

Kusht, the National Chess Game of Turkmenistan

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The origin of shatranj (we use the Arab name, due to its greatest diffusion, a game which certainly existed earlier than the development of the Muslim civilisation) occurred probably in Iran, or else in India, as several legends indicate, or in Central Asia. One cannot affirm with certainty that the Central Asiatic regions were the actual birthplace of that form of chess, considered as a mental battle between two adversaries without any intervention of chance. But it is indisputable that these regions played an active role in the initial diffusion of the game. Indications supporting the relevance of these regions for chess history derive, in particular, from the later high reputation of players coming from precisely these regions and, recently, from the discovery of pieces of the second century, which supposedly belonged to a chess set (B. Turgunov, 1973; I. M. Linder, 1975) in Uzbekistan.

A particular role must be expected from Turkmenistan, due to its peculiar geographical location between Iran and the other Central Asiatic zones of the Uzbeks, Tadjiks, Kirgizes, which are now confederate Republics of the Soviet Union. It may thus plausibly be assumed that shatranj was played very early in Turkmenistan and enjoyed there a significant diffusion. The peculiar name of kusht has been preserved here for the game, without assuming, as the neighbouring peoples did, a more similar name to the Arab shatranj. Also, in the renowned treatise by T. Hyde, 1694, kusht is quoted as a celebrated ancient game, with literary documents. The author regrets, however, that he could not ascertain the actual rules. We are not reporting here, however, anything new on the initial temporary boundary of kusht. We intend rather to report some information on its more recent period in Turkmenistan, together with the illustration of an unpublished kusht set of that provenance, preserved as N.5021 in the Museo Nazionale Antropologico ed Etnologico in Florence.

It is well known that the fundamental work of H. J. R. Murray, 1913, can still be considered the basis for any further research on chess history. A huge amount of data from every people and every time is there

accurately collected and analysed. Unfortunately, comparatively little information can be found in that text concerning chess in Turkmenistan. Even the names of the pieces and the particular rules of play are lacking from the corresponding documentation, so that it is necessary for us to derive them from other sources. Thus, for instance, the names of the pieces are reported by I. M. Linder, 1979, 43. We become acquainted that *sha* corresponds to our king, *perzi* to queen, *ruk* to rook, *pil* to bishop, *at* to knight and *pyiada* to pawn. In general, the names are similar to those of neighbouring countries, well known in the ancient history of the game. It may be noted that *at* is used for horse in Turkish languages, whereas *pil* for elephant was common in Persia before the corresponding Arab name of *fil* took its place. This fact may be assumed as an indication of antiquity for the nomenclature used in kusht, although both the name and the animal were actually extraneous to ancient Iran.

That kusht enjoyed a popularity among people still towards the end of the nineteenth century is already clearly documented in H. J. R. Murray, 1913, 378, from a French source: "When not engaged in plundering, the Turkomans are extremely idle, lying about their tents playing chess, at which they are most skilful, or gossiping." One can thus conclude that chess was there not, as is often the case in other civilisations at the time, a game diffused among the privileged classes, but an everyday occupation of the great mass of the people.

A similar picture can be obtained from an article by N. Aslanov, dedicated to chess in Turkmenistan and published in the *Soviet Chess Dictionary*; G. M. Geiler, 1964, 89-91. There it is clearly stated that the game was played by everybody, without limitations of age or profession. The Turkomans played literally everywhere, including in the camps of the shepherds among the sands of Kara-Kum. The most used chessboards were cloths, kerchiefs or simply the ground. The pieces were generally cut from twigs of *saksaül*, or even little stones of different shape.

In the same article, an original and curious way of playing individual tournaments is also described as typical of the region. Two adversaries begin to play and each of them takes a step backward for every lost game. The one who gets out of the playing area is eliminated. His place is then taken by the subsequent competitor, until only one player remains as the winner. Some items of information are provided on the rules of play, too. The first move of the game could be the combination

of two single moves. For example, a move by a knight and one pawn advanced by one square. Thus, in particular, our initial move of a pawn by two squares was also allowed, but only for the very first move in the game.

As is well known, in ancient chess castling was not allowed or differed from place to place. Here it was very peculiar. It could be carried out only before any exchange took place. It occurred in two moves and one of the squares of the rooks had to be already empty. One move consisted in transferring the king (or the other rook) to this free square; the second move in transferring the other rook (or, correspondingly, the king) to the new square resulting from the first move. All that happened, unusually, despite any number of interposing pieces.

Having stated some information on chess as played in Turkmenistan, we can better analyse the kushi set, coming precisely from Kara-Kum, preserved in the Florentine Museum (Cat. Nr. 5021). It is part of a collection of several ethnographically interesting materials of about the same provenance, which were gathered in loco by Lamberto Loria, during his expedition of 1883. Owing to the above documented diffusion of kusht among the Turkomans, it is not surprising that precisely a kusht set is present in the collection together with characteristic precious wares and objects of everyday use. There is no chessboard, and only 26 pieces are still preserved in the museum – only the black bishop being lost among the major pieces. Indicative dimensions may be considered 2 cm height for the pawns and 5 cm for the kings. A reconstruction of the initial position on a chessboard model is represented overleaf (A), whereas one specimen of every different piece is shown in order in B, for the “white” and “black” series.

The colour is the first peculiarity to be noted. Some pieces evidently appear as blazed. One may wonder whether that corresponded to an intentional treatment or not. Maybe it was unintentional in the amount of damage, since it appears a nonsense, for instance, to carve a horse’s head in order to have it immediately afterwards burned out. But, on the whole, it seems necessary to admit that blazing one half of the pieces was considered a convenient way to mark the “black” pieces. This is certainly not a usual way, but, certainly, one cannot expect to find two differently coloured woods in a region where it was already difficult to find one kind of them.

The horses represent the knights in a figurative way, whereas the remaining pieces have geometrical shapes which cannot be directly related to the role of the figures. A similar situation is typical of other Asiatic countries and partly also of... Staunton pieces.

Since the knights are so well distinguished, no ambiguity remains in attributing the remaining pieces to the corresponding personages, if the usual shape of shatranj kind of pieces is taken into consideration.

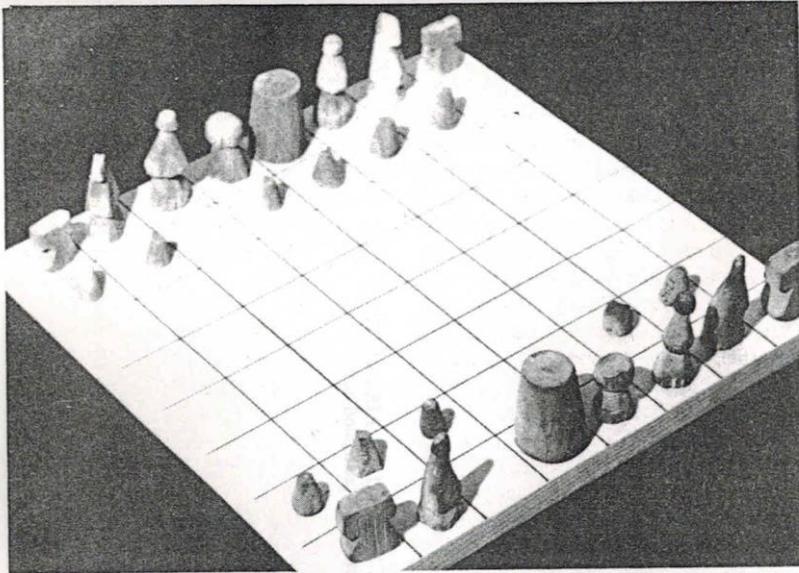
Even if the proposed array must be considered as settled, there are some peculiarities deserving comment.

What is indeed uncommon is a pair of king and queen so different in shape and, as particularly evident here among the black pieces, in dimensions. The fact that the queen appears of such reduced size can plausibly be brought into connection with the role of this piece in shatranj, with such a limited faculty of move extending only to the first diagonal square. Maybe it was only a reminder of a forgotten rule. But even if the actual moves of the ancient shatranj tradition were followed, that could not appear surprising. For instance, we know that in Uzbek chess, among other peculiar rules, maintained until the nineteenth century, the ancient moves for queen and bishop (from G. M. Geiler, 1964, 92). By way of contrast, it may be observed that in several parts of Russia and Georgia the queen had assumed in past centuries not only the present moves but also those of the knight and was therefore known as “ferz vsyacheskaya”.*

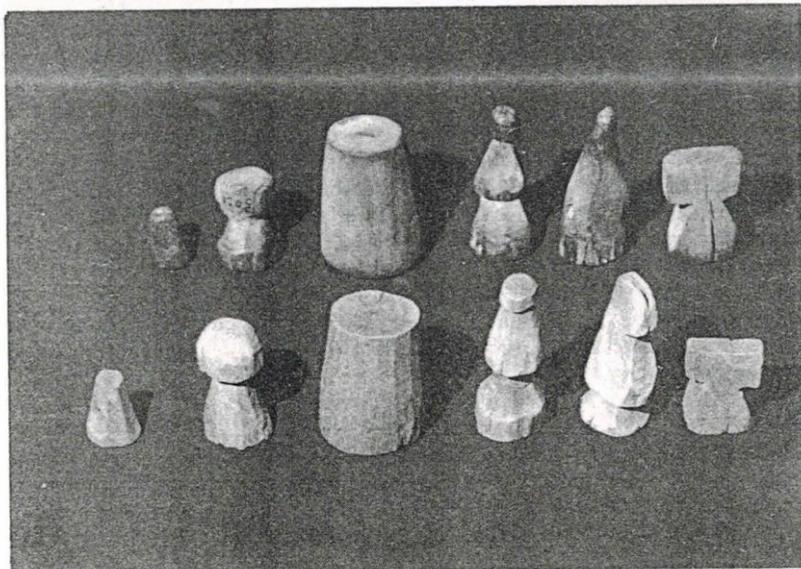
In conclusion, this chess set appears as further confirmation of the diffusion of kushi among the Turkomans. The actual shape suggests a preservation of some of the ancient rules typical of shatranj, after many centuries of duration.

One may now doubt whether to consider as real progress the present diffusion there of international chess instead of the local game. Thus, out of the 1108 items reported in the detailed chess bibliography by N. I. Sakharov, 1968, only two happen to have been printed in Ashkhabad, in the language of Turkmenistan. Both are, moreover, simply translations of common didactic Russian texts at the introductory level. However, it may be encouraging to remark that a player coming from Azerbaijan, the Soviet Republic on the other side of the Caspian Sea, has become, at the time of writing, the World Champion in international chess.

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Above — The remaining kusht pieces of 1883, shown in the initial position on a recent model chessboard. From the Loria collection of Tekké objects. Below — From the left: pawn, queen, king, bishop, knight and rook. The blazed “black” series is shown behind the “white” one.



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* vsyacheskaya = "of all kinds". Ed.