced 19th-century North Indian set featuring a French sepoy army against a band of armed ascetics (fig. 21 / 0702). The army can be identified as French by virtue of its general (queen) who appears to be none other than Napoleon Bonaparte

²¹ Nicoll 2009: 207.

²² Nos. 0710, 0725, 1392, 1703, 1717, and 1738.



Fig. 20: Akbar II (r. 1806-37) sitting on a copy of the Peacock Throne in his *darbar*, or audience hall, in Delhi. The original throne was looted by Nadir Shah of Persia during his invasion of the Mughal Empire in 1739. It disappeared never to resurface after he was assassinated in 1747. Painting by Ghulam Murtaza Khan, c. 1811. Aga Khan Museum, Toronto. / 8030





Fig. 22: Napoleon Bonaparte and a similar looking general (queen) from set no. 702 (fig. 21). Detail from painting by Paul Delaroche, 1838. meisterdrucke.de/fine-art-prints/Hippolyte-Delaroche/145306/Napoleon-in-his-Study.html / 8031

himself (fig. 22 / 8031). While Napoleon did in fact have plans to invade India with a joint Russo-French force in 1801, they were abandoned when the Russian emperor Paul I was assassinated in March of the same year. The set might have been intended as a depiction of a contrafactual what-if scenario where Napoleon actually made it all the way to India and faced off against local resistance. Another possibility is that it was meant to invoke the famous French military adventurer Benoit de Boigne, who was appointed by Mahadaji Scindia of Gwalior to organize and command the army which would help restore Maratha rule over North India in the late 18th century.

The casting of the opposing force as armed ascetics probably speaks more to the orientalist sensibilities of the intended audience than to any perceived notion of reality. Back in France, as elsewhere in Europe, India was largely considered a land of mystery and magic and its inhabitants understood through a lens of exoticizing and othering. Still, the apparently paradoxical idea of armed ascetics was not as far removed from reality as one might think. William R. Pinch has done an excellent job of tracing the complex history of warrior ascetics in India and shown how they formed an important part of the colonial encounter in 18th-century Bengal and Bihar.²³ Looking at the pieces in the set, we can almost hear the French jewel merchant Jean Baptiste Tavernier, traveling in North India in the mid-17th century, as he describes the various members of a similar group:

The only garment of these five *Dervishes* [which Pinch argues were probably *yogis*] consisted of three or four ells of orange-colored cotton cloth, of which they made waistbands, one top of the ends passing between the thighs and being tucked between the top of the waistband and the body of the *Dervish*, in order to cover what modesty requires should be concealed, both in front and behind. [...] Their [the remaining fifty-two members of the group] hair was bound in a tress about their heads, and made a kind of turban. They were all well armed, the majority with bows and arrows, some with muskets, and the remainder with short pikes, and a kind of weapon [a sharp-edged discus] which we have not got in Europe.²⁴

The Anglo-Indian East India Company soldier James Skinner, who began his military career in the Maratha army commanded by Benoit de Boigne, counted ten thousand warrior ascetics in his force when he attacked Jaipur in 1798.²⁵ In his book *Kitab-i tasrih al-aqam*, translated as *History of the Origin and Distinguishing Marks of the Different Castes of India*, he includes a rare illustration of one such warrior ascetic (fig. 23 / 8032). Another and far more influential work on the topic of warrior ascetics is the nationalist novel *Anandamath* written by the Bengali author Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in 1882.

²³ Pinch 2006.

²⁴ Quoted in *ibid.* 67-68.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 73-74.

Before double page Fond Memories

Another all-time favourite of mine, which I nicknamed the "Napoleon-gilded John Co set," given the similarities to the John Co sets and the fact that one of the elephant queens seems to be mounted by Napoleon! The quality of this set and the gilding/polychrome are excellent and so much so that it belonged to Garrick Coleman's personal collection for several years (together with my best John Co set/16cm tall king), until he finally decided to part with both in 2010 and offered me first choice on them! / 0702

Fig. 21: John Company-style set with Napoleon figure, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0702

Here the action is set against the backdrop of the late 18th-century Sannyasi rebellion which saw large groups of *sannyasis*, *yogis*, *faqirs*, and other ascetics rise up against the East India Company. The national song of India, *Vande Mataram*, loosely translated as *Praise to the Motherland*, first appeared in Chattopadhyay's novel, demonstrating the close association between warrior ascetics and national identity in modern India.

The final set presented here belongs to a larger group of chess sets themed around tiger hunting (fig. 24 / 1705). Another such set from late 18th-century Rajasthan is discussed in Chapter 9 (fig. 11 / 1716), together with three other sets which also include tigers (ch. 9, fig. 6 / 0721; ch. 9, fig. 3 / 0731; and ch. 9, fig. 2 / 1143). Several isolated pieces showing elephants fighting tigers are attributed to 18th-century North India, though some may in fact derive from Rajasthan (fig. 25, 9011).

Hunting was a favorite pastime of Indian royalty and a popular theme in their art and literature, which easily explains its extension to the chessboard. The most famous hunting scene is found in the epic *Ramayana* when the exiled prince Rama ventures into the forest to capture a golden deer for his wife Sita. The deer turns out to be the assumed form of a demon used as a ploy by the demon king Ravana to lure Rama away from his wife. Alone and vulnerable, Sita is kidnapped by Ravana and brought back to his capital on the island of Sri Lanka. The scene is now set for the great showdown where Rama, aided by an army of monkeys, travels across the waters and defeats Ravana and his demon hordes in a battle that itself forms the central theme of several Indi-



Fig. 23: Hindu warrior ascetic with coiled-up *jata*, or matted hair, carrying a musket, spear, and *talwar*, or curved sword. Reproduced from Skinner 1825: unnumbered plate between pp. 229 and 230. / 8032



an and Balinese chess sets (see Chapter 12).²⁶ Hunting parties, and especially tiger hunting parties, were also a popular pursuit among European elites in India. This is reflected in certain John Company sets labeled as tiger hunt sets, where the pieces are less heavily armed and seem to be poised for a hunt rather than a battle.²⁷ Elephants can sometimes even be seen fighting off tigers, similar to the North Indian elephant pieces mentioned above (see fig. 25 / 9011 above).

The set under discussion is unusual among tiger hunt sets on several accounts. It is unclear who the leader of the hunt is as the elephants representing the king and the queen do not carry any riders other than the mahout. The only distinction between them is whether they have a tiger clinging to their side or not. Confusingly, in both cases the mahout has his arm raised, ready to strike at the attacking tiger even when it is not there. The mounted camels and horses are much as expected, but the mounted bulls representing rooks come as a surprise, as do the apparently free-roaming horses representing pawns in various postures from kneeling to prancing. The Rajasthani tiger hunt set mentioned above (ch. 9, fig. 11 / 1716) avoids some of the confusion by not having the mahouts strike back at invisible tigers and by substituting traditional footmen for horses. The saddled and bridled yet riderless horses representing rooks must therefore remain a mystery, unless, of course, the riders have simply been lost or removed.

While tiger hunt sets are beautiful to look at and contain an element of drama often lacking in other sets, they leave unanswered the fundamental question of what it is they actually represent in the context of a chess game. The logical choice would be to have one side represent the hunters and the other side the hunted, but instead they choose to have both sides represent the same faction, which thematically makes very little sense indeed. Especially among sets meant for display, where one should think that thematic consistency was a high priority, it seems a missed opportunity not to give agency to the wild animals on the other side of the equation. But perhaps agency is exactly the problem. We know from other sets that animals such as boars, buffaloes, and lions were within the repertoire of the carvers, so it must have been a conscious choice not to include them. Perhaps, in the eyes of Indian royalty and British officers, animals were not considered sufficiently advanced to be represented in the organized structure of an army demanded by the chessboard. An apparent exception is a 19th-century animal set from Rajasthan, but as discussed in Chapter 9, it is doubtful whether the animals in question were ever intended as chess pieces (ch. 9, fig. 28 / 2111).

Before double page

Fond Memories

This set represents a "Tiger Hunt," with tigers attacking the king on both sides. It is 19th century in polychrome ivory and I bought it from my dear friend Emilio Ferre around six years ago, who had bought it from Garrick Coleman in 2006. It has the particularity of having cows as rooks (had never seen it before) and pawns as horses. / 1705

Fig. 24: Tiger Hunt set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1705

Next page

Fig. 25: Assorted polychrome elephant pieces from North India and Rajasthan, 18th and 19th centuries. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9011

²⁶ Crumiller 2016a.

²⁷ Crumiller 2016b: 14.



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South Indian Chess Sets

Jacob Schmidt-Madsen

Chess is the earliest game known to have been designed explicitly as a model. The model, however, was already outdated when it first appeared in India around the middle of the 1st millennium CE. The fourfold army posited by the game, consisting of foot, horse, elephant, and chariot, had been abandoned centuries earlier and now only consisted of foot, horse, and elephant.¹ From the outset, chess modeled an idea rather than a reality, and it should come as no surprise that manufacturers soon began creating pieces and sets at an even further remove from the original theme. Innovations in South India included placing Hindu gods, avatars, heroes, and mythical beasts directly onto the chessboard. Such sets, often referred to as deity sets, may not always have been the inventions of local workshops. Some may have been commissioned by wealthy patrons and customers, while others may have been constructed by dealers out of disparate pieces otherwise unrelated to chess. The latter sets often approach Hindu religion and mythology as mere spectacle without any real understanding of the concepts and deities invoked. Like the fourfold army of chess, they represent an idea rather than a reality. They tell us more about the misconceptions of the Europeans who bought them than the beliefs of the Indians who made them. Between the idea and the reality falls the shadow, the British poet T. S. Eliot wrote. The life of chess is indeed very long.²

¹ Trautmann 2015: 112-13.

² Adapted from Eliot 1934.

Next double page

Fond Memories

This beautiful polychrome figural set belonged to Doug Polubbaum and I bought it in 2006. It was described as from "Nepal or Deccan," but the authors in this book do not think it comes from Nepal. I find the mythical beasts under the knights amazing and the quality of the set superior; so much that a few years ago I found the exact same set in Ernst Boehlen's collection (not in polychrome but in red and white), and I also bought it! / 0681

Fig. 1: Deccan figural set, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0681



Beasts, Men, and Gods

We begin our survey of South Indian chess sets with several examples that echo the European colonial encounter with just a few religious and mythological touches added. In Chapter 11 we saw how John Company sets from Murshidabad and Berhampore in West Bengal exerted their influence on sets from other parts of North India. Similar traces of influence can be found in South Indian sets, though stylistic and thematic differences make them relatively easy to distinguish from their northern counterparts. This becomes increasingly clear the further south we move from the Vindhya Range running across central India.

Two almost identical sets from the late 18th century have two Indian armies facing off against each other (fig. 1 / 0681 and fig. 2 / 2097). The soldiers on one side carry spears and are dressed in *dhotis*, or pieces of cloth wrapped around the waist and legs. They are ornamented with bracelets, armlets, and necklaces and wear the customary *upavita*, or sacred thread, across the left shoulder and down below the right arm. The thread is worn by the so-called twice-born classes of society, comprising the priestly (*brahmin*), ruling and military (*ksatriya*) and mercantile and agricultural (*vaishya*) classes. The soldiers on the other side wear European uniforms with jackets and trousers and carry long-barreled muskets. Their ethnic Indian origin is clear not only from the turbans and beards, but also from the bare feet sticking out from under the trousers. As Michael Mark explains, Indian soldiers did not only wear European uniforms in European armies but also in allied Indian armies.³

The major pieces on both sides are dressed in Indian clothes and headwear, which are sometimes identical between them and sometimes not. The king piece is represented by an elephant with a canopied howdah as expected, but the queen piece, which is usually represented by a second elephant in John Company sets, is replaced with a general on horseback. While one set (fig. 1 / 0681) has the general brandishing a sword on the side of the spear-wielding soldiers in *dhoti*, and a spear on the side of the musket-wielding soldiers in uniform, the other set (fig. 2 / 2097) has him doing the exact opposite. This, of course, is of little consequence to the overall representation, but shows how pieces might easily transfer between sides if they are not clearly distinguished as belonging to one or the other. When we try to make sense of the pieces in a given set, it is important to remember that they were not always assembled with the same logic and consistency that collectors and researchers tend to demand of them.

The bishops are represented as camels, but instead of weapons the riders are equipped with drums. This feature is especially prominent in Rajasthani sets (see Chapter 9) and may indicate a further stylistic influence similar to the more obvious influence from John Com-

Next double page Fond Memories

This is Ernst Boehlen's Deccan red and natural ivory set. I bought it recently from his heirs given that Ernst sadly passed away a few years ago. / 2097

Fig. 2: Deccan figural set, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 2097

³ Mark 1997-98: 55.

pany sets.⁴ References to camels in Indian armies go back to the mid-1st millennium BCE, and they continued to play an important role throughout the colonial period.⁵ This is especially true of the desert regions of western and north-western India where they frequently took active part on the battlefield. One of their functions was to carry drummers who could keep the soldiers in step when marching and communicate orders across the army. The use of musical instruments was a key aspect of warfare even in Vedic times when trumpets, conches, drums, and other instruments would accompany the deafening and terrifying noise of battle. A Rigvedic hymn composed more than a thousand years before the beginning of the common era praises the war drum and implores it to “fill us full of vigour” and “drive [...] afar, yea, very afar, our foemen.”⁶ Similarly, an illustration from a late 16th-century manuscript of the *Baburnama*, which recounts the story of Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in India, shows a camel drummer following him into battle against the Uzbek warlord Shaybani Khan (fig. 3 / 8033).

The knights are the first pieces to give us a taste of the mythological content sometimes associated with South Indian sets. Similar to the well-known motif of Saint George and the Dragon, though not necessarily inspired by it, the horses are trampling underfoot what in one set might appear as a lion (fig. 2 / 2097). The other set, however, makes it clear that the creature is in fact a *yali*, a mythical beast combining the head and body of a lion with characteristics of other animals such as elephants, horses, and serpents (fig. 1 / 0681). *Yalis* are guardian creatures associated with the forces of nature and form an integral part of South Indian temple architecture, displaying the same radiant mane, bulging eyes, and large fangs as seen in the chess pieces (fig. 4 / 8034). Despite the influence from John Company and Rajasthani sets, the *yalis* clearly associate the sets under discussion with South India, probably locating them somewhere in the northern parts of the Deccan Plateau.

⁴ See Rajasthani sets nos. 0697, 0721, 0725, 0731, 0732, 0760, 1143, 1494, 1620.

⁵ Chakravarti 1941: 103.

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.* 122.

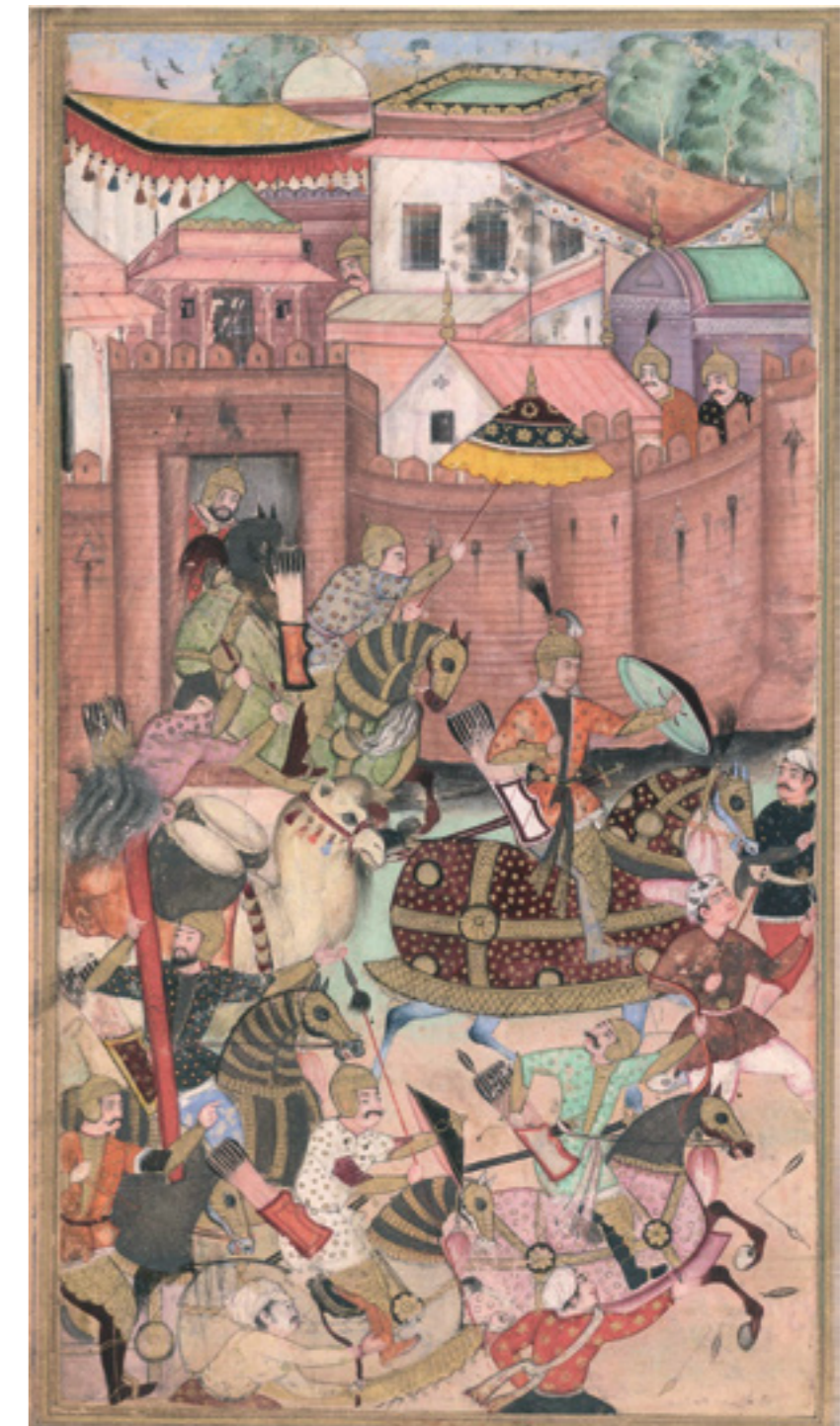


Fig. 3: Babur leaving Khwaja Didar fort near Samarkand to attack Shaybani Khan. Painting by Basawan and Dharm Das from a manuscript of the *Baburnama*, c. 1590. British Museum, London. / 8033





Fig. 4: Architectural brackets in the form of *yalis* from a processional *mandapa*, or pavilion. Tamil Nadu, 17th century. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, US. / 8034

The idea of showing the knight pieces as trampling something underfoot should not come as a great surprise when we consider that a prancing pose generally requires some kind of support for the front legs of the horse. This is sometimes achieved by a tuft of grass or a similar topographical feature, as in set no. 0686 (fig. 7) discussed below, but in the set we now turn to, 0712 (fig. 5), it is the shield of an enemy soldier about to be crushed under the hooves. The set shows a strong Mughal influence and is dated to the late 17th century on account of the costumes, though it may only have been made in the early 18th century. As Mark points out, the crowns above the howdahs of the elephants and the postures of the foot-soldiers indicate influences from outside India, with the clothes of the kneeling musketeer being decidedly European.⁷ Postures similar to those of the foot-soldiers are found in the earliest known illustration of Indian chess pieces in *De Ludis Orientalibus* by Thomas Hyde from 1694 (see ch. 2, fig. 2 / 8015). Hyde received the elaborately carved ivory pieces from a friend returning from Surat north of Mumbai and believed that they represented an ancient tradition of figural chess in India. And while they certainly reflect the pieces of early Rajasthani sets, as discussed in Chapter 9, they have a more

dynamic and naturalistic appearance. Europeans had been commissioning games from western India since the 16th century, and it is possible that the idiosyncrasies of the set gifted to Hyde, as well as the set under discussion (fig. 5), should rather be seen as representative of stylistic influence from Europe.⁸

⁷ Mark 1997-98: 19.

⁸ Holländer 2022: 186-87.

If we consider the three sets discussed above as a whole, it is worth noting how the different sides in the sets are distinguished, not only by figurative style but also by color. The first two sets, which resemble each other very closely figuratively, are colored quite differently. One set is painted red and green with various details highlighted, including the gilding applied to the royal howdahs and the uniforms of the generals (fig. 1 / 0681). This is typical of sets produced for an Indian audience and may even indicate that the set in question was used for actual play. The other set leaves one side in natural ivory and stains the other side red (fig. 2 / 2097). This usually indicates a display set not intended for actual play, as already seen in the case of the similarly colored Lucknow set discussed in the Chapter 11 (fig. 18 / 1595). The third set is kept in natural ivory throughout, with only the bases of one side stained a now almost worn-off red (fig. 5 / 0712). This is a common feature of display sets made for the European market, and given the obvious signs of non-Indian stylistic influence on the set, we can safely assume the same to be the case here. Considering the resemblance of the set to the one procured by Thomas Hyde, as well as the similarity in provenance, it is possible that his set, too, was intended for the European market. Ironically, this would mean that the set did not, as Hyde believed, reflect an ancient tradition of figural chess, and that the earliest known illustration of Indian chess pieces is in fact an illustration of a European idea of Indian chess pieces.

The final set I want to discuss in this section, dated to the late 18th century, is stylistically and thematically more closely associated with South India than the sets described above (fig. 6, 0686). The bare-chested king is seated in a posture of meditation with his left leg folded in and his right hand holding a lotus flower. A heavy pendant hangs from his shoulders and a lavish *kiritamukuta*, or divine crown, sits on his head. His minister is dressed in a tunic and belt and rests his hands on top of each other in an apparent expression of *dhyana*, or meditation. They both have a large circle on their forehead representing a third eye, which adds a further spiritual dimension to the set. The rook is shaped like a towering *ratha*, or temple chariot, used to transport statues of deities during ceremonial processions and religious festivals. Elaborately carved temple chariots are well known from John Company sets, such as Chapter 5, Fig. 4 / 069, but variants more closely resembling the chariots in the present set can sometimes be found in Burmese sets, which generally represent rooks as shrines, temples, or similar (fig. 7 / 8035). Curiously, the top hat worn by the foot-soldier in the Burmese set illustrated here is similar to the one worn by the soldier mounted on the horse in the South Indian set.

Despite the religious connotations of the temple chariot and the god-like attributes of the king and his minister, the set comes across as more secular than the deity sets to be discussed in the following section. This owes not only to the ornamented elephants (bishops) with their canopied howdahs and the prancing horses (knights) with their spear-wielding riders, but also to the foot-soldiers which display the usual distinction

Next double page Fond Memories

This is one of the highest quality ivory sets I own, with incredible carvings and almost all pieces being different and very refined. The kings and queens are inside palanquins and it is dated to the late 17th century. It belonged to Lothar Schmid's collection and Thomas Thomsen strongly advised me to buy it for the collection in spite of its high price (which I am very glad he did!) / 0712

Fig. 5: Southern India set, possibly Mumbai or Surat, mid-late 17th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0712





between muskets and swords. Mark suggests that the set may have been produced by an artist in the private employ of a ruler or landlord, which might then account for the idiosyncrasies of the set and the exalted representation of the king and his minister.⁹ A sandalwood set attributed to 18th-century western India displays a similar veneration for the king and his minister in a stylistically unusual set with camel drummers, mounted horses and elephants, and musket-wielding foot-soldiers (ch. 9, fig. 26 / 0725). The style of the king's *karandamukuta* crown, which is a slightly less grandiose version of the *kiritamukuta* crown worn by the king in the South Indian set, may indicate a closer affiliation with the Deccan than previously recognized.

The Divine Confusion

In Bengali film director Satyajit Ray's adaptation of Munshi Premchand's short story *Sbatranj ke Kbilari*, or the chess players, first published in 1924, there is a wonderful scene that speaks not of the gap between idea and reality as above, but between formal game systems and their thematic interpretation. The obsessive chess-playing of the two protagonists is driving their wives mad with frustration, and in a desperate attempt to regain the attention of their husbands, one of the wives removes the pieces from the board and hides them. It is not long, however, before she learns something important about the nature of both obsession and chess. The two husbands raid the kitchen and make away with an assortment of nuts, fruits, vegetables, and glass jars which they quickly convert to chess pieces (fig. 8). Chess is chess by any means, American philosopher John Haugeland tells us, and the meaning we assign to it a mere act of interpretation.¹⁰

The lack of any inherent meaning in a formal game system like chess is on full display in three 19th-century sets from South India. They all revolve around the representation of Hindu deities and other mythological figures with no obvious reference to the four limbs of the traditional Indian army invoked by the word *chaturanga* originally associated with chess. The god Vishnu and his avatars, or divine manifestations, provide an overall thematic framework, but the individual sets lack internal consistency and in one case even stylistic unity. As discussed in the next section, it is not uncommon for figures intended for purposes other than chess to end up on chessboards as so-called associated pieces. This usually happens more or less accidentally when a piece goes missing and needs to be replaced, but it can also happen more deliberately as an attempt to create an aesthetically pleasing set for personal or commercial purposes. The latter seems to be the case with at least some of the sets discussed in this section. While not necessarily problematic in itself - though definitely dishonest if passed off as authentic - such sets become exploitative when misrepresenting religious beliefs for monetary gain. The very idea of placing deities on a gameboard and

⁹ Mark 1997-98: 23.

¹⁰ Haugeland 1985.



Fig. 7: Wood-carved chess set from Myanmar. Late 19th century. Private collection. / 8035



Fig. 8: Chess by other means. Image from *The Chess Players* by Satyajit Ray, India, 1977. / 8036



Before page

Fond Memories

This very high-quality ivory set, painted red and green, was in Gareth Williams' collection, and I bought it in 2009. Gareth had bought it at the Harbeson auction sale in 1979, described as "from southern India or southern Deccan." / 0686

Fig. 6: Southern Deccan or southern India set, circa 1790. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0686



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 *vina*, 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 *Shritattvanidhi* attributed to Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar III. Mysuru, mid-19th century. Reproduced from Sjomann 1999: pl. 10. / 8037

Before page Fond 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

There can be little doubt that the set was configured by someone who either did not know or did not particularly care about Hindu religion and mythology. The different styles of carving indicate that the pieces came from different series and possibly even different workshops. The identical postures of the Krishna and Parashurama pawns suggest that they were taken from a South Indian *dashavatara* set which originally also included the remaining eight avatars. The same is true of the Kalki knight, whose head betrays its South Indian origins, but which must have come from a slightly larger set. The bases of the Ganesha rooks and the Krishna king break the symmetry of the set by being round instead of oval, and according to Raghu Dharmendra, who specializes in the traditional ludic arts and crafts of India, the Ganesha figures come from Jaipur in Rajasthan and the Krishna figure from somewhere in North India.¹¹ This, together with the uncertain origin of the Sarasvati queen and the yogic bishops, suggests that the set was assembled from pieces acquired from different sources, opening up the possibility that other and less obviously constructed sets may also have been sold off to unsuspecting buyers. That the set was meant for the European market is not only suggested by the fact that one side is kept in natural ivory, but also by the inclusion of female queens, which Mark argues is an indication that sets were “almost certainly made for sale to Europeans.”¹²

The second set is more harmonious stylistically, though the variation in bases still suggests that several of the pieces were made for purposes other than chess (fig. 11 / 0674). This observation finds further support in the thematic non sequiturs which cannot easily be explained otherwise. The king appears to be Krishna holding a shepherd’s staff, which would logically make the queen his consort Radha. The context, however, including the monkey-faced bishop and the serpentine knight, suggests that the couple might equally well be understood as the avatar Rama and his wife Sita or the god Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune. Further confusing the matter, the two bishops on either side are represented differently, with one bishop taking on the appearance of the monkey-faced god Hanuman, and the other bishop looking like yet another Vishnu, Krishna, or Rama in a different pose with palms joined in a gesture of reverence.¹³ The knights are snakes with their hood raised and should probably be identified with Shesha, the serpentine demigod which makes up the bed that Vishnu sleeps on in the intervals between the cyclical dissolution and creation of the universe. The rooks appear as sages seated in a pavilion with a book in one hand and the other raised in the same gesture of fearlessness seen in the Ganesha rooks above. Again, the Vaishnava, or Vishnu-worshipping, context would suggest identifying them with the Buddha, who was appropriated by Vaishnavism at an early stage

11 Raghu Dharmendra, pers. comm.

12 Mark 1997-98: 19.

13 Bishops are also represented differently on the same side in several Rajasthani sets (e.g. nos. 732, 760, and 1620 in Chapter 9), but the fact that they are always mounted on camels makes the difference less pronounced.

and came to be regarded as one of the ten primary avatars of Vishnu. As in the previous set, the pawns follow the king in representing Krishna, though the form of representation is reversed, with the flute-playing king now appearing as eight flute-playing pawns. One can only wonder how such a strange mixture of gods and myths would have been perceived by a practising Hindu in 19th-century India.

The third set leaves little doubt that the king and queen should be interpreted as Rama and his wife Sita (fig. 12 / 0668). Rama is shown with a bow and quiver and Sita poses with one hand held up in a gesture of protection and the other hand holding a lotus flower. The monkey-faced pawns suggest that the set is themed around the epic *Ramayana* where the exiled prince Rama fights off the demon king Ravana and his hordes with the aid of a monkey army. This, however, is not borne out by the remaining pieces, which are identical on both sides and give the impression of a more generalized South Indian deity set. The role of bishop is played by Ganesha who holds an elephant goad, representing anger, in his upper right hand and a noose, representing attachment, in his upper left. His lower right hand pinches the tip of the broken-off tusk that he is said to have written the *Mahabharata* epic with as dictated by the sage Vyasa, and his lower left hand holds a *laddoo*, or sweet, which he is nibbling away at with his trunk. The horse-headed Kalki once again acts the role of the knight, carrying Vishnu’s signature discus and conch in his upper hands and a sword and shield in his lower hands. The rooks are represented as *gopuras*, or temple entrance towers, which are a very prominent and distinct feature of Hindu temples in South India. They are usually bright with colors, which make their natural and red-stained ivory equivalents in the present set seem comparatively tame and unimpressive.

Chess sets depicting the opposing armies in the central battle of the *Ramayana* with more attention to detail are especially common on the predominantly Hindu island of Bali in Indonesia. Here a wider cast of characters from the epic are usually featured, including Rama’s brother Lakshmana and his eagle mount Garuda, as well as figural representations of Ravana and his son Meghanada (fig. 13 / 8038).¹⁴

Dedicated *Ramayana* sets were also made in India, although in much smaller numbers, with a particularly beautiful example currently held in the Maryhill Museum of Art in the US. The masterpiece is the ten-headed figure of Ravana towering over his fierce-looking demon hordes with a drawn bow (fig. 14 / 8039). The set is kept in natural ivory with the bases of one side painted black as is common in display sets produced for the European market. Another set outside the present collection from 19th-century Mysuru has Rama and Sita presiding over a group of monkey pawns in naturalistic poses.¹⁵ In a rare moment of figurative chess poetry, they are mirrored across the board by their di-

14 Keats 1985: 189-90.

15 Gunter 2004: 158, fig. 12:28.

Next double page

Fond Memories

This extraordinary and very rare set has monkeys as bishops, serpents as knights and also very unusual rooks as deities seated on fountains, which make many of its pieces extremely unusual. I bought it at the Jean Claude Cholet auction at Christie’s in 2007 in London, which was the first in-person auction I attended. My very dear friend Thomas Thomsen joined me and suggested that we sit in the first row so that I could “raise my arm whenever I wanted to buy a set without feeling guilty if I saw a friend in the room bidding for it.” I found that advice odd but later thought he was absolutely right as several of my friends were also interested in the sets I bought. It was my first serious auction purchases and I bought most of the sets I wanted; c. 15 sets and boards that day ... / 0674

Fig. 11: Southern India figural set, late 19th to early 20th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0674





vine counter-couple Vishnu and Lakshmi presiding over a similar group of monkeys. The side of Rama and Sita, representing the earthly incarnations of Vishnu and Lakshmi, is carved in sandalwood, while the side of Vishnu and Lakshmi themselves is carved in black ebony. The inclusion of sages, mounted tigers, and domed pavilions indicate that the set should not be seen as a *Ramayana* set through and through, but rather as a celebration of the divine manifestation of Vishnu and Lakshmi on earth. Mark believes that the set was made for a European audience on account of the female queens, but given the sensitive treatment and deep understanding of its subject expressed both stylistically and thematically, it might also have been made for an Indian patron.¹⁶

As a final note in the discussion of *Ramayana* sets, it should be pointed out that the monkey army, which aids Rama in his battle against Ravana, is in fact a poor match for a game of fourfold armies. While Ravana's army is described as consisting of "1,000 elephants, 10,000 chariots, 20,000 horse, and more than ten million demons," the army of the monkey king Sugriva is described as something less than a fourfold army, though "prepared to withstand in battle even an army of four divisions."¹⁷ Viewed through this lens, the story of the *Ramayana* battle is really the story of how an exiled prince without access to the full strength of a fourfold army is able to defeat an established king who has that very access. This should, of course, not be seen as a critique of *Ramayana* sets or their makers, but rather as a remark on the inherent instability of the central metaphor of chess. As already mentioned in the opening lines, the fourfold army of chess was a lost ideal from the very beginning.

Assorted and Associated

One of the key challenges facing chess historians is how to distinguish between pieces that were used for chess and pieces that were not. Ever since Renate Syed published her argument for a historical basis to the famous legend of how chess traveled from India to Persia in the 6th century CE, the search has been on for early chess pieces in the presumed place of origin in Kannauj, the ancient capital of the Maukhari dynasty in North India.¹⁸

¹⁶ Mark 1997-98: 20.
¹⁷ Trautmann 2015: 109-11.
¹⁸ Syed 2001.



Fig. 13: Pieces from a Ramayana chess set. Bali, early 20th century. Private Collection. Photo © Jonathan Crumiller. / 8038



Before page
 Fig. 12: Hindu/Deity figural set, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0668



Fig. 14: King piece from a Ramayana set depicting the ten-headed demon king Ravana. India. Photo © Maryhill Museum of Art, Washington State, US. / 8039



Fig. 15: Alleged prototypical chess piece in the form of a terracotta elephant with mahout. Kannauj, mid-1st millennium CE. Archaeological Museum of Kannauj, India. Photo: Jacob Schmidt-Madsen. / 8040

Before page
Fond Memories
 This is my second complete "Goanese" set, very similar to the one above. / 1347

Fig. 17: Goanese figural set, circa 1840. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1347

Several terracotta figures of warriors and animals, including mounted horses and elephants, have emerged from the area, and some researchers believe that they represent prototypical chess pieces (fig. 15 / 8040).¹⁹ The problem, however, is that without additional contextual evidence we will never know for certain what the figures were used for. Yes, they might have been used for chess, but they might equally well have been used as toys or souvenirs or ornaments or something much more obvious that we are no longer able to see.

The uncertainty of identification surrounding early chess pieces persists into much more recent times, showing how fundamental the problem is to our understanding of the history and development of chess. As long as players are able to differentiate between the various pieces on the board, they can take whatever shape or form desired or deemed practicable. This means, as exemplified by the scene in Ray's movie referenced above, that all or any abstract or figurative pieces may have found their way onto a chessboard sometime or other. To avoid getting lost in the myriad implications of this observation, it is necessary to narrow down the search to pieces that were explicitly produced, or at least conventionally used, for the purpose of playing or displaying chess. This, however, is complicated by the fact that chess-like figures, which might otherwise have formed part of a set, were often sold as stand-alone toys and ornaments. Writing in 1888, T. N. Mukharji noted the widespread production of "pictorial ivory cards, toys, figures, images of gods, flappers, chessmen, combs, fans, bangles, &c.," and even cited prices for individual pieces from Murshidabad such as the goddesses Durga and Kali, elephants with howdahs, bullock carts, camels, and men.²⁰

Three sets presented here appear to have been assembled from figurative pieces that may or may not have been intended for the chessboard. Two almost identical sets from 19th-century Goa introduce a wide range of pieces on red and blue bases (fig. 16 / 9004 and fig. 17 / 1347). The kings, knights, and rooks, as well as a few spear-wielding pawns, look like they might have been made for chess, and the somewhat unusual queens also find parallels in a Rajasthani set (fig. 25 / 1703) described in Chapter 9, but the remaining pieces seem wholly out of context. They belong to different strata of society, such as merchants, ascetics, and soldiers, and call to mind the attempt of the 13th-century Dominican friar Jacobus de Cessolis at describing chess as an allegorical representation of contemporary European society.²¹ But where de Cessolis divides the pieces into nobles and commoners and uses them to represent the entire breadth of the social order, the Goan sets lack the intentional variety that we would expect from a deliberate effort at social allegory. The only deliberate thing about the sets is the fact that we have two of them instead of just one. This does not necessarily mean that the figures were intended for chess, but perhaps rather that they were selected from a limited repertoire of similar figures and forced into a chess-like configuration for commercial purposes.

¹⁹ See, for example, Eder 2010.

²⁰ Mukharji 1888: 275-276.

²¹ Adams 2006: 15-56.









The sets also include wooden boards with floral and faunal motifs carved into the border and squares without any apparent connection to the pieces.

The third set is even less convincing with its complete lack of stylistic and thematic unity (fig. 18 / 1850). The size of the pieces vary inconsistently across the set, as does the height of several bases. An apparent king piece shows Robert Clive, the commander at the decisive Battle of Plassey in 1757, sitting in a howdah on the back of an elephant under a blue umbrella. He probably once led the East India Company forces in a John Company set, but has now been put in charge of a somewhat odd cast of characters, including a horseman spearing a calf and a woman carrying a gourd of water on her head, as did one of the pieces in the two sets discussed above. On the other side of the board, disregarding for a moment the obviously random distribution of pieces, we find an Indian king and minister commanding an equally ragged band of travelers, musicians, messengers, and the occasional soldier. Clearly, several of the pieces were never meant to occupy the squares of a chessboard — not to mention forming a consistent set of chess pieces — and only do so now by association.

A comparison between the three sets reveals several close correspondences, indicating that many of the pieces may derive from the same stock of mass-produced toys and ornaments. This becomes even clearer when we take into account a fourth grouping of pieces, whose attempt at forming a set does not extend much beyond the red and green coloring of the bases (fig. 19 / 1258). The reappearance of by now familiar faces, such as the woman with the gourd and several others, makes it apparent that we are dealing with combinations and recombinations of a recurring cast of characters. They stand around like extras on a film set, waiting to be associated with some chess set or other. Still, as borne out by the *Hariharachaturanga* written at the court of the Odishan king Prataparudra in the 16th century, not all figures associated with chess may have served a formal ludic function on the board. Godavaramisra's work describes a chess variant played on a 14x14 square board with thirty-two pieces on each side. Twenty-eight of the pieces, representing various military functions within the army, are placed on the two rows closest to the player as in traditional chess, while the remaining four pieces, representing army musicians, are placed outside the board for purely decorative purposes.²² Such practices are unlikely to have been common outside of courtly settings, but should serve as a reminder that the line between play and display, between original and associated, is porous indeed.

Next double page Fond Memories

This is what I fondly call a "Goanese" set, given that it has women as queens and the costumes are similar to the "Indo-Portuguese" ones. Jacob describes these pieces very well, including whether they were all originally made for chess. I found them beautiful, both the different figures and their polychrome and patina, and have therefore bought two very similar sets, and also several similar pieces, both from dealers. These sets/pieces did not show up anymore for sale since the ivory ban was implemented in the UK ... / 9004

Fig. 16: Goanese figural set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9004

Next double page

Fig. 18: Associated John Company-style polychrome set. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1850

Next double page

Fig. 19: Associated figural polychrome pieces. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1258

²² Bock-Raming 1995: 115.

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Chess Sets from the Subcontinent Region of Sri Lanka

Ulrich Schädler

Famous for its elephants, ivory carving besides wood carving had a long tradition in Sri Lanka, going back to antiquity. However, the craft reached its heyday in the time of the kingdom of Kandy (1597-1815).

According to John Whitchurch Bennett, an officer in the British colonial government, Sri Lankan “ivory is considered the most valuable for all the purposes of the manufacturer, being whiter, of finer grain, and retaining its whiteness much longer, than any other”, but, he adds, only one in a hundred of male elephants — i.e. roughly 5% of the population — would have tusks of a usable size for handicraft purposes. Therefore, most of the ivory for carving came from tushes, protruding teeth of tuskless elephants, much smaller than tusks. Elephants, cinnamon, and ivory became important trade goods for export, and some of the ivory was sold to China, where chess sets were carved for Western clientele, too.

The ivory workers were mostly Sinhalese, and the castes distinguished between carvers (*Atdatkatayankarayo*) and turners (*Liyana vaduvo*), who were lower on the social scale than the former.

Among the objects they produced from ivory or elephant bone were handles of daggers, knives, and fans, combs, caskets, pipe cases, book covers, inlays for furniture and door frames, statuettes of the Buddha, elephants or humans, some of which with Christian motifs for Portuguese or Dutch clients, as well as dice and counters for games. Some of these objects were intended as gifts, since the Ceylonese traditions provided many occasions for the exchange of presents.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Sri Lankan ivory industry rapidly declined, due to the shortage of raw material, especially because of the massive slaughter of elephants until their protection in 1937.

Many chess sets from Sri Lanka betray a strong influence from Buddhist traditions, comparable to chess sets from Mynamar, with which they share some common features. Often the war-like image present in most Indian chess sets has been completely replaced by religious motifs and allegories.

The exact dating of these chess sets is a difficult endeavour. They are usually placed in the 18th or 19th century without any further justification. This is due to the long lasting artistic traditions on the one hand and the lack of precisely dated comparable objects. The island was a bone of contention between the European colonial powers and was first under Portuguese (1597-1658) and then Dutch rule (1658-1796) until the British took over in 1796. However, the Europeans only controlled the coastal areas, while the Kingdom of Kandy continued to exist in the interior. Only in 1818 the kingdom became a British protectorate. The colonial history of Sri Lanka shows that it makes a difference whether a chess set (or other works) was produced during the period of Portuguese, Dutch or British rule, as the clients and potential customers and their preferences as well as the sources and models for the carvers may also have changed. However, political, economic and cultural relations to Southern India or even other countries such as China or Myanmar can also provide important clues.

The chess table and the pieces no. 0791 (Fig. 1) belong together, although they were certainly not made by the same craftsman. The chess board covers a square wooden table resting on four bulbous feet. Equipped with drawers to store away the pieces, it is adorned with ivory plaques decorated with foliate scrolls, flowers and birds in bas-relief and coloured in red and green as the chessmen. The double-headed bird in the corners represents the mythological bird known as *gandabherunda* (lit. whose strength is terrible) or *bherunda pakshiyā* (lit. Bherunda bird), a form of Vishnu also known from Buddhist imagery in Sri Lanka. Similar motifs appear frequently in Sri Lankan and South Indian silverware and sandalwood and stone carvings, e.g. in the Buddhist temple of Kelaniya and in Mysuru, where the bicephalous bird was used as a symbol by the Wadiyar Dynasty since the 16th century. Particularly noteworthy is the drawer handle designed as a peafowl, whose body forms the knob, while two other birds fill the plaque attached to the drawer.

Carved from ivory coloured red or green the chessmen stand on voluminous cylindrical bases and are nearly identical on both sides: only the pawns differ in their headgear and the weapon they present in their right hand, and all the men on the green side wear moustaches, the others chin beards.

The king wears a Nilame costume consisting of a 4-corner hat and a short jacket with short and puffy sleeves. He is the only one who wears shoes. In the 19th century, this costume was restricted to the Sri Lankan royalty on special occasions, such as marriages. As a matter of fact, this could be the theme that is represented here. This assumption is strengthened by the relief motif visible on the two ivory plaques inlaid on both sides of the wooden board: it represents a mating dance of a couple of entwined swans, whose tails are developing in elaborate floral scrolls. This symbol of the graceful unity of two lovers called *hansa puttūwa* has a long tradition in Sri Lankan art (see for example the ivory casket in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. n. 1993.29, 2nd half of the 16th century) and is still used nowadays as an auspicious sign on the occasion of a wedding. The game was probably designed as a wedding present.

The barefooted queen, represented as a lady of noble descent, is clad in a richly adorned *sari* in Kandyan style. The “bishops”, dressed like the king but wearing a different hat, hold the same weapon in their right hands as the pawns, and might therefore represent court nobles as commanders of the guards.

The knight and rook are placed on high column-like pedestals, similar to what is known from British Barleycorn chess sets. The knight is represented by a little elephant sitting on the base. The rooks have the shape of a hexagonal shrine or temple supported by helical columns and topped by the traditional spire of Buddhist sacred architecture. The pawns wear a *dhōti*, a cloth wrapped around the lower body with a central loincloth between the legs, which gives the impression of knee-length trousers. The bulging thighs of the pawns are typical of Sri Lankan art of the time. Their naked upper bodies are adorned with a lavish necklace. In their right hand they hold a *bichuwa*, i.e. a dagger with an undulating blade, or a ceremonial axe. These well-fed men do not exactly look like well-trained and battle-hardened soldiers; their corpulence rather illustrates the wealth of their master. The lack of firmly dated comparisons makes it difficult to make a more precise suggestion as to its date than the early 19th century.

Similar in iconography but different in its less elaborate carving style and painted coloured and gilt decoration is the set of chessmen n. 0806, made of ivory, probably in the early 19th century (Fig. 2 / 0806). The pieces of both sides are identical, one side distinguished through the black wooden bases and the red colouring of the pieces. All the figures are carved in a hieratic style, oriented frontally with the arms resting against the bodies — a characteristic feature of Sri Lankan ivory statuettes of the Kandyan period. The king is depicted as a Sri Lankan king, dressed in a long-sleeved jacket with a wide collar, a necklace with impressive pendants, a tunic over long trousers, shoes, and a crown on his head. The much smaller queen wears a traditional *sari*, the bishop, judging from his dress, is a person of high rank and holds a spear in his right hand, the same weapon as the pawns.

**Next double page
Fond Memories**

A matching figural ivory chess set and board with refined work on both. I bought it more than 15 years ago through a very good friend of mine, Sir Chris Ondaatje, who has a special relationship with Sri Lanka and knew a dealer there that brought me the set and board in person to Europe! Never saw a similar set from Sri Lanka nor one with a matching board! / 0791

Fig. 1: Sri Lankan figural set with matching board, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0791





Fond Memories

A rare Sri Lankan ivory figural set with rare elephants as knights! I bought it from Garrick Coleman in 2014. Sri Lankan sets are very rare and I only have three of them in my entire collection. / 0806

Fig. 2: Sri Lankan figural set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0806

Next page

Fond Memories

Sri Lankan ivory figural set has a long history of distinguished provenances: I could trace it back first to John Harbeson's collection, later sold at Sotheby Parke Bernet in 1979. It was then sold at Freeman's in 2002, bought by Halvor Jaeger, from whom I bought it when he and his wife sold their collection at Waddington's in Canada 10 years ago. It has been published both in Mackett-Beeson (1967, page 67; 1968, page 74) and in Victor Keats book Chessmen for Collectors (page 40, figure 31). / 1431

Fig. 3: Sri Lankan Buddhist figural set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório.

The hierarchy of king, queen, “bishops” and pawns is indicated by the decreasing height of the simple bases. The knight, a seated little elephant, and the rook, a two-storey sacred building, stand on profiled bases.

The set no 1431, made of ivory and ebony respectively, is based on a completely different concept (Fig. 3). Probably dating to the early 19th century, Buddhist elements make the theme leaving aside any association with war and competition. All the pieces rise from bases in the shape of lotus thrones. The king and the queen are depicted as a male and a female Bodhisattva sunken in meditation. Their high, conical *mukutas* are decorated with lotus leaves and precious stones. They have assumed the lotus position (*padmasana*) and are holding their hands in front of the body in such a way that certain Buddhist hand gestures — the so-called *mudras* — are recognisable. By bringing the palms of both hands together in front of the heart the queen performs the *namaskara mudra*, the gesture of reverence and profound adoration. While the left hand rests relaxed in his lap, the king holds his right hand at shoulder level with the thumb and the ring finger forming a circle while the index, the middle and the little finger are held upwards. This may be interpreted as the *kartari*



mudra, a gesture believed to give relief from stress caused by discord — which might indeed refer to the game. Otherwise the *prithvi mudra* or earth gesture may be meant here, used to express groundedness and spiritual balance, which would fit well with the meditative attitude of the king.

The bishop is depicted in the shape of a seated elephant, the knight as a horse curiously seated on its hind legs. The rook resembles a spire, a pointed top that crowns Buddhist topes or *dagobas* (called *stupa* in India), shrines for relics. Interestingly, the pawns are not given as human figures, but as lotus buds, the lotus flower being a Buddhist symbol of purity of the body, speech and mind.

The quality of the carving is remarkable: the forms are softly carved out of the ivory, the surface is carefully polished to achieve a shining finish, and the details are delicately but clearly inscribed in smooth, wavy lines. Moreover, the carver paid particular attention to the natural-looking faces.

The set of chessmen n. 1827 (Fig. 4), for which a date around the middle of the 19th century was proposed, is a unique set in various respects and particularly curious. It is carved from sandalwood and hardwood and corresponds at first sight to what one would expect from many Indian chess sets. There is a camel rider (the bishop), the horseman (the knight), the *mabout*-driven elephant (the rook) and the foot-soldier, well-known from chess sets from Rajasthan and other regions. King and queen however come as a Chinese merchant or mandarin and his servant, a quite surprising element. The king especially follows Chinese models very closely, as can be seen from the details of his dress like the hat, the long necklace and the tunic reaching down over the feet.

Apart from these two Chinese, there are some more intriguing stylistic features to be observed, which are hardly to be found in continental Indian chess sets. The elephant trotting loosely along has a forehead that recedes backwards and a curled trunk, while in most cases of Indian chess sets the front of the elephant forms a vertical line with the trunk reaching towards the ground. The men wear fez-like hats. And the riders hold the reins very high up and in one hand, which is also rather unusual for Indian chess sets.

Some elements, as the movement of the elephant, the form of its head and the curled trunk (compare the elephants in stone relief of the Kelaniya Temple, late 18th century), and the four-petaled flowers on the caparison (compare the motif carved in wood in Embekke Dewalaya, after 1371), as well as the Chinese “connection” may perhaps indicate a Sri Lankan origin of this unusual chess set. However, this rather vague assumption requires closer scrutiny through a detailed study.

Next page Fond Memories

Figural in wood; this set always puzzled me as it looked Indian or Persian but with Chinese characters as bishops/mandarins! I bought it from Thomas Thomsen some years ago, who initially told me it might be Persian but after the research for this book Ulrich concluded it must be Indian. Thomas had bought it from Beno Bordiga, a NY collector, who had bought it at a NY auction c. 20 years before. Still a mystery why the Chinese characters! / 1827

Fig. 4: Wooden figural Indian set with Persian king and vizier, 19th century. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 1827





How difficult it often is to attribute antique chess sets to specific regional schools of craftsmanship on the basis of iconography, style and technique is made particularly clear by set no. 1395 (Fig. 5).

This set of chessmen shares some common features with the Sri Lankan set n. 1431 (Fig. 3), at least at first sight. Again, king and queen are fashioned as a woman and a man both meditating. They are sitting cross-legged on their base, which resembles a lotus throne, in the typical padmasana position. Both have long hair and wear a high crown. The king wears a tight shirt with long sleeves, while the woman is half-naked, but adorned with a magnificent chest ornament and two bangles. The bishop is represented by a gracious young woman, holding a vase on her head with her left hand. She is draped in a long cloth covering her legs, the hem of which she lifts with her right hand. The knight is a rampant horse with rich trappings. The rook comes as a pagoda-like architecture on top of a pedestal supported by four pilasters in the corners and a relief of a human figure in between. The pawns are skinny bearded Hindu ascetics, clad only in a loincloth and turban and sitting cross-legged on their base; the positions of their legs and hands being all different. Nearly identical chessmen make a set preserved in an American private collection.

The style of the carving, namely the elongated proportions of the topless young woman with the elegant S-shape of her posture, the naturalistic rendering of the scrawny old men, the architecture of the rook somewhat similar to what can be found in some chess sets ascribed to Myanmar or Thailand (so-called „Burmese“), and the movement of the horse sitting on his hindquarters are unusual compared to chess sets carved in other regions of the Indian subcontinent. I would also like to point out the shiny, thinly applied green colour, very different from that of most other Indian chess sets. Moreover, most pieces on both sides seem to have been copied mechanically.

Due to the described particularities, the set has been likewise identified as 19th century Nepalese (because it seemed impossible to link it to any other Indian regional style) or as coming from Erbach (Germany). In 1783, count Franz I. of Erbach (he himself a talented ivory craftsman) founded the Ivory Carvers' Guild, establishing a new industry in his county, which soon became a profitable source of revenue. In 1892, the local School of Ivory Carving was founded, and ivory carvings from Erbach acquired an excellent reputation. And even throughout the 20th century and still today the art survives in Erbach, though on a much reduced scale, due to the fact that elephant ivory cannot be used any longer but mammoth ivory and other substitutes can. However, it is known that Indian games were also imported and sold as „Erbach“ products.

Therefore, although the set was likely carved in Erbach, it cannot be excluded that it was made in India, but in this case on the basis of a German „Indic“ model. As for the dat-

Before double page Fond Memories

An ivory set I am very fond of, given its delicacy and figural themes. This set was sold at Sotheby's, 22-Oct-1980, lot 626, and described as Nepalese. I bought it from Franz Josef Lang several years ago and he told me it looked Indian or Nepalese but could have been made in Erbach. I did not really believe him; I handled hundreds of Indian/Asian sets over the years and both the king/queen, rooks and the pawns clearly look Asian both in form and style (although the knights/horses look more European). I have a friend of mine living in the US with exactly the same set but in brown and natural ivory. Ulrich describes very well the process he followed to classify it so I leave it for you to decide! / 1395

Fig. 5: "Nepalese"-style figural set, possibly Erbach, 19th or 20th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1395

ing of the set, the late 1960s and early 1970s might provide a plausible context, when young people in Europe and the USA began to take an interest in Indian spirituality, making India fashionable in the West.

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Domestic Antique Indian Chess Sets

Dr. Leander Feiler

Introduction

This chapter of the book is dedicated to extraordinary antique domestic Indian chess sets originating from India. These chess sets have been embedded in the culture of India for centuries.

The Kshatriya caste comprises the important patrilineal clan of Rajputs (literally: son of a king). There are 36 royal Kshatriya clans subdivided into mainly 3 groups named Suryavamshi, Chandravamshi and Agnivamshi (solar, lunar and fire race/dynasty). They claim to be descendants of ruling Hindu warrior classes of northern India, who rose to predominance during the 6th to 12th centuries.

During British rule (until 1947) approximately 600 princely states existed which predominantly were ruled by Rajputs. Members of the Kshatriya caste and especially the Rajputs mainly continued playing chess. Consequently, they kept chess sets and other games of great artistic value made of valuable materials like semiprecious stones, ivory or camel bone with silver and/or gold applications adorned with precious stones. These games were highly estimated as a dowry and were kept in the family treasures. This is why these chess sets and other games are preserved perfectly and this explains why till recently the antique domestic Indian chess sets were almost completely hidden from public view.

Rajputs normally have a family historian (i. e. *charan*) who keeps record of important family events like birth of a child, marriages, death of a family member as well as of jewelry and its value and of all the contents of the family treasure.

It is reported that the members of the Kshatriya caste stopped regular playing of chess approximately by 1960. Consequently, the routine replacement of the original textile chess boards that had worn out and/or destroyed, for example by insects, was stopped.

The chess sets to be presented are either figural, semi-figural or non-figural, they are of extraordinary beauty and signalize the outstanding workmanship of the artists who made them. The non-figural chess sets indicate Muslim influence.

The characteristics of each of the five antique domestic Indian chess sets, as well as how they reflect the history of the origins of chess described above, will be explained in detail below.

Bundi Chess Set made of Indian Jade (Aventurin)

Bundi was the capital of a small princely state (or native state) with the same name, founded in 1342 AD and ruled by Hada-Chauhan Rajputs. During the British Raj (1858-1947) the Maharao of Bundi were great patrons of art and architecture and they also benefited from their cooperation with the British. Since 1948 Bundi has been part of Rajasthan. During the reign of the Bundi king Maharao Raja Ram Singh Bahadur (1821-1889 AD) the charming and beautiful chess set of green Indian Jade was made. The chess pieces are all of the non-figural type. Their strong bases are decorated with silver ornaments and the predominant “heads” are adorned with various types of balls. The squares of the 8x8 textile chess board [not pictured] are red and green; red stands for Hinduism and green stands for Islam.

Originally the chess boards of the domestic sets were not chequered, having a uniform appearance: The present domestic board perhaps shows the western influence of the British Raj.

Concerning the two parties of the present chess set, they are distinguishable due to the kind of small balls at the silver coated upper side of the pieces. The Hindu party has gilded silver balls, real pearls, and glass beads, the pieces of the Islamic side show silver balls only.

The group of pawns and officers, the vizier (an Arabic/Persian word meaning minister in the sense of advisor) and the king of each side differ from each other in size only. In the center of the base of each king there is a silver plaque with an inscription surrounded by 12 stones. The inscription on the Muslim king is surrounded by 6 green and 6 black stones and is written in the Urdu language in Perso-Arabic script, a right-to-left script derived from the Arabic alphabet.

The Hindu king is about 8.5 cm high and 12 red stones surround the inscription in Devanagari script which reads:

*maharao sbri Jaimalji
samvat 1920*

The Samvat dating system can be “translated” to our own calendar by subtracting 57 years, or 56 years if a month from Jan-Apr is specified. Samvat 1920 corresponding to 1863 AD is obviously the year when the chess set was made. “Maharao Shri Jaimalji” can be translated as «the esteemed Maharaja Shri Jaimal.»

This reference has nothing to do with the ruling king of Bundi at that time. It refers to a highly esteemed and venerated member of the Rajput clan and obviously refers to Jaimal Rathore (1507-1568 AD), the ruler of Merta. He was the great-grandson of Rao Jodha Rathore, who founded Jodhpur.

The story goes as follows: After the battle of Merta in 1567, Jaimal was dethroned and forced to take refuge with Rana Udai Singh of Mewar. In 1567, when the Moghul Emperor Akbar encamped outside Chittorgarh (a stronghold of Udai Singh), the Mewar king and his family fled to the Aravalli hills leaving the fortress with 8000 soldiers and 1000 musketeers under the command of Jaimal and Panna, another Rajput warrior. Jaimal died in 1568. Jaimal played a significant role in the history of Rajasthan’s resistance against the Mughals and even today he is a highly esteemed and venerated member of the Rajput clan. Since Jaimal visited Bundi several times, the Bundi chess set was obviously intended to recall the history of this famous Rajput.

Dholpur Chess Set made of Indian Jade (Aventurin)

Dholpur is situated approximately 55 km south of Agra (famous for the Taj Mahal) and was the capital of the state with the same name. It was established by the British as an independent kingdom existing from 1805-1818, and as a princely state (or native state) under British sovereignty and from 1818-1949 ruled by a king of the Jat community. This community is neither part of the Rajputs nor of the Kshatriyas; nevertheless they are Hindus of low caste but follow the rules of the Rajputs. Due to their good relations to the British, they were installed as kings of Dholpur.

The Dholpur chess set is similar to the Bundi chess set. Both sets are non-figural (possibly indicating Muslim influence), are made of green Indian jade, have silver applications and silver caps decorated with balls on the top, have a strong base and the height of the kings is approximately 8,5 cm.

The Dholpur pieces differ from the Bundi ones by the shape of the pieces and by vertical engraved silver bands. All these pieces have silver balls on top and the Hindu part has additionally red engraved lines in the jade body and both kings have a silver band around the basis with an inscription in Devanagari script:

Maharaj-Rana Bhagwant (or Bhagwan) Singh samvat 1803

Next double page Fond Memories

A wonderful set and I was grateful to Jon Crumiller for offering me the possibility of acquiring it. Jon had bought it from Leander Feiler (the author of this chapter), who specializes on Indian domestic sets and has traveled extensively through India. It is an excellent example of the traditional Indian chess theme of “Hindu versus Muslim.” The Hindu king’s inscription is in Devanagari script, whereas the Muslim king’s inscription is in Urdu, a right-to-left script that is a derivative of the Arabic alphabet. The inscription states that the set was made in 1863. / 0709

Fig. 1: Bundi chess set made of Indian Jade (Aventurin), 1863. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0709





“Savat 1803” corresponds to 1746 AD. This date does not fit with the biography of Bhagwant Singh. He was born in 1823 AD and was the younger son of Rana Kirat Singh, his father. After the early death of Bhagwant Singh’s elder brother Rana Pohap Singh, Bhagwant Singh ascended the throne as Maharaj-Rana of Dholpur in 1836 and died in 1873 AD.

The textile chess board has 8x8 squares of uniform appearance corresponding to the Indian tradition and is surrounded by a colorful artistic fabric. It looks old but it is probably not the original of the set.

The chess set is perfectly preserved because each party’s pieces were kept separately in two copper boxes, originally meant for storing chapati, a kind of Indian bread. Furthermore, the pieces were well protected by soft cushions, one for each copper box. Both cushions bear an identical Rajastani inscription in Devanagari script. The reading is:

*maharani sarup kavari sa
savat 1877
riyasat Dholpur*

Which means:

Honorable Queen Roop honorable daughter (of a Rajput)
1820 AD
Dholpur state

Queen Roop was the sister-in-law of Bhagwant Singh and wife of his elder brother Rana Pohap Singh, who died early. It is known that Queen Roop helped and supported Bhagwant Singh after the early death of her husband. Due to the inscription on the cushions it is likely that the chess set was part of the dowry of Queen Roop.



Fig. 3: Inscriptions on Dholpur chess pieces. Photo by Bruce White, © Bruce White and the World Chess Hall of Fame. / 1986b

Before page
Fig. 2: Dholpur chess set made of Indian Jade (Aventurin), 1820. Photo by Bruce White, © Bruce White and the World Chess Hall of Fame. / 1986

*Fatehgarh chess set made of semiprecious stones
with silver decoration*

This extraordinarily interesting figural chess set originally comes from the palace of Fatehgarh. Today the palace is surrounded by a village with the same name, having about 1000 inhabitants, located approximately 50 km southeast of Ajmer and formerly situated at the border of the princely states of Mewar and Marwar.

“Fateh” is an Arabic word and means victory and “garh” means castle. Maharaj Fateh Singhji Rathore founded the fort of Fatehgarh, and under the British Raj it became the center of the small princely state also called Fatehgarh. Fateh Singh’s father was Maharaja Takht Singh Rathore of Jodhpur in Marwar (1819-1873) and his mother was Dholi Bai from Mewar, third wife of Takht Singh. The present chess set was part of her dowry. The artist who made the set was Bhagwana Ram Soni, working in Mewar.

It is to remark that the present chess set reflects the early history of the origins of chess. All the chess pieces are totally figural, following the structure of the historic Indian army. Apart from kings and viziers (adviser) the chess set comprises the 4 parts (*chaturanga*): these are elephants (*bathi*), cavalry (*ghora*), camels (*unt*) and pawns (*sepooy*).

The Hindu part of the chess set is made of smoky topaz (Hindi name *sunela pukbraj*) of reddish color. The other part is of agate (Hindi name *hakik*) of whitish/yellowish color, appreciated by Muslims to protect from the evil eye. The pieces differ not only in the kind of stone but also in the floral silver decoration, including the representation of the bright lotus flower and of the sun, the latter indicating that the ruler belongs to the Sun dynasty. Kings, viziers and pawns all have flat round adorned silver caps.

The faces with mouth, nose, ears and eyes are made in perfect style whereby the eyes’ inlays consist of white glass beads providing a vivid appearance of the chess pieces. Consequently, the pieces set out on the chess board appear to be alive and seem to be conversing with one another. An extraordinary feature of the kings and viziers is the perfect modeling of their arms and hands holding daggers.

The reddish king is 10 cm high and bears an inscription on the back reading: *sammatt 1803 maharaj shri fateh singji th fatehgarh* (1746 AD, Shri Maharaj Fateh Singh Thakur, Fatehgarh; Thakur is a title more or less equivalent to Earl).

The reddish vizier is 9 cm high and has an inscription which is very similar to that of the king on the silver band at the bottom of the piece. The whitish/yellowish king and vizier too are 10 cm high but bear no inscription.



Next page
Fond Memories
I bought this set directly from Leander in 2015. It is a figural set made of agate and topaz and with silver mounts, and according to Leander «It dates from 1746. The chess set and the textile board comes from the Palace of Fatehgarh, situated at the border of the former Mewar and Marwar States and founded by Maharaj Fateh Singhji.» / 0711

Fig. 4: Fatehgarh chess set made of semiprecious stones with silver decoration, 1746. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0711

On the back of the textile board (silk patchwork on cotton) measuring approximately 110x110 cm including borders, there is an inscription which reads similar to that of the reddish king: *sbri maharaj fateh singhji fategarh sarvar (=state) sammat (=samvatg) 1803 (Shri Maharaj Fateh Singh, Fatehgarh state, 1746 AD)*. The squares of the textile board are separated by silver and gold ribbons and are of uniform appearance. This characteristic fits perfectly in the tradition of antique domestic Indian chess boards.

Semi-figural chess set from Gangapur

Gangapur nowadays is a village, situated about 60 km north-west of Chittorgarh. Originally Gangapur was a Thikana (comparable to a county). This extraordinary chess set is semi-figural, kings and viziers have heads most probably made of ivory with masterly sculptured faces, whereas their bodies as well as the other chess pieces are non-figural and made of camel bone.

The red king bears an inscription which, according to information obtained from the former owner, reads *chopdar (chaudbar?) ratan singh thikana gangapur samvat 1928 (General Ratan Singh, Gangapur County, 1871 AD)*. Although this inscription is on the red king of the chess set, Ratan Singh was not the king of Gangapur but a Rajput ruler of lower rank.

The faces of kings and viziers show much character due to their vivid eyes consisting of white glass beads embedded in lacquer, prepared from plant juices. On the other hand the striking walrus moustaches provide a severe look. Kings and viziers have a quite unique head covering with precious stones.

All chess pieces are adorned with silver gilt bands. The parties are distinguished by red and green coloring according to Indian tradition. The head-covering of the red king (height 15,5 cm) and that of the red vizier (height 14,3 cm) comprise 10 emeralds and 2 rubies each and that of the vizier has an additional pearl. On the tops a bunch of gold wires is fixed. The head-covering of the green king (height 15,6 cm) has 10 emeralds and that of the green vizier (height 14,0 cm) is adorned by 8 rubies and 4 emeralds, however, the bunch of golden threads on top is missing.

Concerning the non-figural pieces consisting of bishops, knights, rooks and pawns it is interesting that on one representative of each group the original name in Rajasthani language is written in Devanagari script. In detail:

ut (unt)	=	camel (red 9,0 cm, green 8,9 cm), corresponding to bishop
ghora	=	horse (red 9,0cm, green 9.2cm), corresponding to knight
hati (hathi)	=	elephant (red 8,8 cm, green 9,0 cm), corresponding to rook
senik (sainik)	=	soldier (red 6,8 cm, green 7,2 cm), corresponding to pawn.

It is remarkable that the local names which correspond to the names of the four parts of the historic Indian army (*chaturanga*) are written on one representative of each non-figural group of chess pieces.

It is striking that the sizes of the pawns vary: The height of the red pawns varies from 6,4-6,8 cm and the height of the green pawns varies from 6,2-7,2 cm. The diameters of the pawns vary too, but nevertheless the pieces match perfectly with one another as well as with the other chess pieces including kings and viziers.

The textile board, about 80 years old, measuring 76 x74 cm, is made of silk, stitched on cloth, with woven flower decoration. The squares are separated by ribbons and are of uniform appearance and thus correspond to the Indian tradition.

Semi-figural chess set from Daulatgarh

Before 1947 Daulatgarh (Fort Daulat) was a Thikana (county), today it is a village, situated approximately 12 km from Asind (Bhilwara District).

This unusual chess set made of camel bone is a further semi-figural example in which only kings and viziers are characterized by heads with big turbans, mounted on a massive round basis, partly covered by silver sheets with geometric design of dots and lines.

Kings and viziers differ basically in that the kings are slightly taller. The other non-figural chess pieces are clearly shorter and are of “pepper pot” form with decorated silver caps of varying diameter, depending on the kind of chess piece. Both parties are marked, according to Indian tradition. One side with reddish brown highlights, the other with green ones. The inscription on the red king reads as follows:

*thakur singh sbri daulat sinbaji thikana daulat garh samvat 1864
(Thakur Singh Sbri Daulat Singh, Daulatgarh County, 1807 AD)
samvat 1864 corresponds to 1807 AD.*

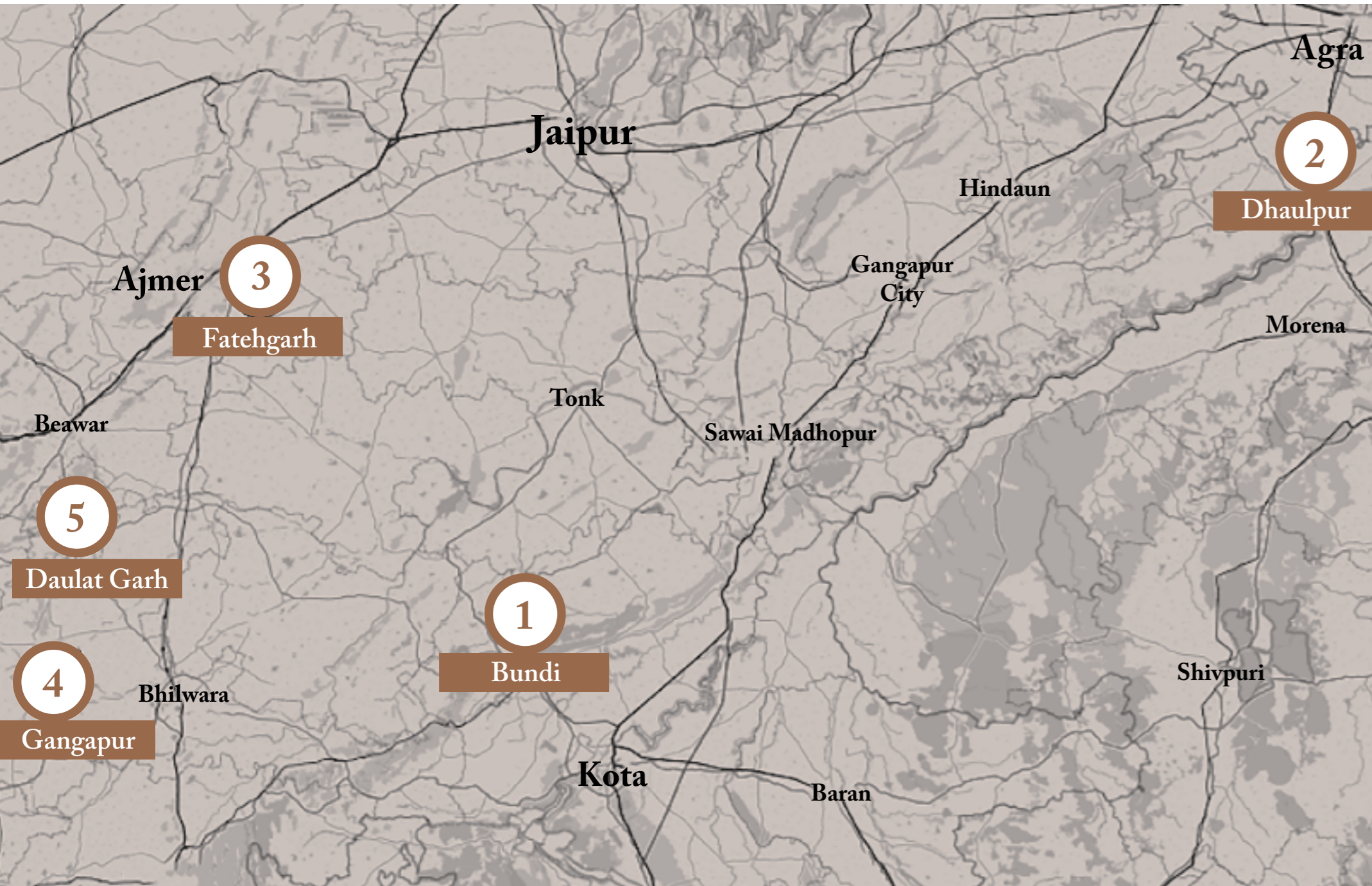
The red, green and violet textile board is decorated with silvered thread borders. The faces of the heads of the kings and viziers show a harmonious male personality. Since these sets represent an Indian tradition of chess which invokes advisors and generals rather than queens, it is not surprising that all chess sets described in this chapter do not contain a queen. But it also has to be emphasized that domestic Indian chess sets exist in which the vizier is a queen and that is possibly due to the western influence during the last centuries.

Next double page
Fig. 5: Semi-figural chess set from Gangapur. Photo by Franco Maria Ricci, © António Horta-Osório. / 1175

Next double page
Fig. 6: Semi-figural chess set from Daulatgarh. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0752







Geographic Origins of the Domestic Indian Sets

The following map (fig. 7) shows modern day Rajasthan, forming a rectangle of approx. 260 x 170 km (1cm = 12.5 km), comprising the most important cities of today and the location of the five chess sets described in this chapter. These locations correspond to the capitals of the former princely states under British sovereignty. It is apparent that the two non-figural chess sets (figs. 1 and 2) originate from an area neighboring the Islamic Mughal Empire. The other chess sets (figs. 4, 5, and 6) are either semi-figural or fully figural and originate from areas dominated by Hinduism.

One reason why the later chess pieces are non-figural has to do with the fact that instead of carving kings, ministers, elephants, dromedaries, and horses, it is easier to make them in non-figural forms with the added possibility of writing the corresponding names on the pieces. In any case, that a chess set is non-figural does not mean that it is simplistic. On the contrary, the Bundi set (fig. 1) described above is an excellent example of perfect creative power, harmonious ornamentation, and artistic workmanship, well-known from the artists of the Bundi school.



*The Game of Empires:
Indian Chessboards and Artistic
Exchange in the Age of Discovery*

Hugo Miguel Crespo

Linking East and West, chess—thought to have originated in India around the sixth century—and chessboards were among the earliest items encountered by Europeans in India in the early sixteenth century. At the Portuguese court, chess was held in high regard, with King Sebastião I (r. 1557-1578) renowned as a skilled player.¹ Yet the game's appeal extended far beyond courtly confines, permeating Portuguese domestic interiors, as evidenced by rare surviving pieces of furniture. Among them is a small folding table (44.0 x 75.5 x 28.0 cm), doubling as a writing cabinet, whose incised decoration includes a games board for chess and draughts. Made in the mid-sixteenth-century Azores from local juniper wood, this table—now in the collection of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon (inv. 297 Mov)—features a Renaissance-style border framing the games board, accentuated with dark pigment. When the Portuguese ventured to the Indies, chess undoubtedly accompanied them as a favoured pastime. François Pyrard de Laval (c. 1578–c. 1623), in his detailed account of travels to India (1601-1611), observed in 1608 that the Portuguese exhibited 'a great fondness for chess, draughts, and other board games'. Earlier still, João de Barros (1496-1570), the official chronicler of Portuguese exploits in Asia, recounts in his *Décadas* a striking episode from 1509: during the first contacts with Malacca, Diogo Lopes de Sequeira was ambushed by a local adversary while engrossed in a chess match aboard his ship.² The cultural resonance of chess is further reflected in Portuguese-commissioned Indian objects, such as a silk-embroidered coverlet from Bengal, dating to the first half of the seventeenth

1 Dagoberto L. Markl, "O Xadrez e os Descobrimentos. O Tempo de João de Barros (1496-1570)", *Oceano*, 27 (1996), pp. 92-98.

2 *Idem*, *ibid.*, p. 95.

century and also housed in the Lisbon museum (inv. 4581 Tec).³ This remarkable piece vividly depicts two Portuguese men, resplendent in courtly attire—including tall hats, ruffs, jerkins, and puffed breeches—seated on a narrow bench, engaged in a game of chess with servants in attendance.

Game boards are among the rarest and most fascinating objects produced in India for export to European markets during the early modern period. Made on a miniature scale with jewel-like precision, they epitomise the artistic confluence at work in the subcontinent during the so-called Age of Discovery, as reflected in their refined manufacturing techniques and decoration. The production of Indian game boards, typically made from precious woods and decorated with marquetry and inlays—often incorporating ivory—cannot be separated from the contemporary tradition of fine cabinet making. Recent research, integrating contemporary documentary sources with in-depth analysis of surviving objects and paying special attention to materials, production techniques, and decorative repertoire, has illuminated the various production centres responsible for these remarkable artefacts.⁴ These centres, located on the north-western coast of India, include Thatta and Gujarat in the north, as well as Thane and Chaul further south, which, during this period, formed part of the Northern Province of the Portuguese State of India (*Estado da Índia*). Curiously, no game boards appear to have been made in Goa, the capital of the *Estado*, or in Kochi, in present-day Kerala, a major port city along the Malabar Coast bordering the Laccadive Sea, which had earlier served as the seat of Portuguese dominance in India. In the case of Goa, this absence might be attributed to a more repressive religious context and stricter decorum, or, more plausibly, to a greater specialisation in northern India, where enduring traditions of board games flourished within Islamic and Persianate centres. Other production centres discussed in this text, which began manufacturing furniture for export at a slightly later date and catered to a broader European clientele—including the Dutch and the British—were located on the Coromandel Coast, notably in Visakhapatnam (*Visagapatão* in Portuguese).

Before delving into the distinct production centres and the game boards manufactured there, it is helpful to provide a brief overview of the different types of boards produced. These include flat reversible boards, flat folding boards, games boxes (flat boards folding into a box), and boards folding into oblong boxes with drawers. While the first three types are double-sided—one side for playing chess or draughts (and sometimes backgammon), with the reverse featuring backgammon, or the ‘game of the goose’—the fourth type incorporates all three games in a single surface. Flat reversible boards represent the simplest form, whereas flat folding boards, including games boxes with interior compartments for storing games pieces, were better suited for travel. The flat hinged versions likely emulated

³ Ulrich Schädler, Thomas H. Thomsen (eds.), *Crossing Games. Journeys between East and West* (cat.), Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga - Imprensa Nacional, 2022, p. 212, cat. 132 (catalogue entry by Ana Kol).

⁴ See Hugo Miguel Crespo, *India in Portugal. A Time of Artistic Confluence* (cat.), Porto, Bluebook, 2021.

contemporary European prototypes from Italy and the Iberian Peninsula, although an earlier origin in the Islamic lands of West Asia is also plausible. An example of the flat folding type, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (inv. 7849-1861), features chess and draughts on one side and backgammon on the interior. Lavishly decorated with geometric marquetry (*taracea* in Spanish, *intarsia* in Italian) in Islamic Mudejar style, it was likely made by Christian woodworkers in southern Spain in the early sixteenth century.⁵ The backgammon side, on the interior, follows the Italian style with its slim, elongated ‘tongues’, suggesting that this particular type may have been modelled on earlier Italian game boards produced by the Embriachi in fifteenth-century northern Italy.

Also decorated with *taracea* and housed in the same museum is an example of the games box type (inv. 154-1900).⁶ Much thicker when folded, it forms a box with sufficient interior space for storing chess pieces and other gaming items and is fitted with a spring catch on the exterior for closure. Made in southern Spain, it has been dated to circa 1525-1575. The games box includes two loose boards, similarly decorated in *taracea*: one for the ‘fox and geese’ and the other for ‘nine men’s morris’, both of which are stored inside. This hinged, box-like design was also replicated in Japan, where a rare group of Namban lacquered examples survives.⁷ One example in a Portuguese private collection (9.0 x 44.2 x 42.7 cm, closed), decorated with mother-of-pearl, features an Italian-style backgammon board on the inside while the exterior mimics the appearance of a plain box.⁸ These examples, produced for export at the turn of the seventeenth century, demonstrate the global reach of this type of games board. Far more complex in design are game boards that fold into an inner box fitted with drawers. These are divided into three oblong sections of equal size: one in the centre spans the length of the box below, while two falling leaves flank it. When opened, the falling leaves are set at right angles, supported by two crenellated boards that act as feet. When closed, these crenellated sections tightly enclose the inner box, making the entire piece highly portable. While later Indian examples exhibit a similar shape, albeit non-folding, no exact prototype has yet been identified in either Europe or Asia that might have served as the original model. Given its geometrical complexity, an origin within the Islamic lands appears highly plausible.

It is curious to note that the types of game boards made in India for European consumption do not include what was perhaps the most common type in the subcontinent: a games board raised on four low corner legs, resembling a square footstool. Such boards

⁵ See Marta Ajmar-Wollheim, Flora Dennis (eds.), *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (cat.), London, V&A Publishing, 2006, pp. 218-219, fig. 15.13, and p. 355, cat. 43.

⁶ Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain*, London, V&A Publishing, 2010, pp. 88-89, fig. 81.

⁷ See Clement Onn, “The Asian games of *shuang lu* and *ban-sugoroku*”, in Schädler, Thomsen, *Crossing Games*, pp. 154-159, where two examples in Japan, decorated with mother-of-pearl also on the outside, are discussed (pp. 156-158, figs. 3-4).

⁸ Annemarie Jordan Gschwend, K.J.P. Lowe (eds.), *The Global City. Lisbon in the Renaissance* (cat.), Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, 2017, p. 159, cat. 121.



would have been used by players seated on the floor, on raised platforms (a dais) covered in textiles, or on low seats. The Horta-Osório Collection includes a later example of this type (fig. 1 / 0671). Made from lightweight exotic wood and featuring drawers for storing game pieces, it is thickly veneered in rosewood and decorated with ivory inlays. The board, designed for chess and draughts, is decorated with alternating motifs of full poppy flowers and floral groupings. The positioning of the full poppies—on the four central squares, two at the medial points of each side, and four at the corners—forms a cross-shaped diagram across the board.⁹ Highly elaborate, the flower decoration includes raised elements in red-dyed ivory set against a mica ground. The same mica—sheets of the mineral muscovite—is employed in the decoration of the board's waist, partially covered by pierced openwork ivory plaques. From its late Mughal style and decoration, this board must have been made in eighteenth-century Northern India. The Horta-Osório Collection holds another board of this type—raised on four turned feet and fitted with a drawer—though made in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka (Ceylon).¹⁰ Constructed from rosewood, it features low-relief carved ivory inlays highlighted in red and green, framed in ebony. It survives with all its finely carved ivory chessmen.

Thatta

In his *Remonstrantie*, the Antwerp merchant Francisco Pelsaert (c. 1595-1630) observed in 1626 that the coastal city of Thatta, a river-port in present-day Sindh, Pakistan, was renowned by its craftsmanship: 'Ornamental desks, draught-boards, writing-cases, and similar goods are manufactured locally in large quantities; they are very prettily inlaid with ivory and ebony, and used to be exported in large quantities to Goa and the coastal-towns'.¹¹ Pelsaert emphasises that Thatta had thrived under Portuguese influence until the loss of the kingdom of Hormuz in 1622, serving as a vital mercantile hub linking the Persian Gulf to Portuguese-ruled Goa.¹² Pelsaert also noted a strong Iranian presence in Thatta, describing merchants from Isfahan who clandestinely brought silk for sale, despite the prohibition on its export from Persia. This Iranian connection is particularly significant, as the micro mosaic technique of inlay known as *sadeli* in India, or *kbatam* in Persian, was first introduced to India in Sindh. Originating in medieval times in the eastern Mediterranean, this decorative

⁹ A similar marking, albeit more obvious, is seen on a chess table in the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. 335:1 to 35-1907) likely made at Travancore or Coorg for the Ling Raja, ruler of Coorg. See Amin Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon. A Catalogue of the Collections in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Peabody Essex Museum*, London, V&A Publications, 2001, pp. 168-169, cat. 28.

¹⁰ Published in Schädler, Thomsen, *Crossing Games*, p. 205, cat. 125.

¹¹ Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India. The Remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert*, ed. William Harrison Moreland, Peter Geyl, Cambridge, W. Heffer & Sons, Ltd., 1925, p. 32.

¹² On Thatta and the Portuguese, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Portuguese, Thatta and the External Trade of Sind, 1515-1635", *Revista de Cultura*, 13-14 (1991), pp. 48-58; João de Deus Ramos, "Thatta and Lhari Bandar: Portuguese Presence in Two Commercial Entrepôts of Sind in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", in Karl Anton Sprengard, Roderich Prak (eds.), *Maritime Asia. Profit Maximisation, Ethics and Trade Structure c. 1300-1800*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994, pp. 115-124; and Willem M. Floor, "The First Dutch Voyage to Thatta (1631): The Journal of Gregorij Cornelisz", *Anais de História de Além-Mar*, 9 (2008), pp. 381-421.

Before page

Fond Memories

A beautiful Moghul chess board in bone and wood, with two drawers. It came with a matching Islamic-pattern ivory polychrome chess set. I bought it in 2004 from Manuel Castilho. / 0671

Fig. 1: Mughal North Indian games board of rosewood, exotic wood, ivory, mica with gilt copper fittings; circa 1750-1800. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0671

technique spread to Iran and India.¹³ Under the Safavids, the art of *kbatam* flourished in Isfahan, Shiraz, and Kerman, before being introduced to Surat through Sindh, likely via Shiraz. The combination of ebony and ivory inlays with *sadeli* on certain objects—such as the game boards mentioned in Pelsaert’s *Remonstrantie*—supports the attribution of a specific group of artefacts to Sindh. These objects, characterised by pronounced Islamic aesthetics and a Timurid decorative repertoire, primarily featuring non-figurative decoration are consistently made from teak veneered in ebony and inlaid with ivory, dyed bone, exotic woods, and a profusion of *sadeli*.

The Horta-Osório Collection includes four game boards made in Thatta: three flat reversible boards and one games box. These are all made from teak (*Tectona grandis*), veneered in Ceylon ebony (*Diospyros ebenum*), and inlaid with ivory and *sadeli*. One example (figs. 2-3 / 9001) features one side for chess and draughts, with a chequered pattern of alternating ebony and ivory squares, framed by an elaborate border of vegetal scrolls and a raised outer frame decorated with a frieze of eight-petaled rosettes. The reverse features, on each half, opposing crenellated boards with semicircular niches for holding backgammon. The backgammon played on this board follows the Hispanic type, known from King Alfonso X’s *Libro de los juegos* (*Book of games*), as opposed to the Italian style with its rows of ‘tongues’. The pattern of the board features a cross design with framed square panels in the corners. Both the cross and the four panels are decorated with star and lozenge reserves in *sadeli* over a complex vegetal scroll design.

Two other reversible game boards in the Horta-Osório Collection, made in Thatta, feature chess, draughts, and Hispanic-type backgammon on one side, with the ‘game of the goose’ on the reverse. The first (figs. 4-5 / 1290) is more elaborate in its decoration: the chess, draughts, and backgammon face is framed by a highly ornate border of arabesques surrounding the central game pattern and a raised edge with eight-petaled rosettes.¹⁴ The reverse features a spiral architectural diagram (a pergola), characteristic of the ‘game of goose’ as depicted in a 1588 engraving by Mario Cartaro for the Neapolitan edition of Alonso de Barros’, *Filosofía cortesana moralizada*.¹⁵ The board contains the usual sixty-three spaces, separated by baluster-shaped columns. The spiral is formed by a *sadeli* frieze, while the numbers are engraved in cartouches adjacent to the spiral, above each space. The figures are inlaid with ivory, engraved and cut into shapes such as geese or birds, with forward-pointing beaks, a bridge (6), an inn (19), a well (31), a tower-shaped maze (42), a ship (in place of a

13 On the technique, see George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi, 1903. Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition, 1902-1903*, Calcutta, Superintendent of Govt. Printing, India, 1903, pp. 156-157; and Javad Golmohammadi, ‘The Art of Iranian Decorative Vener, *Kbatam-kari*’, in Alison Ohta et al. (eds.), *Art, Trade and Culture in the Islamic World and Beyond. From the Fatimids to the Mughals*, London, Gingko Library, 2016, pp. 242-253.

14 Published in Schädler, Thomsen, *Crossing Games*, p. 147, cat. 82.

15 Fernando Collar de Cáceres, ‘El tablero italiano de la *Filosofía cortesana* de Alonso de Barros (1588): la carrera de un hombre de corte’, *Anuario del Departamento de Historia y Teoría del Arte* 21 (2009), pp. 81-104.

prison, 52), two dice (26 and 53), and the figure of death (58). At the centre—corresponding to the goal, reached by passing through the house (63), known as the garden of the goose—is a large hexagonal star in *sadeli*. This star features an intricate pattern of hexagonal stars made from green-dyed bone, set over a field of arabesques. The corner spandrels are similarly decorated with arabesques and half-hexagonal stars in *sadeli*. As seen in early game boards, forty-one spaces are left blank, while the remainder are called *caselle parlanti originarie*.¹⁶ The ‘game of the goose’ seems to have reached Asia quickly, where it was locally produced for affluent merchants, courtly officials, and captains of the *Estado*.

The third flat reversible games board (figs. 6-7 / 1950) is similar to the previous one, yet simpler, less decorated, and more sombre.¹⁷ Its decoration matches that of a games board in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. 62.14), which, until recently, had been identified as a sixteenth-century northern Italian production.¹⁸ The side for chess and draughts is virtually indistinguishable from the Horta-Osório board, both in its arabesque decoration and in the placement and amount of *sadeli*. In contrast, the ‘game of the goose’ side differs only in the central motif, which on the Horta-Osório board has been replaced by a large roundel filled with *sadeli*. The differences are so minor that both boards were undoubtedly made in the same workshop and likely by the same craftsmen. Similar reversible boards featuring the ‘game of the goose’ are rare, with only other known example. In very poor condition and lacking much of its original decoration, this board is in storage at the same New York museum (inv. 53.71.12). It has been misidentified as probably Moroccan and dated to the eighteenth century. The fourth games board (fig. 8-10 / 1899) also made in Thatta, is a games box—a type for which no other example is known to us. Modelled after a prototype similar to the Spanish *taracea* games box mentioned above, it features, when open, a board for chess, draughts, and Hispanic-style backgammon on one side, and on the reverse (the inside of the box), a board for the Italian style of backgammon, with elongated ‘tongues’ alternating ivory and North Indian rosewood (*Dalbergia sissoo*). As with the three other game boards in the collection, it features highly elaborate arabesque borders and raised frames inlaid with eight-petaled rosettes.

Among the most complex types of game boards, those folding into oblong boxes with drawers, only one example made in Thatta is known.¹⁹ Recently published, it belongs to a Portuguese private collection. As with the reversible boards and games box produced in Thatta in the Horta-Osório Collection, it is decorated with arabesque borders, vegetal scrolls, eight-petaled rosettes, and *sadeli* roundels.

16 Franco Milanese, David Lanari, *Il Gioco dell’Oca nei Tempi* (cat.), Mirano, Centrooffset Edizione, 2011.

17 Published in Schädler, Thomsen, *Crossing Games*, p. 146, cat. 81.

18 Wolfram Koeppel (ed.), *Making Marvels. Science and Splendor at the Courts of Europe* (cat.), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019, p. 96, cat. 36.

19 Crespo, *India in Portugal*, pp. 83-86, figs. 46-47, and p. 154, cat. 52.

Next single pages Fond Memories

This board, dating from the 16th century, is one of my very favorite style boards. They are very rare and are practically all in museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore and others, but I managed to acquire four of them, and three depicting the known three versions of the back side (the front side is always for chess)! This board has the pachisi game in the back. I bought it recently through a friend, who had been offered it from a dealer. It is very similar but of larger size to the board held by the ACM in Singapore. / 9001

Fig 2: Frontside view of reversible games board, probably Thatta, of teak, ebony, ivory, and *sadeli*; circa 1580-1620. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9001a

Fig 3: Backside view of reversible games board shown in Fig. 2. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9001b

Next single pages Fond Memories

This board depicts the same chess theme on the front side (like 9001, Figs 2-3), but has the ‘Game of the Geese’ on the back. This one is similar to the boards on the V&A and the Met collections. I bought it from Sylvie Lhermite-King and Pedro Aguiar Branco in 2017. / 1290

Fig 4: Frontside view of reversible games board, probably Thatta, of teak, ebony, ivory, sandalwood, and *sadeli*; circa 1580-1620. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1290a

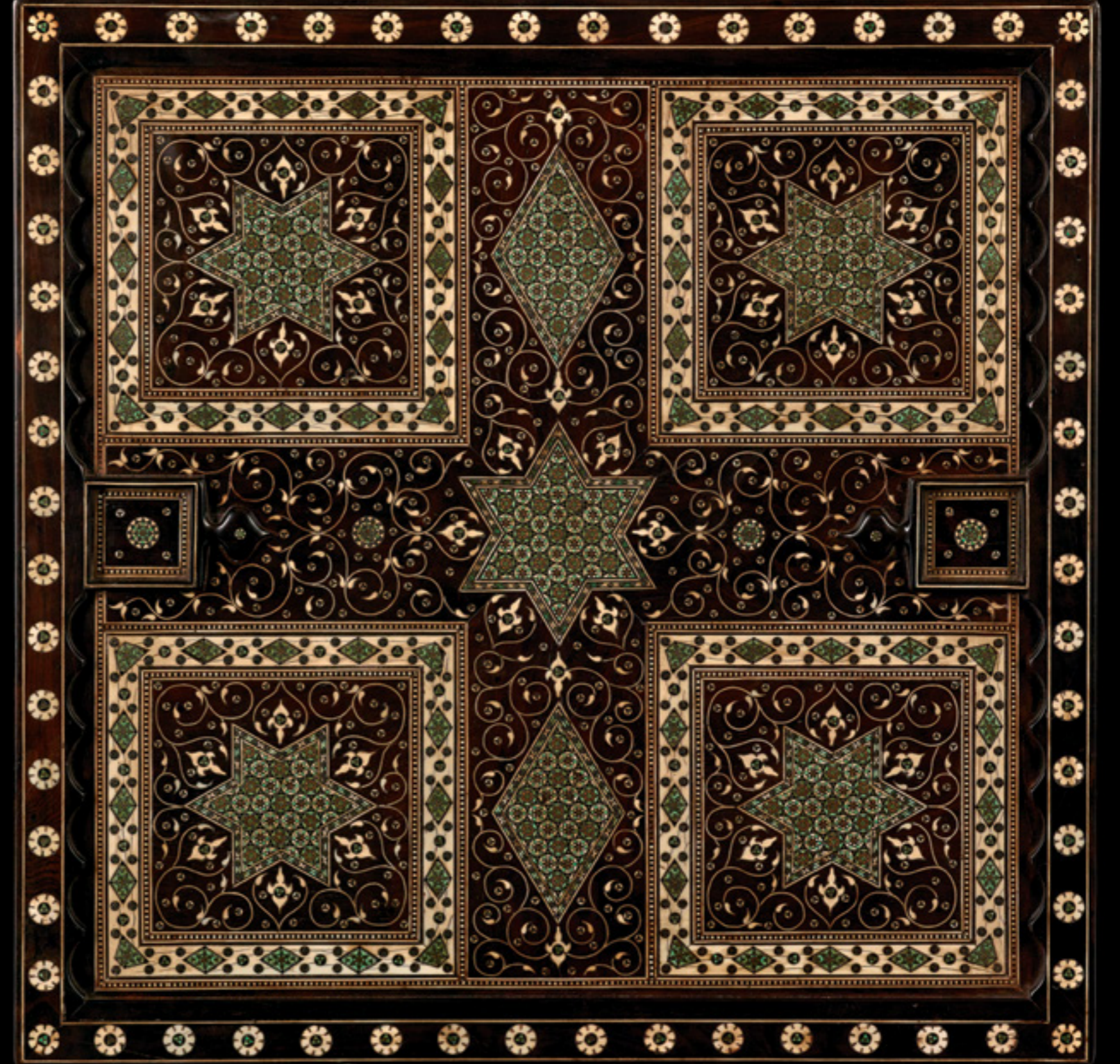
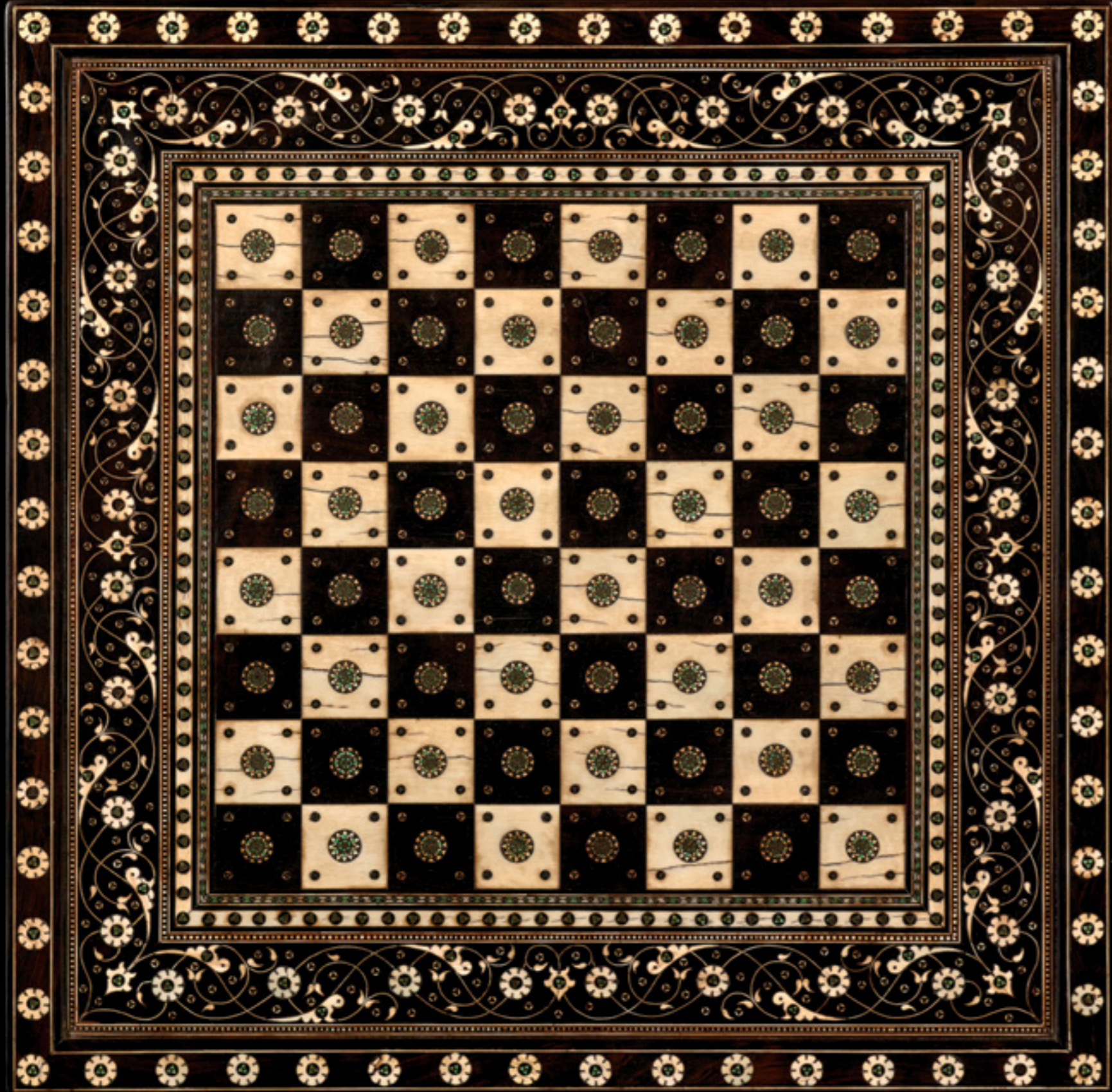
Fig 5: Backside view of reversible games board shown in Fig. 4. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1290b

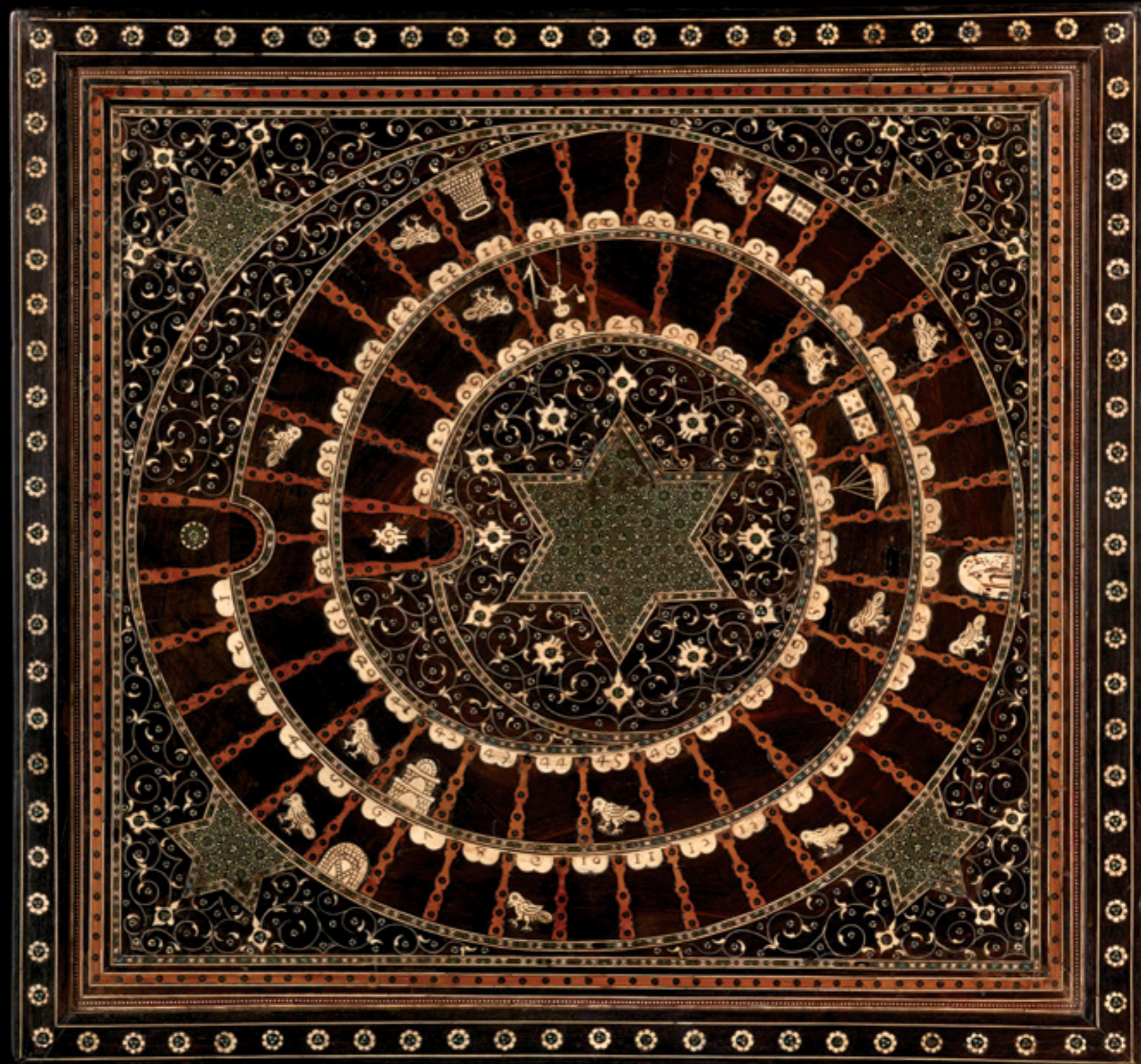
Next single pages Fond Memories

The same as 1290 (Figs. 4-5), but with the Game of the Goose on the back with different motifs. I bought in 2021 it from a Portuguese dealer, Jorge Cruz, who acquired it from a family in the north of Portugal. We like so much these Indo-Portuguese boards, and they intersect with both of our collections, hence we did not resist buying a second one with the same motifs. / 1950

Caption: Fig 6: Frontside view of reversible games board, probably Thatta, of teak, ebony, ivory, sandalwood, and *sadeli*; circa 1580-1620. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1950a

Fig 7: Backside view of reversible games board shown in Fig. 6. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1950b









Gujarat

In his account of travels to India, Pyrard de Laval underscores the importance of Gujarat and its port cities, particularly Khambat and Surat, for the trade with Goa.²⁰ He describes three hundred to four hundred ships arriving in the capital of the Portuguese State of India two or three times a year from these cities. While the most important commodities brought to Goa from Gujarat were silk and cotton textiles, Laval remarks that these goods ‘dress the whole world from the Cape of Good Hope to China, men and women alike, and from head to toe’.²¹ The French traveller also notes the production of daybeds and bedsteads painted in shellac in a variety of colours. More importantly, however, he emphasizes the manufacture of ‘cabinets like those made in Germany inlaid with pieces of mother-of-pearl, ivory, gold, silver and gemstones’, as well as ‘other small cabinets, caskets, and boxes of tortoiseshell, which they polish so clear that nothing can have a prettier effect’.²²

Gujarati mother-of-pearl works can be divided into two groups.²³ The first includes those made entirely of mother-of-pearl plaques (mosaic) or applied over a wooden core. The second comprises wooden objects covered in dark mastic inset with finely cut mother-of-pearl pieces. Game boards in both techniques can be found in private and public collections.²⁴ Both techniques, likely produced in the same centres, utilises highly iridescent material, with shades of pink, green, and blue, cut from the shell of the green turban snail (*Turbo marmoratus*), a marine gastropod once common in the Indian Ocean. Our knowledge of this production relies largely on European travellers’ accounts, such as Pyrard de Laval’s travelogue, as well as on Abu’l-Fazl’s *Ain-i Akbari* or ‘Administration of Akbar’ (1595). In his chronicle of Emperor Akbar’s reign (r. 1556-1605), Abu’l-Fazl ibn Mubarak (1555-1602) identifies Ahmedabad province as a centre for the export of these types of objects, produced in Khambat, Surat, and in the capital city of Ahmedabad.²⁵ This geographical attribution and dating are supported by the *in situ* survival of mastic-inset and mother-of-pearl overlay-decorated domed cenotaph canopies in the tombs of revered Sufi Shaykhs.²⁶

The Horta-Osório Collection includes two Gujarati mother-of-pearl game boards made using the first technique: one reversible and another, seemingly reversible but applied

Before double page Fond Memories

Very rare chess and backgammon board, similar to 1950 (Figs. 6-7), 1290 (Figs. 4-5), and 9001 (Figs. 2-3), but this one has been made for backgammon on the back side. Probably later (17th century), and made in Thane (near Mumbai). I bought it from a Portuguese dealer, Jorge Cruz, in 2020. / 1899

Fig. 8: Indian games box, probably Thatta, of teak, ebony, ivory, sandalwood, *sadeli*, and brass; circa 1580-1620. Photo by Paulo Alexandrino and Masayuki Kondo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1899a

Fig. 9: Inside of Indian games box shown in Fig. 8. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1899b

Fig. 10: Inside of Indian games box shown in Fig. 8. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1899c

20 François Pyrard de Laval, *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval aux Indes orientales (1601-1611)*, ed. Geneviève Bouchon, Xavier de Castro, vol. 2, Paris, Chandeigne, 1998, pp. 746-747.

21 Idem, *ibidem*, pp. 749-750.

22 Idem, *ibidem*, p. 750.

23 Crespo, *India in Portugal*, p. 30 and following; Idem, *Gujarat & Portugal. Mother-of-pearl, Tortoiseshell and Exotic Woods*, Lisbon, São Roque Antiquidades & Galeria de Arte, 2024, p. 10 and following.

24 A reversible games board, combining the first technique (on the side for chess and draughts) with the second technique (on the side for Iberian-style backgammon), is housed in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich (inv. R 1099). See Wilfried Seipel (ed.), *Exotica. Portugals Entdeckungen im Spiegel fürstlicher Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Renaissance* (cat.), Vienna - Milan, Kunsthistorisches Museum - Skira, 2000, pp. 157-160, cat. 66 (catalogue entry by Sigrid Sangl).

25 Abu’l-Fazl Allami, *Ain-i-Akbari*, ed. H. Blochmann, vol. 1, Calcutta, Rouse, 1873, pp. 485-486.

26 See Crespo, *Gujarat & Portugal*, pp. 12-20, figs. 6-12.

as a tabletop in more recent times. As with the flat reversible boards made in Thatta, the Gujarati examples have an inner core made from teak boards. The first games board (figs. 11-12 / 0908) has a chequered side for chess and draughts, while the reverse features crenellated boards on each half for playing Hispanic-style backgammon. The chequered side comprises alternating squares of mother-of-pearl and mottled tortoiseshell, likely sourced from the dorsal scutes of the hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*). Unlike another known example, each playing square consists of four smaller squares. Curiously, all the mother-of-pearl on this side comes not from the shell of the green turban snail (*T. marmoratus*) but from the gold-lipped pearl oyster (*Pinctada maxima*). The use of *P. maxima* on Gujarati objects is common, particularly for the undersides of dishes, whereas *T. marmoratus* is often reserved for more prominent sections. Both materials are sometimes combined, as seen on the backgammon side of the board under discussion, which is mostly decorated with *T. marmoratus*. In addition to the crenellated boards, the backgammon side is fitted with raised reserves, architectural in shape. Its design includes a large lotus-shaped rosette at the centre, surrounded by four smaller rosettes in the corners, connected together by a ribbon-like motif, and set against a scale-pattern ground. The rosettes and the ground are made from highly iridescent *T. marmoratus*, while the borders and ribbon are made from pearl oyster shell. A comparable games board (55.0 x 55.0 x 3.0 cm) in a Portuguese private collection has been published and exhibited on different occasions.²⁷

The second board (fig. 13/ 9016), now repurposed as a tabletop, retains only the side likely intended for backgammon which is entirely made from *T. marmoratus*. Its design, akin to those found on dishes, basins and plates, resembles the previous board. However, the reserves are flat, and the crenellated boards for holding the backgammon checkers are absent. Although this adaptation into a tabletop dates no earlier than the nineteenth century, some Gujarati mother-of-pearl boards are known to have been incorporated into European furniture at an earlier date. One remarkable example, housed in the collection of the Kunstgewerbemuseum at Pilnitz Castle in Dresden (inv. 47716), is a long table (81.0 x 256.0 x 94.0) made of oak veneered with ebony and rosewood, and inlaid with silver and ivory. Possibly executed in Augsburg before 1589, its design incorporates two reversible Gujarati game boards—crafted in teak and overlaid with mother-of-pearl—sawn in half and applied as part of the tabletop.²⁸

Next single pages Fond Memories

This was my first Indo-Portuguese board, in the material I am most fond of; Gujarat mother of pearl. I saw it at the CCI Hamburg exhibition in 2005, with Franz Josef Lang, who told me he knew the owner (Thomas Thomsen), and could check if he might accept to sell it. The answer was positive, and I gladly bought it! Thomas had bought it at an auction in the US in the early 1990s. It dates from the 16th century and was made for chess on one side and for backgammon on the other. There are only a few examples known in the world, almost all in museums. / 0908

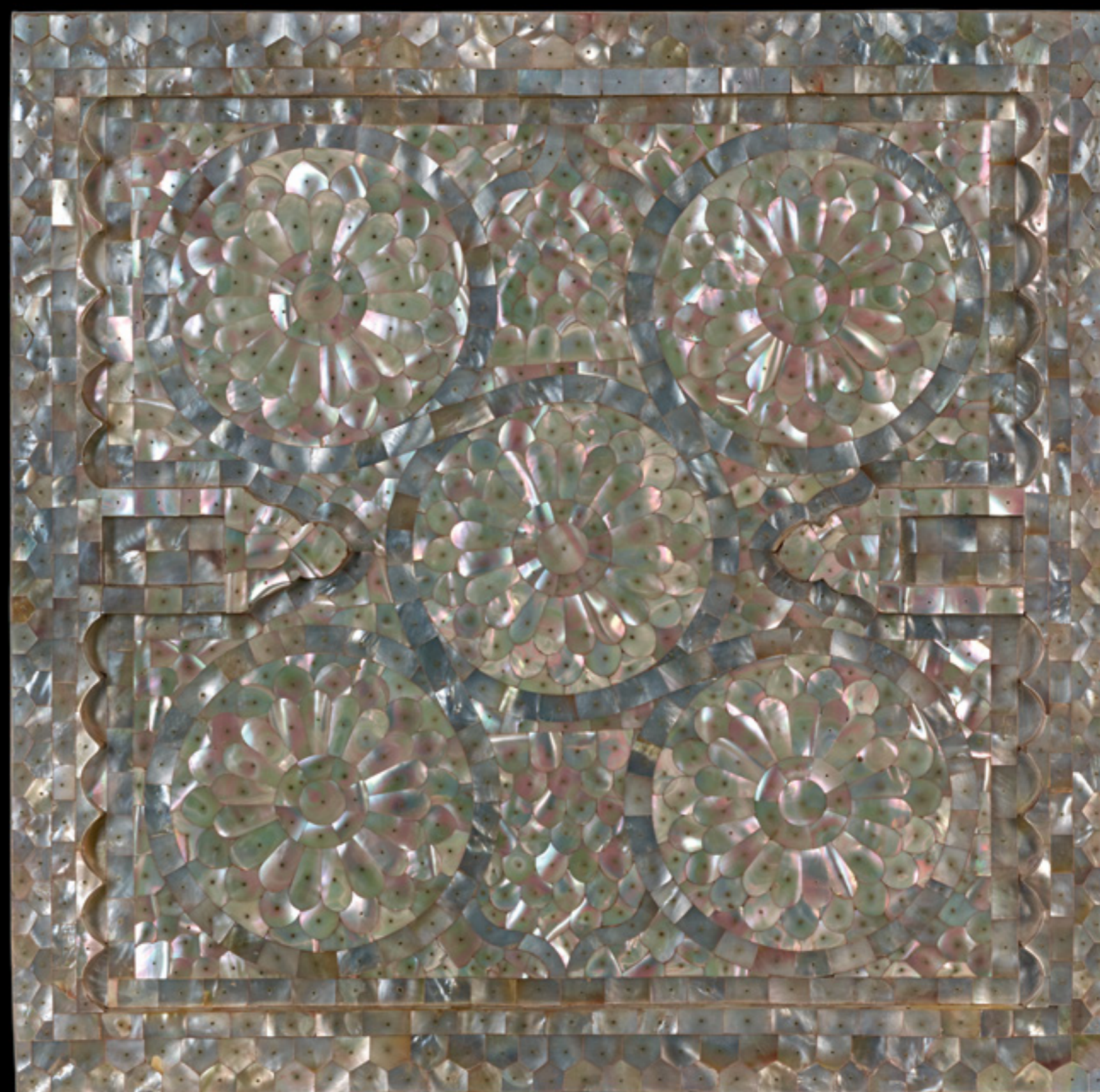
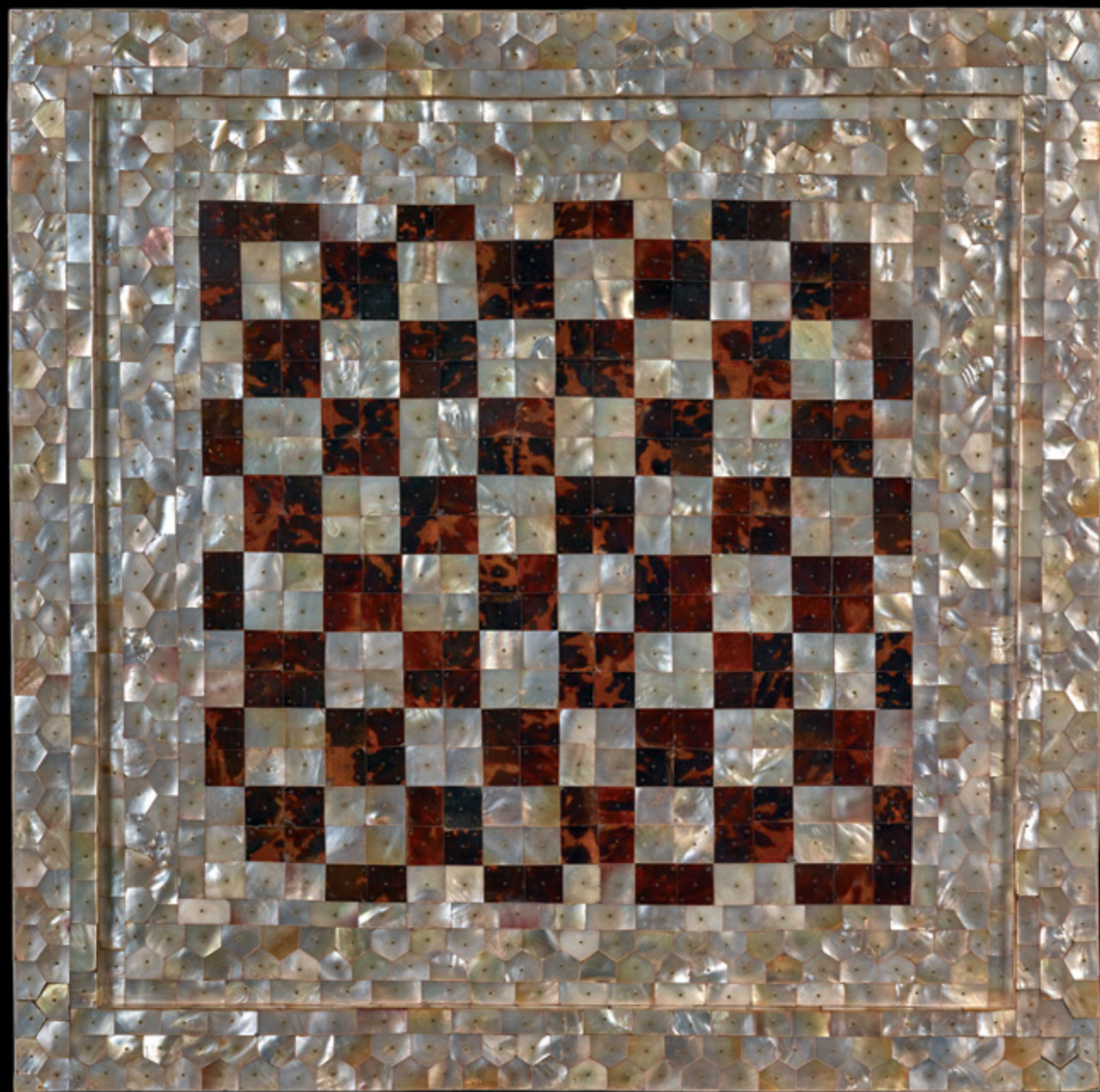
Fig. 11: Reversible games board, Gujarat, of teak, mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, and brass; circa 1560-1600. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0908a

Fig. 12: Backside view of reversible games board shown in Fig. 11. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0908b

Fig. 13: Backside of reversible games board (transformed into a tabletop), Gujarat, of teak, mother-of-pearl, and brass; circa 1560-1600 (later table). Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9016

27 Schädler, Thomsen, *Crossing Games*, p. 180, cat. 105.

28 See Sigrid Sangl, “Indische Perlmutter-Raritäten und ihre europäischen Adaptationen”, *Jarbuch des Kunsthistorischen Museums Wien*, 3 (2001), pp. 262-287, on pp. 283-284, and p. 286, fig. 27.





Thane

Of the several coastal cities where the Portuguese settled in the sixteenth century, and which formed part of the Northern Province of the Portuguese State of India, some already had an established tradition of producing luxury goods for export, particularly textiles.²⁹ Just before the Portuguese settlement in 1534, the once-powerful city of Thane (*Taná* in Portuguese) had lost much of its political and commercial importance to other ports, such as Chaul to the south and, primarily, Surat to the north in Gujarat. By the early seventeenth century, Thane was renowned not only for its fine silk production, particularly precious velvets, but also for the local manufacture of luxury furniture and for the trade in European house furnishings. Writing in 1635, António Bocarro (1594-1642), the official chronicler and *guarda-mor* of the Torre do Tombo in Goa (the Goan archives of the *Estado*), provides a valuable testimony on the production of luxury textiles and furniture in the village. He states that in Thane there were: 'many looms for making pieces of clothing which are called *cortes de gibão*, trimmings and painted linens and silks, all perfectly done, and also excellent writing cabinets, cabinets and centre tables with marquetry in blackwood and ivory, much more resistant than any other places of this State [of India].'³⁰

The veneered furniture produced in Thane is characterised by a teak structure thickly veneered in rosewood or ebony and inlaid with a vibrant combination of ivory, green-dyed bone, and exotic woods, secured with brass pins and glued. The ivory is further incised and highlighted with coloured mastic.³¹ The decoration, predominantly floral and occasionally combined with geometric patterns, is stylised and Persianate, featuring flowering plants and Chinese-derived lotus flowers. There is also a clear Gujarati influence in its figurative scenes and repertoire, including depictions of people and animals. Ottoman influences are also present, notably *saz* leaves and stylised carnations and other flowers, while certain motifs are of European origin, often derived from textiles, such as dragon and human head motifs. Additional elements, which would become abundant in the later production centred in Goa, reflect Hindu themes and symbolic meanings intended to ward off evil. These include *nāgīnī*, *gaṇḍabheruṇḍa*, and *jaṭāyuh*.

The Horta-Osório Collection includes two game boards likely made in Thane, both of which belong to the more complex type that folds into an inner box fitted with drawers. However, the second example was altered in more recent times into a flat

29 On Thane, see Sidh Losa Mendiratta, "Two Towns and a *Vila*, Baçaim, Chaul and Taná: The Defensive Structures of Three Indo-Portuguese Settlements in the Northern Province of the Estado da Índia", in Yogesh Sharma, Pius Malekandathil (eds.), *Medieval Cities in India*, New Delhi, Primus Books, 2014, pp. 805-814.

30 António Bocarro, *O Livro das Plantas de todas as Fortalezas, Cidades e Povoações do Estado da Índia Oriental*, ed. Isabel Cid, vol. 2, Lisbon, Imprensa Nacional - Casa da Moeda, 1992, p. 115.

31 Hugo Miguel Crespo, *Choices*, Lisbon, AR-PAB, 2016, pp. 136-171 (cat. 15); and Idem, *India in Portugal*, pp. 88-105.

Next single pages Fond Memories

A wonderful Indo-Portuguese games box with a chess board, with Mogul influence, from the 16th century, made in Thane (near Mumbai), that I bought at auction in Lisbon in 2019. It also had a figure in the middle (like box 0881, Figs. 19-21) for the "Barato game" but this one has been lost. Another intersection item of both of our collections. / 1819

Fig. 14: Folding games board, probably Thane, of teak, rosewood, ebony, sandalwood, ivory, green-dyed bone, brass, and iron; circa 1540-1600. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1819a

Fig. 15: Overhead view of folding games board shown in Fig. 14. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1819b





board. The first example (figs. 14-17 / 1819), complete and among the most lavishly decorated of this type to have survived, is constructed from teak, veneered with rosewood and ebony, and decorated with inlays of ivory, green-dyed bone, rosewood, and sandalwood (*Santalum album*).³² The top features a chequered pattern for chess and draughts, with alternating square-shaped rosettes and depictions of flying birds, likely doves. The chequered field is framed by a wide border of vegetal and flower scrolls, incorporating star-shaped carnations, human masks at the midpoints, and rampant lions in the corners. On each player's side, there are the customary crenellated borders for holding checkers, designed for Hispanic-type backgammon, along with a raised, arched reserve. Narrow borders of alternating six-petaled rosettes in ivory and sandalwood separate the chequered centre from the wider decorative border. While the drawer front is simply veneered in ebony framed with rosewood, the crenellated falling leaves, which also serve as feet when the board is open, are ornamented with flowering stems bearing the serrated leaves quintessential to the marquetry furniture of Thane. As with the examples made in Chaul discussed below, the board under discussion is fitted with a central trapdoor, triggered by the opening of the drawer below. From it, an ivory figurine would have emerged, signalling the end of the game.

The second board (fig. 18 / 0894), albeit transformed, shares much of its decoration with the first example.³³ The rosettes on the chequered area are circular instead, the medial points of the wide border are set with large, complex multicoloured flowers, and the corners feature crowned double-headed eagles. As with similar motifs found in contemporary furniture made for the Portuguese market in Thane, human masks, lions (*simha*), and double-headed eagles (*gandabherunda*) serve an apotropaic function as protective symbols. Folding game boards such as these two, made in Thane, are extremely rare, with only five or six known examples. The only such board in a public collection belongs to the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem (inv. AE85560).³⁴ Other examples similarly produced in Thane include a games board in a Portuguese private collection.³⁵

³² Published in Schädler, Thomsen, *Crossing Games*, p. 171, cat. 95.

³³ Published in Idem, *ibidem*, p. 171, cat. 96.

³⁴ Pedro Moura Carvalho, *Luxury for Export. Artistic Exchange between India and Portugal around 1600* (cat.), Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2008, pp. 54-55, cat. 12.

³⁵ Kate Lowe, "Foreign descriptions of the Global City: Renaissance Lisbon from the outside", in Annemarie Jordan Gschwend, K.J.P. Lowe (eds.), *The Global City. On the Streets of Renaissance Lisbon*, London, Paul Holberton publishing, 2015, pp. 36-55, on p. 47, fig. 35.

Before page

Fig. 16-17: Folded view of folding games board shown in Fig. 14. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1819c / 1819d



Chaul

One other production centre that seems to be intimately related with Thane is Portuguese-ruled Chaul, which is now in ruins.³⁶ Located 60 km south of Mumbai and a port city of the sultanate of Ahmednagar, its first Portuguese settlement dates to 1516 with the construction of a factory and, in 1521, of a fortress. Soon afterwards, in 1530, its first church is built, that of Nossa Senhora do Mar, followed by the settlement of the Franciscans, and afterwards of the Dominicans (1549), Augustinians (1587), and Jesuits (1580). Lower Chaul, or 'Chaul de baixo' as it was called, which became a town around 1545-1546, was almost destroyed in 1570-1571 by the forces of the Sultan of Ahmednagar, Murtaza Nizam Shah I (r. 1565-1588), and was later rebuilt. It was handed over to the Marathas in 1740.

The city outskirts were settled by a local population of weavers and cabinet makers, alongside *chaudarins* (toddy tappers and collectors of coconuts), who had taken part, alongside the Portuguese, in the defence of the city against Muslim attacks. The population of Upper Chaul, three miles north following the river, whose jurisdiction fell under the rule of the Nizam Shahi, consisted of Hindu merchants and craftsmen, who produced, according to friar João dos Santos, who visited Chaul in 1597, coverlets of every kind, inlaid cabinets, daybeds, and other pieces, turned trinkets, countless small and precious objects (*brincos*) made from ivory, tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl, and bloodstone. João dos Santos concludes by saying that Upper Chaul is like a perpetual fair, where one finds almost all of the pieces, silks, clothes, and trinkets that come from India to Portugal.³⁷ Pyrard de Laval tells us that Chaul produces 'a large number of caskets, boxes, cases, finely made Chinese-style writing cabinets' and also 'daybeds and bedsteads varnished in every colour.'³⁸

A distinctive group of objects based on questions of shape and style which survives in very small numbers in Portuguese private and public collections matches descriptions of the types of furniture made at Chaul according to surviving sources. Somewhat less refined in technique when compared with the marquetry produced at Thane, these objects are characterised by a teak structure veneered in rosewood (sometimes also with ebony) decorated with ivory inlays secured with brass pins. The motifs, of a larger module than those found on the pieces made at Thane, strictly floral (small quatrefoils and large lotus-shaped rosettes) or architectural in nature (niches), are high-

Before page Fond Memories

A beautiful Indo-Portuguese chess board, with the double-headed eagles on the corners, symbol of the Habsburgs. I bought it from Pedro Aguiar Branco in 2004, one of my first Indo-Portuguese boards. / 0894

Fig. 18: Games board, probably Thane, of teak, ebony, rosewood, sandalwood, ivory, green-dyed bone, brass, and iron; circa 1540-1600. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0894

³⁶ On Chaul, see Gritli von Mitterwallner, *Chaul, eine unerforschte Stadt an der Westküste Indiens (Web-, Sakral- und Profanarchitektur)*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1964; Walter Rossa, *Indo-Portuguese Cities*, Lisbon, Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimientos Portugueses, 1997, pp. 55-60; and Artur Teodoro de Matos, "Chaul. Porto Estratégico, «Feira Permanente» e Terra de Artífices", in Mafalda Soares da Cunha (ed.), *Os Espaços de um Império. Estudos*, Lisbon, Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimientos Portugueses, 1999, pp. 161-167.

³⁷ João dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental (Varia Historia de cousas notaveis do Oriente)*, vol. 2, Lisbon, 1891, p. 319.

³⁸ Laval, *Voyage*, p. 758.

lighted by engraving, the lines thus produced covered with coloured mastic (mixture of wax and oils), in green, red and black.

The Horta-Osório Collection holds one games board (figs. 19-21 / 0881) likely made in Chaul.³⁹ It belongs to a similarly decorated group of more complex boards that fold into an inner box fitted with drawers. This group comprises around six known examples.⁴⁰ The best documented among them is the well-known board at the Ajuda Palace in Lisbon (inv. 65971).⁴¹ From the collection of the Portuguese royal house, it adorned the 'Chinese Room', and was disassembled and restored in 2016. It features a rectangular inner box with three compartments: one squared in the centre and two oblong, with one fitted with a locked drawer for storing game pieces. Opening the drawer triggers the appearance of a female figure carved in ivory. This figurine rises from the board floor through a trapdoor in the centre, signalling the end of the game. The back compartment originally functioned as a music box, with the original strings still surviving, once playing when the drawer was opened. The board in the Horta-Osório Collection survives with its original carved ivory figurine, showing traces of polychromy in red and black. As with the board at Ajuda, the decoration of the Horta-Osório Collection example features a border of architectural arches framing the chequered central field. The corners of the border are, however, more elaborate, featuring crowned double-headed eagles (*gandabherunda*). As with the Ajuda example, this board is entirely made from thick boards of North Indian rosewood inlaid with ivory, incised and highlighted in crimson and green. The inner box is made from teak.

Belonging to the same group, there is another board in a private collection in Lisbon, featuring East-Asian style gilt copper fittings with floral decoration over a fish-roe ground, along with game pieces, dice, and cups. Another board was sold at auction in Lisbon in 1998. One other, also in a private collection in Lisbon, is similarly fitted with Chinese or Japanese-style gilt copper fittings with identical decoration, lacking any architectural motifs but with ebony inlays in addition to those of rosewood. A newly published example, recently acquired by the Asian Civilisations Museum, features strictly floral decoration.⁴²

Next pages

Fond Memories

This Indo-Portuguese games box was used for chess, checkers, and the «Barato» game. It has double-headed eagles in the corners. I bought it from a dealer, Jorge Welsh, who had bought it from a Portuguese collector friend of ours, Arq. Jose Lico, in 2004. These games boxes are very rare and date from the 17th century. It is interesting that I bought it while thinking about our Indo-Portuguese collection and not our chess collection. Like the previous mother of pearl board (908), they intersect both of our collections. / 0881

Fig. 19: Folding games board, probably Chaul, of ebonized teak, rosewood, ivory, brass, and iron, with gilt copper fittings and female ivory figure; circa 1560-1620. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0881a

Fig. 20: Overhead view of folding games board shown in Fig. 19. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0881b

Fig. 21: Folded view of folding games board shown in Fig. 19. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0881c

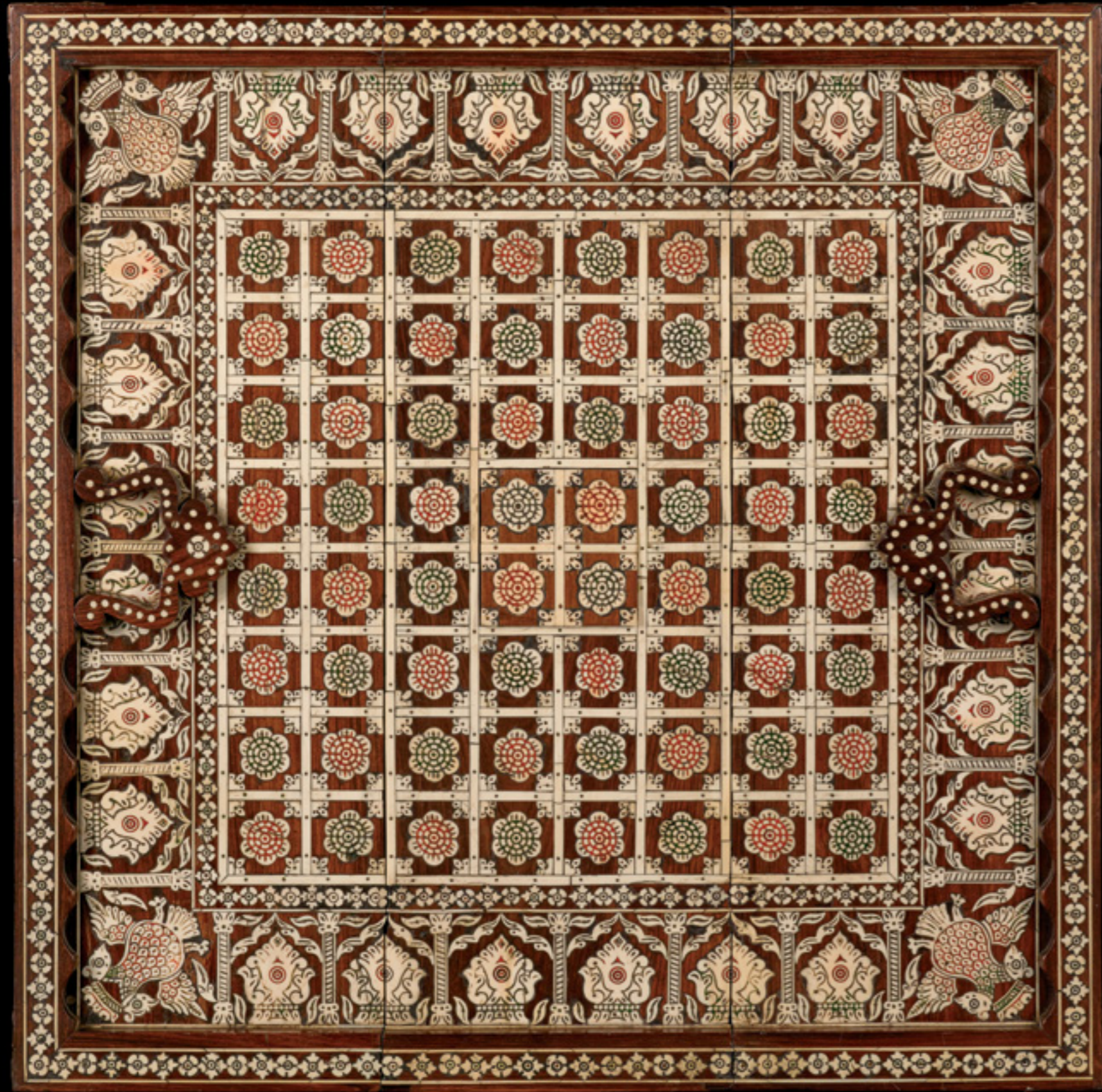
³⁹ Published in Schädler, Thomsen, *Crossing Games*, p. 170, cat. 94.

⁴⁰ Crespo, *India in Portugal*, pp. 108, and 110; and Idem.,

⁴¹ Published in Jordan Gschwend, Lowe (eds.), *The Global City*, pp. 220-221, and p. 345, cat. 248 (catalogue entry by Hugo Miguel Crespo).

⁴² Hugo Miguel Crespo, *From the Northern Province. Marquetries and 'Lacquerware' from Portuguese India*, Lisbon, São Roque Antiquidades & Galeria de Arte, 2024, pp. 60-65, cat. 5.





Visakhapatnam

A port situated on the east coast of India, in present-day Andhra Pradesh, Visakhapatnam (known as *Visagapatão* in Portuguese sources) possessed a fine harbour and a textile-producing hinterland, both of which attracted European settlement and created a demand for western-style furniture. The precious hardwoods required for fine cabinetmaking were readily available from nearby forests. A natural harbour between Calcutta and Madras (present-day Chennai), frequented by European vessels linking West and Far East, as well as by locals trading along the coast, Visakhapatnam specialised in easily transportable furniture and other smaller decorative objects, such as game boards, mostly emulating European prototypes. The first references to the industry date to the 1750s, when Major John Corneille wrote that Visakhapatnam's 'chintz is esteemed the best in India for the brightness of its colours', and that 'The place is likewise remarkable for its inlay work, and justly so, for they do it to the greatest perfection'.⁴³ Known for its fine ivory-inlay work, the furniture made in Visakhapatnam for export to European markets is characterised by its distinctive incised motifs ornamenting the ivory, typically filled with melted lac (shellac), an insect secretion mixed with black pigment.⁴⁴

The Horta-Osório Collection includes four remarkable game boards made in Visakhapatnam. One belongs to the flat folding type, while the other three fold into a box (games box). The first board (figs. 22-23 / 0858) is made from teak and veneered in ebony and ivory. One side features a chequered pattern for playing chess and draughts, while the reverse is prepared for Italian-style backgammon, with long 'tongues' alternating between ebony and ivory. The decoration is concentrated primarily on the ivory frame, which is finely engraved with vegetal scrolls, flowers, and large serrated leaves. Similar motifs can be found on a miniature bureau-cabinet in the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. IS.4:1,2-2008) and on a 'burgomaster' chair in the same museum (inv. IS.25-1970), both likely produced in the 1760s—roughly the date of the flat folding games board.⁴⁵

The two more elaborate game boxes are very similar in decoration but differ significantly in their materials. One (figs. 24-26 / 0891) is constructed from thick boards of East Indian rosewood dovetailed together and inlaid with ivory and sandalwood.

The other (figs. 27-28 / 1838) is made from sandalwood and inlaid with ivory and ebony. When opened, the interior sides of both boards reveal their Italian-style backgammon patterns, with alternating long 'tongues'. The central bands are adorned with lotus-flower rosettes, while the thickness of the boxes, veneered in ivory, features friezes of

⁴³ Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon*, p. 172.

⁴⁴ For this production, see Idem, *ibidem*, pp.172-176.

⁴⁵ For the 'burgomaster' chair, see Idem, *ibidem*, pp. 195-197, cat. 44; and Lucy Wood, *The Upholstered Furniture in the Lady Lever Art Gallery*, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 670, cat. 62, fig. 419.

vegetal scrolls. On the exterior, the chequered patterns of both boards—alternating ivory squares with the rosewood ground on the first board, and ivory squares alternating with ebony on the second—are framed by an intricate border of floral sprays, including large tulips, palmette-shaped flowers, and serrated leaves. These floral motifs, some derived from European depictions of flowers in contemporary scientific books, are ubiquitous in printed textiles (*chintz*) produced on the Coromandel Coast in the 1720s and 1730s.⁴⁶ Highlighted in black, the border decoration, with its large-scale floral motifs, resembles that of a toilet glass—a small cabinet with a mounted mirror for a dressing table—in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. 49-1905).⁴⁷ Based on its type and profuse floral decoration, this toilet glass (86.5 x 53.0 x 27.5 cm) has been dated to around 1730-1740. A cabinet and stand in the same museum (inv. IS.289&A-1951) also features matching floral decoration, including similarly rendered tulips and serrated leaves.⁴⁸ Given its form, emulating English cabinets made around 1725-1750, and its decoration typical of the 1750s as practised in Visakhapatnam, the cabinet has been dated to circa 1765. Based on these two larger pieces of furniture, it is likely that the two game boxes under discussion were made in the 1750s.

More austere in its decoration, the third games box (figs. 29-30 / 0493) is similarly configured for chess and draughts on the exterior and Italian-style backgammon on the interior.⁴⁹ Constructed from sandalwood, it is veneered in ivory and inlaid with ivory and ebony. The incised decoration on the ivory veneers, more subtle and restrained, consists of floral sprays that can be dated to the last decades of the eighteenth century. Its Neoclassical style resembles that of a toilet glass produced in Visakhapatnam around 1790-1800, now in the same London museum (inv. IS.31-1975).⁵⁰ Also constructed from sandalwood, the toilet glass is entirely covered with ivory veneer and decorated with simple garlands and vases. Despite the board's apparent simplicity, the most remarkable aspect of its decoration is the Cyrillic inscriptions: a monogram and numerals on the exterior, and roundels with longer inscriptions on the interior. These identify its original owner as Catherine the Great (r. 1762-1796), Empress of Russia. While the numerals read as '1711', the longer text, divided across the roundels, translates in modern Russian as *Yekaterina Imperatritsa Vserossiyskaya* ('Catherine, Empress of All Russia'). A palaeographic analysis of the inscription points not only to a text reflecting the orthography in use before the Russian spelling reforms of 1918 but also to errors likely introduced by the Indian craftsman copying the provided written model onto the incised ivory. The date '1711' also appears erroneous, as there was no 'Catherine, Empress of All Russia' at that time; the country was ruled by Peter I (r. 1682-1721),

⁴⁶ See Rosemary Crill, *Chintz. Indian textiles for the West*, London, V&A Publishing, 2008.

⁴⁷ Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon*, pp. 187-188, cat. 38.

⁴⁸ Idem, *ibidem*, pp. 191-193, cat. 42.

⁴⁹ Published in Schädler, Thomsen, *Crossing Games*, p. 210, cat. 130.

⁵⁰ Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon*, pp. 207-208, cat. 51.

Next pages

Fig. 22: Flat folding games board from combination set-board-boxes (reviewed in Chapter 6), Visakhapatnam, of sandalwood, ivory, ebony, and metal; circa 1760-1770. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0858b

Fig. 23: Flat folding games board from combination set-board-boxes as seen in Fig. 22 (and reviewed in Chapter 6). Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0858c

Fig. 24: Games box, Visakhapatnam, of rosewood, ivory, sandalwood, and metal; circa 1750-1760. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0891a

Fig. 25: Folded view of games box shown in Fig. 24. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0891b

Fig. 26: Inside view of games box shown in Fig. 24. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0891c







while his wife, Catherine I (1684-1727), became empress only later, ruling from 1725 to 1727. Given the board's style and Catherine the Great's reign (1762-1796), it is plausible that the intended date was '1771' or perhaps '1777'.

The Victoria and Albert Museum, renowned for its extensive collection of objects made in Visakhapatnam, includes three folding game boards: one flat example (inv. 02289(IS)), likely dating to the late eighteenth century, and two mid-nineteenth-century game boxes (invs. 9784(IS) and 02288(IS)) designed in the shape of two stacked books.⁵¹

Coromandel Coast

The Horta-Osório Collection includes a games board (figs. 31-32 / 0902) that folds into a box made of finely carved ebony. The exterior side is configured for chess and draughts, with a chequered pattern alternating ebony and ivory squares, framed by a narrow rippled or waveform moulding in ivory. Known as *moulures ondées* in French and *Flammleisten* in German—translated as 'wavy' and 'flame mouldings' respectively—these rippled mouldings have been used in European furniture and picture frames since the early seventeenth century. The interior side is designed for Italian-style backgammon, featuring long 'tongues' alternating between ivory and ebony, with the contours of the ebony 'tongues' accentuated by ivory filets. For added protection, the games box is fitted with finely chased metal corner braces and a plain heart-shaped lock plate. The highly refined carved decoration consists of floral sprays with large-scale stylised flowers. These flowers, identical to those seen on ivory-inlaid objects from Visakhapatnam—including two game boxes in the Horta-Osório Collection discussed above—are quintessential to this production and derive from contemporary painted textiles (*chintz*) made along the Coromandel Coast. Similar flower motifs appear on a chair in the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. 413-1882), formerly housed at Hamilton Palace, the seat of the Dukes of Hamilton in South Lanarkshire, Scotland.⁵² This chair, attributed to the Coromandel Coast, has been dated to around 1680-1700. This is also the likely date of the carved ebony games box.

It is difficult to determine with certainty where this games box was made, as carved ebony furniture was produced in large quantities during the second half of the seventeenth century across India (particularly the Coromandel Coast), Sri Lanka, and the Dutch East Indies (notably Batavia, present-day Jakarta).⁵³ This production is characterised by the use of solid ebony—primarily for turned, carved, or openwork elements in chairs, settees, cradles, and beds—and ebony plaques carved in various types of relief and styles, often combined with twist-turned elements common in contemporary European furniture. The Coromandel Coast was undoubtedly one of the most significant centres for the production of carved

51 Idem, *ibidem*, p. 209, cat. 53, and p. 212, cat. 57.

52 Idem, *ibidem*, pp. 141-142, cat. 4.

53 Idem, *ibidem*, pp. 130-135.



Before pages

Fig. 27: Games box, Visakhapatnam, of sandalwood, ivory, ebony, and metal; circa 1750-1770. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1838a

Fig. 28: Inside view of games box shown in Fig. 27. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1838b

Next single pages

Fond Memories

This intriguing board, which I bought in 2006 at a CCI organised auction for a high price, has the particularity of having the monogram of Catherine I of Russia, and the date 1711. An unverified and speculative explanation for the monogram «KMP(R)» and the historic date 1711 could be the following possibility: Katharina Marcias Regia was secretly married with Czar Peter I since 1707. On the 17 March 1711 he declared this marriage in public. But on the other hand we are nearly sure that this board was produced in India in the early 19th century in the region of Visakhapatnam, Gulf of Bengal, so the mystery remains; could the board be 100 years earlier? / 0493

Fig. 29: Games box, Visakhapatnam, of sandalwood, ivory, ebony, and metal, 1711. Photo by Paulo Alexandrino and Masayuki Kondo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0493a

Fig. 30: Inside view of games box shown in Fig. 29. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0493b

Next single pages

Fond Memories

A beautiful 17th century Ceylonese games box, including chess, backgammon inside and the "Nine Men's Morris" on the back. I bought it at a Sotheby's auction in 2005. / 0902

Fig. 31: Games box, Coromandel Coast, of exotic wood, ebony, ivory, and metal fittings; circa 1680-1700. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0902a

Fig. 32: Inside view of games box shown in Fig. 31. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0902b





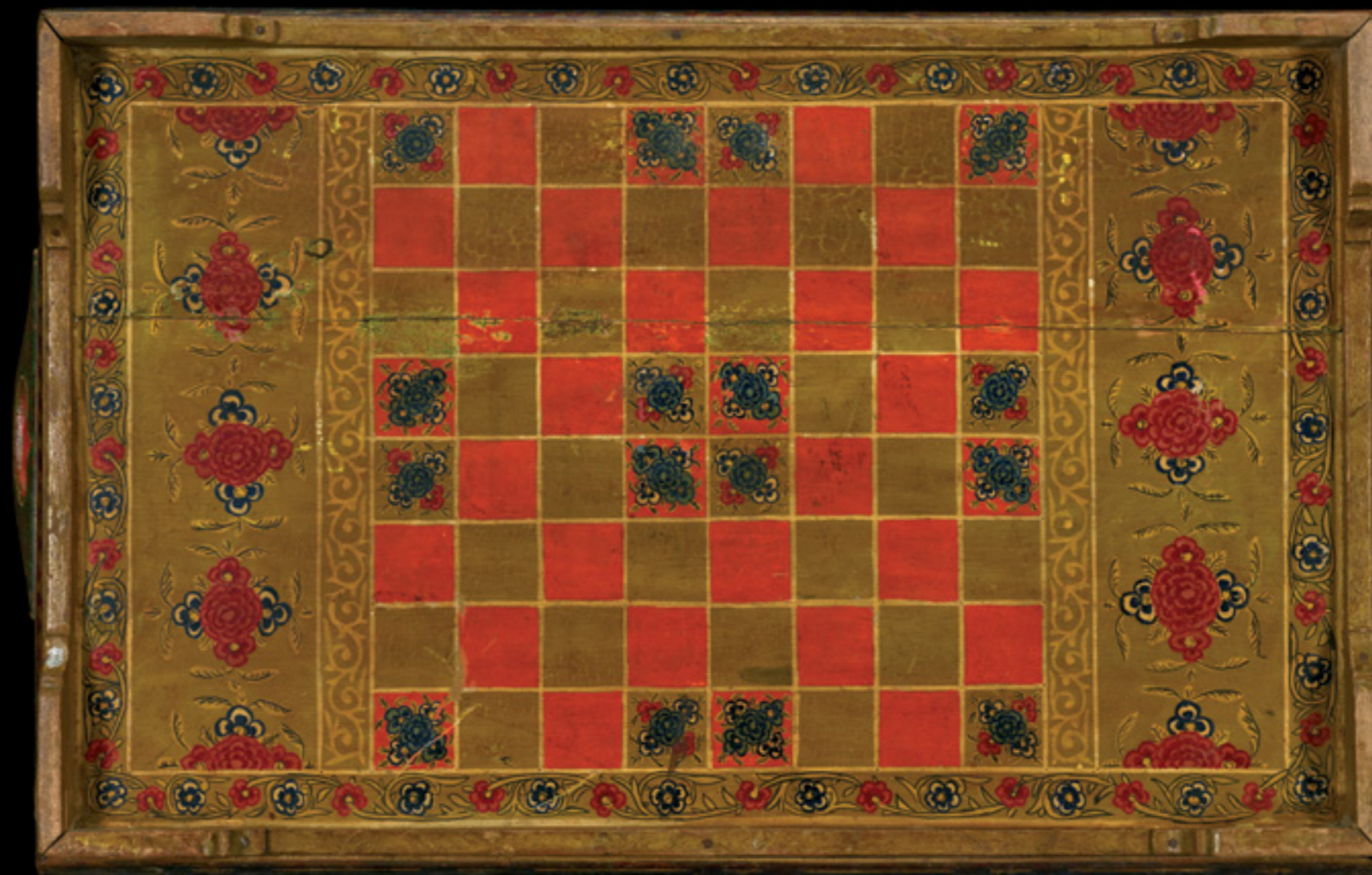
ebony furniture, though it faced competition from pieces made in Batavia and, to a lesser extent, Sri Lanka.⁵⁴ Made from similar materials and exhibiting comparable craftsmanship, these pieces are differentiated primarily by their decorative repertoires. In the absence of any motifs indicative of a Ceylonese origin, it is likely that this games box was produced in India, possibly by Tamil woodcarvers.

Later Indian Chessboards

Alongside rarer—some even unique—examples of chessboards made in India during the Age of Discovery, the Horta-Osório Collection also includes later boards produced for export to European markets. As with earlier examples, these encompass flat one-sided boards, flat reversible boards, and mostly games boxes—i.e., thicker folding boards forming an inner compartment for storing game pieces.

The most unusual of these later game boards (figs. 33-33a / 0874) is shaped as a rectangular tray with pierced, raised handles on each side, set on a raised socle with feet at each corner. The top surface is designed for playing backgammon, while the underside depicts a square board for chess and draughts. This wooden board, with its pierced openwork raised border, is Islamic in style and profusely decorated with lobed cartouches and borders, some filled with flowers while others with more stylised floral motifs. The vibrant shellac-painted and gilt decoration, Persianate in style, is typical of nineteenth-century export wares made in Kashmir. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London holds a small group of similarly decorated Kashmiri objects, made primarily from carefully pressed and smoothed layers of *papier mâché*, varnished and painted in bright colours. A decagonal box made c. 1850 in Srinagar, Kashmir, perfectly exemplifies this style. Made of painted and varnished *papier mâché* and decorated with horizontal floral bands, it was gifted by Queen Victoria (r. 1837-1901) to the then South Kensington Museum (inv. 3-1852). Larger Kashmiri export pieces, such as a Tibetan-inspired table now in the same museum (inv. 1604-1871), attest to the diverse type of wares made there.⁵⁵ As with the varnished chessboard, both the box and the table date to the second half of the nineteenth century. More elaborate in its painted and varnished decoration, and of the games box type, another board (3.5 x 47.3 x 47.3 cm), also likely made in Kashmir is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. 48.174.87).

The other eight chessboards under discussion may be grouped according to their manufacturing centre and decorative repertoire. The first group includes boards made in Visakhapatnam, on India's eastern coast in present-day Andhra Pradesh.⁵⁶ Of the two



Next page
Fig. 33: Games board, Kashmir, of painted, gilt and varnished wood; circa 1850-1900. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0874a

⁵⁴ See Jeanne Terwen-de Loos, *Het Nederlands koloniale meubel. Studie over meubels in de voormalige Nederlandse koloniën Indonesië en Sri Lanka*, Uitgever, Franeker, 1985; Jan Veenendaal, *Furniture from Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India during the Dutch Period*, Delft, Volkerkundig Museum Nusantara, 1985; and Idem, *Asian Art and Dutch Taste*, Zwolle - The Hague, Gemeentemuseum, 2014.

⁵⁵ See Amin Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon. A Catalogue of the Collections in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Peabody Essex Museum*, London, V&A Publications, 2001, pp. 297-298, cat. 117.

⁵⁶ On this production, see the section in this chapter on the earlier Indian chessboards made for export to Europe.



boards from this centre, the earlier (fig. 34 / 0857) is a folding board veneered in sandalwood (underside), ebony, and ivory, featuring a broad border of foliage framing the chequered pattern for chess and draughts. The second of the flat folding type and dated c. 1855–1875, is made of teak veneered in ebony and ivory (fig. 35 / 0835). As with other later Visakhapatnam objects made for export, its decoration comprises ivory-veneered figurative borders—featuring animals and buildings—etched and highlighted with black lac. A second group is defined by the use of *sadeli*, the micro-mosaic inlay technique known as in Persian *khatam*, from which it was introduced into India.⁵⁷ The most spectacular example is a games box (figs. 36–36a / 0860) entirely covered in intricate micro-mosaic patterns. The exterior bears a chequered pattern for chess and draughts, while the interior is designed for playing backgammon, with cypress tree-shaped ‘tongues’ and a central frieze of polylobate motifs. The design, variation, and technical refinement of the micro-mosaic patterns suggest an Iranian origin, dating to the mid-Qajar period (1789–1925).

Another games box (fig. 37 / 1920), similarly decorated and likely from mid-nineteenth-century Qajar Iran, also belongs to this group. Comparable in materials and decoration, there is a similar games box (5.1 x 47.6 x 47.6 cm), likewise for chess and backgammon, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. 48.174.86). As with the Kashmiri board in the same museum mentioned above, this Iranian board belonged to the collection of Gustavus Adolphus Pfeiffer (1872–1953), an American businessman and philanthropist who collected chessmen and chess-related objects.⁵⁸

A third group is characterised by high-relief carving. One games box (fig. 38 / 9013) combines carved ebony elements with *sadeli* decoration. The carvings include floral friezes on the board’s sides, a broad border framing the central chess and draughts pattern, and alternating squares with animals and architectural motifs. *Sadeli* is used more sparingly, forming a narrow border. Similar chessboards—combining micro-mosaic with carved sandalwood panels—were typically made in Surat, one of Gujarat’s most important port cities. A fine example is a games box (7.5 x 46.0 x 23.0 cm, closed) made c. 1867 and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. 02263(IS)).⁵⁹ Unlike the Horta-Osório board, the carved sandalwood panels of the London example are flatter and more schematic, featuring only floral borders. Another board of the games box type (fig. 39 / 0866) also features high-relief carving but no *sadeli*. Likely made of carefully stained teak, the carving includes raised borders around the central chequered field, and ‘black’ squares, which alternate with ‘white’ ivory ones. An identical games box (4.4 x 44.5 x 44.5 cm), combining carved sandal-

Before page

Fig. 33a: Backside view of games board shown in Fig. 33. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0874b

Next single pages

Fig. 34: Flat folding games board, Visakhapatnam, of teak, ivory, and ebony, with metal fittings; circa 1780–1800. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0857

Fig. 35: Flat folding games board, Visakhapatnam, of sandalwood, ivory, and ebony, with metal fittings; circa 1855–1875. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0835

Next single pages

Fond Memories

This is a 19th century Persian board, which are quite rare. I bought it at Christie’s in 2010. / 0860

Fig. 36: Games box, Iran, of wood, rosewood, ebony, Ivory, and *sadeli*, with metal fitting; circa 1850–1900. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0860a

Fig. 36a: Inside view of games box shown in Fig. 36. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0860b

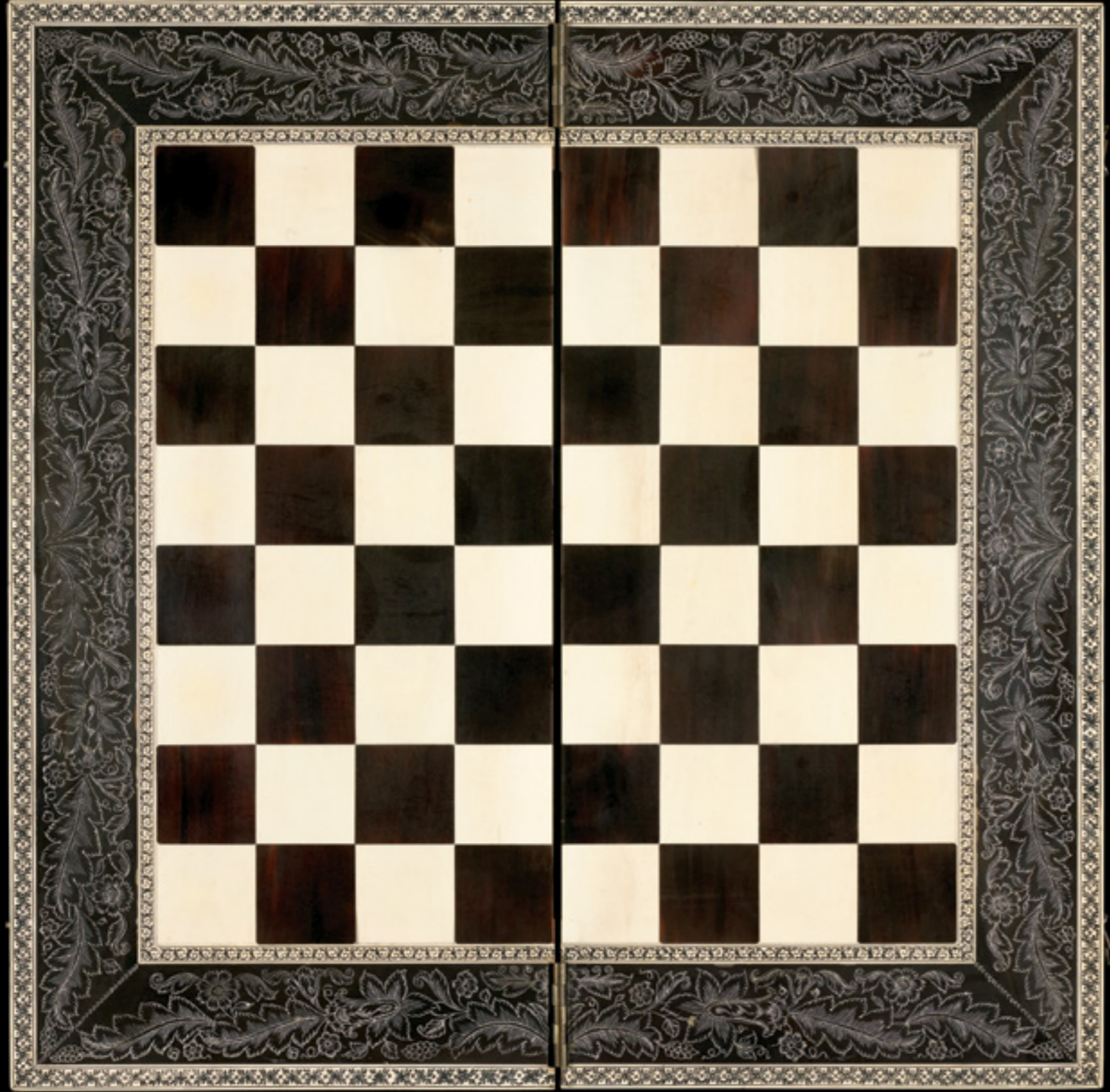
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Fig. 37: Games box, Iran, of wood, rosewood, ivory, and *sadeli*, with metal fittings; circa 1850–1900. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1920

⁵⁷ See the other section in this chapter.

⁵⁸ For this collection, albeit not including any of the two mentioned chess boards, see Jessie McNab Dennis, Charles K. Wilkinson (eds.), *Chess. East and west, past and present. A selection from the Gustavus A. Pfeiffer Collection* (cat.), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1968.

⁵⁹ Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon*, p. 332, cat. 139.







wood—decorated with floral motifs and images of deities in niches—with *sadeli*, belongs to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. 48.174.128) and likewise derives from the Pfeiffer collection.

The final two boards in the group are more difficult to ascribe to specific centres. One (fig. 40 / 0846), a flat reversible board with playing fields for chess and draughts on both sides, is made of wood—possibly teak—veneered in rosewood and ivory, and inlaid in ivory with stylised floral motifs. Likely produced in northern India, its ivory ‘white’ squares feature painted decoration in vivid pigments mixed with shellac, though some of this is poorly preserved. The last board (fig. 41 / 0890), also flat, is veneered in tortoiseshell from the hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), without any additional decoration. Framed in thin ebony veneer on the thickness of the board, the chequered pattern the chequered pattern alternates green-coloured tortoiseshell squares with clear ones made from ventral scutes. Green-stained tortoiseshell—likely coloured with a copper-based agent—is rare. One example is a Georgian tea caddy made in England c. 1780-1800, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. W.53-1919). While the tortoiseshell almost certainly originated in Indian waters, the refined character of this chessboard suggests it was likely made in Georgian England, around 1790.

Alongside the game sets discussed elsewhere in this volume—including rare chessmen carved from ivory during the early modern period and earlier—the breadth, variety, artistic merit, and historical significance of the game boards examined in this essay underscore the importance of the Horta-Osório Collection. Through comparative analysis with boards and materials in museums and private collections beyond the Horta-Osório Collection, new insights have been gained into the geographical and chronological contexts of their production.

**Next page
Fond Memories**

This is my highest quality wood and ivory 19th century Visakhapatnam board, which I bought recently at an auction in Lisbon. / 9013

Fig. 38: Games box, Gujarat, probably Surat, of teak, ebony, ivory, and *sadeli*, with metal fittings; circa 1860-1880. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9013

**Next single page
Fond Memories**

This was my first Indian board, with highly elaborated wood work depicting figures and animals on the sides. I bought it in Portobello road in 1992, together with my first Indian set, a green and white Visakhapatnam set with figures on top of the rooks. I bought several of these boards over the years, which go very well together with my Indian sets. / 0866

Fig. 39: Games box, Gujarat, probably Surat, of teak(?) and ivory with metal fittings; circa 1860-1880. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0866

**Next single page
Fond Memories**

This is an Indian ivory board, dating from the 17th century, that I bought at Bloomsbury in 2009. It is double-sided, one in greenish tones and the other in reddish tones, and was made for the domestic market, probably Mysore. There is a similar one at the V&A. / 0846

Fig. 40: Flat reversible games board, Northern India, of teak, rosewood, ivory, and traces of polychrome and gold; circa 1680-1700. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0846

Next single page

Fig. 41: Flat games board, Western India or probably England, of wood, ebony, and tortoiseshell; circa 1790. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0890

