

Introduction

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If the Internet did not exist, then neither would this booklet. We, Jean-Louis Cazaux of Toulouse, Gerhard Josten of Cologne, and Myron Samsin of Ottawa first learned through this modern medium that we are all concerned with discovering how the game of chess may have come to be—and that we arrived at this question from similar premisses though approaching it in different ways. The catalyst was then added by Egbert Meissenburg, the Nestor and chronicler of the chess history research group *Initiativgruppe Königstein*, who suggested that we join our previously separate paths and ideas, and bring them between two covers. We have gladly fulfilled his suggestion by bringing forth this volume, in which we also ground our ideas in the work of the authors who have cleared the way for us.

Until recently, the study of chess history has rested upon two pillars of evidence: ancient texts and archaeological finds. Both these sources have reached the limits of what they can tell us, leaving the question of the game's origin still open today, as it has been from the very beginning of serious inquiry in Thomas Hyde's *De Ludibus Orientalibus* of 1694. These disciplines still cannot conclusively answer Egbert Meissenburg's concrete questions as to the Who, the Where, the When, the How, and the Why of its origin.

Joachim Petzold recognized that literary texts can serve as guideposts, but at the same time warned that textual references to chess tell us with certainty only that chess was known at the date of writing. A further measure of uncertainty is added by the fact that the date of a text's writing is often unclear. In addition, cults of personality and national pride play a large role in such literature, while questions about the concrete process and causes of chess origins fall back into obscurity once we disregard the well-known legends that have grown around the game.

Archaeological finds also carry considerable risk as to their proper interpretation, since they can never be unambiguously identified as chess discoveries. Which criteria should guide our judgement? Here we have no standard generally accepted as valid. An ancient collection of figurines is often assumed to be a set of chessmen before this claim can be justified. A recent example is provided by the well-known figurines from the Harappa culture in India, which S.V. Rao hastily planted on a chessboard but in fact show no signs of being chesspieces at all.

Even so, today we know more than did Jacobus de Cessolis at the end of the thirteenth century, when he answered all the critical questions in his own particular manner—attributing the invention of chess to the Babylonians, naming the presumed inventor as well, the date of invention, and even giving three purposes for its invention: to serve as a moral lesson for a king, a way to prevent boredom, and a challenge to the spirit.

But despite this progress, we are still confronted with these problems:

- literary texts are opaque, ambiguous and less than trustworthy sources;
- archaeological discoveries do not give us any noteworthy contributions to the solution of the given questions. They are, and have only ever been valid as support for literature.

The art historian Hans Holländer has analyzed this deficiency, and the problem in general, in his 1994 paper “Thesen zur Früh- und Vorgeschichte des Schachspiels.” In it, he laments the “continuing conflation of representation and game structure” by chess historians, and gives priority to game structure. Structure is an independent factor which has survived relatively unchanged for centuries, and thereby is a natural source of evidence. Chess, Holländer argues, is not by nature a representation of a real army (as it has usually been characterized), but instead embodies nothing more than an especially multifaceted type of game structure, which is able to support a great variety of interpretations. He came via these considerations to the conclusion that chess may have emerged from a synthesis of strategic games and hunt-games. We have therefore begun our collection with Holländer’s article in full, as well as its English summary.

Chess certainly came to be interpreted as a battle game, and its pieces as individual warriors. This mythology has been attached to its structure since the very first written legends, and possibly earlier still. Faced with this situation, and having no certain evidence, we might well consider it rather like the hen and the egg. Which came first? Holländer chose the egg, as it were, where most others have assumed it to be the hen. Might he then be wrong? But the assumption made by others does not convince us at all. What kind of reality is represented by games like Merels, Mancala, Liubo or Nard? We do not wish to deny any possible loans from reality towards the structure of the game. However, our point of view is that the game constitutes a world of its own—be it a cosmos in miniature, an interplay of logical shape and form, or a sheer flight of fancy. These were the motivations that led the creators to use cups for Mancala, “ropes and hooks” for Liubo and the *ashtapada* board for Chaturanga. Therefore, these are the paths we must retrace in order to arrive at the wellspring of chess.

In this context, Egbert Meissenburg has pointed out to us that one longstanding goal in the discussion of chess origins has been to avoid basing conclusions *solely* on literary, etymological or archaeological facts, no matter how important they may be. Such a point of view was clearly taken in 1913 by Johannes Kohtz in his exchange with Murray, where he wrote:

What separates me from him [i.e. Murray] are the completely opposite approaches that we take towards ancient games. Mr Murray possesses an enormous command of the literature. The chess library of John G. White in Cleveland—the richest there ever was—has been available to him for many years. It is conceivable that this command, in which he is far ahead of anyone else, serves as his most important source of chess historical knowledge. Anything that the game itself could tell him stands only if it can be confirmed in his reading.

For me, things are reversed. Statements in the ancient texts cannot be understood by themselves. It is primarily through a deep knowledge of ancient games that we acquire the ability to draw truth out of them. Whether Mr Murray possesses this ability, I have every reason to doubt. The things that his books have told him often fall into contradiction, once they are judged in light of what I have gathered from a fundamental study of games...

It would thus appear very sensible to consider a wider variety of possible sources. Stewart Culin in his *Chess and Playing Cards*, published in 1898, was the very first researcher to free chess from its historical prison, namely, its singular role as a soloist among games. As suggested by his title, he trained his eye upon the interconnections between chess and other types of game. He also outlined the interconnections between chess and broader forms of human endeavour. He saw in modern games the survivals of forgotten magical rituals, and in such things as dice and cards he saw the tools of these ancient trades.

The notion of dice, cards or magic may seem like a foreign intrusion into the study of chess, but we must remember that pre-modern cultures saw no shame in playing with chance. Medieval chess, for instance, was not the model of pure combination that it is today. It was slow, perhaps dull at times, losing popularity to such things as endgame puzzles and problems. An element of randomness could be, and often was added to give some drama to the play. Muslims played oblong chess over a 4x16 board with dice, and dice were often used in medieval Europe as an alternative to regular play, as recounted in *Huon de Bordeaux*, a French romance from the thirteenth century. The success of games like Nard, Pachisi, Chaupur and many other Indian games shows that chance could be an integral part of a world-view. We should not, therefore, overlook sources which take us beyond the ideas we have nowadays become accustomed to. Culin's great contribution was to extend the discussion in these directions.

Another pioneer of this type of extended inquiry must surely be Joseph Needham with his *Science and Civilisation in China*, published in 1962. In it he does not treat chess as an isolated phenomenon (as had the previous literature), but instead sees the game as part of a family of other games. The fact that his particular domain is China is of secondary concern here. In Vol. IV, part 1, in a chapter entitled "The Magnet, Divination, and Chess" he shows the relationship between various games and even supplies a hypothetical evolutionary tree of these games. He adds to it the wish that:

Some social anthropologist will produce some day a fully integrated and connected evolutionary story, quite biological in character, showing how all these games and divination-techniques were genetically connected.

The question as to the idea or ideas concealed within games generally remains in the foreground of his considerations on the matter, and Needham sees an especially clear influence from divination in the Chinese chess game, Xiangqi. As far as we know, no notable author before Culin and Needham concerned himself with such questions of the game-ideas which may be inherent in chess.

Needham's evolutionary suggestions were a pathbreaking step. Explanations from chess literature and the related field of etymology had, starting with Thomas Hyde, taken on a life of their own and in some cases had become an end in themselves. Meanwhile, the game itself and its structure were overlooked as sources, or at the very least neglected. This must also have spurred Pavle Bidev. Shortly after the appearance of Needham's book, and after an investigation of certain game structures, Bidev confessed that he had for 34 years been blind despite his wide open eyes, and that he had mistakenly believed in the Indian origin of chess because he had trusted the testaments of Antonius van der Linde and H.J.R. Murray. After his lifelong and dubious searches in literature, as well as many theoretical and culture-historical considerations, Bidev now investigated the concrete game itself and arrived at new discoveries. We have included here an extract from his representative article in *Deutsche Schachzeitung*, as well as a translation.

The work of Needham and Bidev is sometimes hampered by its revolutionary character. Rather like Copernicus, they reverse the order of things assumed by conventional wisdom, and declare the opposite to be true. In this case, the received wisdom stems from Murray and van der Linde, and has filtered down into many non-historical chess books, articles and columns. One often finds in such works a cursory statement to the effect that India gave birth to chess sometime around AD 600—after which the author moves on to the main purpose at hand. A side-effect of this common wisdom tends to be that anything non-Indian (and thus by extension non-Western) may be perceived as derivative, variant, dependent—not really *chess* but a curious and quaint deviation from it. Needham and Bidev run up against this conventional wisdom when they declare Chinese chess to be a true chess and fully equal to the western game in its historical importance.

Such conventional wisdom is a harmful attitude to take, if one also wants to investigate structural interrelations and patterns. This attitude prevents one from seeing a superficially different, yet internally very similar game (Chinese chess for instance) for what it is, and denies such games the attention they deserve.

Peter Banaschak suggests that we should instead use internal, structural characteristics to guide our attitudes on what is a true chess, fully the equal of the familiar game. Sincerely taking this attitude to heart will mean that we get a richer, wider concept of what chess is, and the various paths that it has taken throughout the world. In an excerpt from his book, *Schachspiele in Ostasien*, reproduced here, he provides just such a definition of chess, pointing to what defines the core of the game and the essential framework upon which everything else hangs.

Yuri Averbakh similarly breaks with the taboo that chess is an isolated game, and instead calls upon Stewart Culin's work of a century ago. Among all the members of the *Initiativgruppe Königstein*, Averbakh, along with Ricardo Calvo and others, is distinguished in that he once was among the world's elite of competitive chessplayers, and thus perhaps has an especially close relationship with the realities of the game. Averbakh maintains that the process of origins began with the evolution of an Indian race game into a chess game, that it was a centuries-long development, and that its cause is to be found in Indian and Greek influences. In his opinion, the Greek family of petteia-games, played without dice, had an important role in this evolution. He has most recently presented this thesis at the International Colloquium, Board Games in Academia, at Fribourg in 2001. Here we give the text of his presentation.

One should not, however, limit oneself to sources of information provided by the game itself. Together with literature and archaeology, it may well lead to further clues towards solving the critical questions. This point of view is shared by Alex Kraaijeveld in *Board Games Studies* /3, which appeared in 2000. In his article entitled "Origin of Chess—a Phylogenetic Perspective" he proceeds from the belief that there are three basic sources to be used in the solution to the questions, these being the three sources mentioned above. The game itself is, in his opinion, the most fruitful source we have at the moment. Kraaijeveld goes on to argue that the most objective, unbiased way to use this information is through a technique common in evolutionary biology—a method previously unseen in serious chess research. His online article summarizes the results of this experiment, and is reproduced here.

These same ideas are at work in our concluding contributions. Our considerations begin with the structure of chess and proceed from there. We share the hypothesis that chess emerged from other games which preceded it and which were transformed into chess through a long process of evolution and adaptation. We reject the idea of a single inventor. The structure of the game rules out any other interpretation, in our opinion. We also agree in our proposals as to the approximate date of this process. We see ourselves following the path laid down by Needham, Bidev, Holländer and Averbakh.

In his afterword, the well-known chess historian Egbert Meissenburg places our methods in relation to those hitherto used in the study of chess literature, archaeology, and etymology. While welcoming new arguments and considerations, he also warns against an overvaluation of structural methods. In his opinion, further research is needed in order to arrive at stronger and more valid results.

Our individual conclusions may thus not be identical, but this is simply in the nature of the undertaking. We are nonetheless united by a love of chess and an objective search for its origin. *Gens una sumus!*