

Developing Arab Chessmen

Franco Pratesi

The Rule, not the Exception

Many beautiful chessmen from the past have been preserved and many people take delight in collecting them. Among collectors' sets, any Arab chessman is usually rather recent and of exotic provenance, something different from all the rest of the figurative pieces. A similar situation is encountered when we move to public collections. Here it is easier to find ancient pieces, often real treasures of art; in them materials tend to become of great value, passing from noble woods to ivory, from semi-precious stones to gems, more and more skilfully carved. Here again Arab pieces are seldom present, and they look like an appendix to the collection, often poorer in material and profile than the remaining items.

We are thus induced to think of many different figurative sets and some extra pieces, Arab chessmen, so difficult to distinguish that in a first approximation they look as pertaining to a single set or at least to very similar ones. Several books reproduce only a given set, and particularly that kept in Nuremberg museum, as truly representing all of them. In particular, they look squat to our eyes, accustomed to slender modern pieces. They also appear to be static, in terms of their moving on the chessboard (as indeed they actually were in shatranj). Equally static they seem to be in the course of time, without any significant development in their profile.

As a consequence, when we consider, for instance, the evolution of European chessmen our minds tend to start with old figurative pieces, as for instance Lewis chessmen, characterised by kings, queens and several army or court personages. It is for us difficult to get accustomed to the very simple idea that, on the contrary, Arab chessmen were the rule, throughout Europe too, during Middle Ages and also Early Renaissance, that is, until the development of modern chess. As a matter of fact, Arab chessmen have represented an acknowledged model of chessmen for play, the first one to enjoy an almost worldwide spread.

In the Framework of Early Chessmen

The story and the origin of Arab chessmen must be dealt with in the context of other early chessmen. It would be nice if we could state that Arab chessmen were first introduced in 717 by Ibrahim ibn Talha ibn Obaidallah while playing in Medina. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to affirm anything alike. So, we are left with speculation, and we must find a plausible framework for the scattered specimens that have been kept.

It is hard to maintain that chessmen were invented at once with a standard profile and that precisely this original profile could spread universally. In particular, nobody knows how the first chessmen exactly were. Certainly, one may suppose that the first chessmen were of a figurative kind. At that tentative assumption point some literature records – as for instance Firdousi's description – requiring that the pieces on the chessboard represent, in a clearly recognisable way, army characters as kings, generals, soldiers. The same assumption can be reached easily if one believes in a chess origin from race games – figures of the kind used in chess could earlier be adopted as markers in order to distinguish the players (so that they were the more suitable, the more they were different).

However, we may be sceptical about any suggestion that the same figurative chessmen, even if assumed to exist in early times, could actually have widely spread. In fact, no common tradition exists for these figures, no standard profile has been kept throughout the various countries where chess flourished. In short, we may state that, if early chessmen were figurative, only their standard names actually spread everywhere – not their shape.

In particular, one must acknowledge that three of the most widely used chessmen in ancient times were of an abstract kind. Even before Europe became acquainted with chess, or at about that time, there were mainly three different kinds of abstract chessmen, Arab, Chinese, Japanese. Probably, other national pattern for Asiatic chessmen ought to be considered, but most of South-East Asiatic national chessmen were in their turn not very different from Chinese or from Arab ones. On the other hand, we lack reliable information on early Indian chessmen – both abstract and figurative sets illustrated by Thomas Hyde could have been in use for many centuries. We can put Japanese chessmen aside –

they clearly correspond to a change in the circular section of Chinese-like chessmen in order better to correspond to the specific rules developed in that country. They appear as a local development, without any appreciable influence on other chessmen outside the country of origin.

An extremely interesting question is connected with the origin of Chinese disc chessmen. In particular, it is not evident whether they represent an initial or a final stage in the general evolution of chessmen. Certainly, if we think of chess as deriving from some kind of draughts-like game played on the board with two armies of equal (or almost equal) pebbles, then this is precisely the way we would expect chessmen to have been first distinguished by the pawns of the parent game.

Arab chessmen have in part the same function. It suffices to think to the muzzle of the horse and to the tusks of the elephant: commonly, they are far from actual figurative additions! They rather look like marks or symbols – as such not very different from Chinese ideograms – apt to substitute for ever the actual image of the animal. Once the agreement of common players is found, there is no need any more to bother for better finishing and representing a given personage. In conclusion, usual Arab chessmen appear to be intermediate objects between completely abstract sets, such as the small discs used in Chinese chess, and figurative ones.

Two Plausible Origins

The study of Arab chessmen and their origin entails questions that are relevant for early chessmen in general – for instance, the option of an abstract or a figurative profile. Unavoidably, the hypotheses about early chessmen are strongly connected with those put forth about early chess itself. As a result, starting from our specific topic we soon meet with the general question of chess origin, protochess, and the like.

In particular, as for anything intermediate, we may consider the origin and development of Arab chessmen as coming from either side; namely, from simple to complex or vice versa. In the first case, “intermediate” Arab chessmen could derive from equal game pebbles by introducing in them dimensional scales and specific symbols or appendices. We can separately consider the eight pawns, still simple game men, and the eight major pieces. For all of them the shape of a cylinder or of a truncated cone may be directly suggested by the material used,

both bone and wood lending themselves to obtain at once almost finished products of such profiles. If we add that the pieces must be easy to grasp and to locate on the chessboard, we can soon reach a thimble-like profile for the pawns. The major pieces will be of similar shape, yet bigger and provided with suitable marks or appendices, apt to indicate their specific role. Thus, Arab-like chessmen are rather easy to obtain starting from an existing set of equal or almost equal men and a lower limit on time for a development of this kind is hard to set.

The alternative explanation, which is commonly reported by chess historians, is that, on the contrary, previously existing figurative men became stylized later on, up to lose their former evident meaning. This last process, if it really occurred, could happen in order better to fit the practical game conditions or else, as often suggested, the Islam prohibitions to represent human or animal figures. Whichever was the path actually followed, it appears by now an ascertained fact that it was only with the Arab profile that similar chessmen could reach an universal distribution among players throughout most part of the world, whereas Chinese discs were spreading in South-East Asia. Both models were among the most abstract ever; apparently, an abstract character is useful for the game to become widely spread.

Arab, to a Certain Extent

Another problem is whether Arab pieces really can be considered to have had an Arab origin. In particular, it sounds somewhat odd to speak of Arab pieces in Europe for times as late, as the Renaissance. Even within the typical models of Arab chessmen, the patterns developed in Europe were rather specific and somewhat different from Eastern specimens.

I know that some European scholars tend to underrate the contribution to our common culture by the Arabs, maintaining that they only helped in transmitting the great conquests of the Greek philosophy. I personally have no such prejudice and I am prepared to acknowledge original and significant Arab contributions to many topics as astronomy, medicine, alchemy and, why not, chessmen development. Thus, I can accept for European chess an Arab origin, with chess and early chessmen spreading from countries under Arab government, as Spain and Sicily. However, a question remains, who were these Arabs?

As a rule, great empires are multinational countries. Let us shortly consider the best known to us, the Roman empire. It was certainly centred on its big capital, Rome, but it included many nations and from several points of view its cultural basis was to be found in Greece. In comparison, Arabia even lacked a similar centre – the holy towns of Mecca and Medina having not been capitals of the Islam world from an administrative or a cultural point of view. The civilization of the Arabs was mainly based on the cultures of nations who came under their government, particularly the Persians.

In conclusion, even if partly unified by a single religion and a single written language, there were under Arab government many populations and several of them may represent for the introduction of Arab chessmen more suitable candidates, than the Arabs themselves. Unfortunately, we are not yet able to associate Arab chessmen with a given people, even if we may suspect some, as especially the Persians (the source of many chess masters and of the oldest literary documents known). Moreover, we find on our way another question ready. Once introduced by a given people, how could a single model be accepted by the whole multinational territory being under Arab influence?

We do not know anything alike for comparing. Somewhat similar game tools may be playing cards, which originated in China during the first millenium A.D. and slowly spread westwards, until they finally reached Europe in the beginning of the last quarter of the 14th century. For the earliest centuries, we have very little information, but no Arab cards seem to have enjoyed a general use in the Islam world. Likely, significantly different card packs have been used in Persia, India and Egypt (the last country seeming now to correspond to the most direct source for Europe). However, one has to remember that playing cards reached Europe more than three centuries later than chess; therefore, the spread of cards might reflect a different situation within the borders of the large territory under Arab influence.

For chessmen one finds instead two main patterns quoted. According to the prevailing religious version of Islam – Scythe or Sunnite – a first model had some partial figuration, as for instance rather naturalistic horse muzzles, while the second was completely geometric. That has been easily explained with a more or less strong prohibition to represent human and animal beings in statuettes. For such prohibitions, however, there is strictly no need for any Arab religion. Before the Arabs, the same God was already recognised by the Christians, and before them

by the Jews. The very first God of Israel was himself, according to the Old Testament, rather displeased with holy images. To find a starting point on this basis would be very difficult – indeed, recommendations to avoid figures for faith reasons were earlier than the very origin of chess!

Arab-European Patterns

The study of chessmen evolution in Europe and neighbouring countries should be focused on Arab pieces. In terms of time, in the long run, strictly European chessmen – leading to the final development of Regence and Staunton sets – clearly appear to be recent specimens. In terms of place, only Far Eastern Asiatic countries have developed in early times their own profiles: Europe, North Africa, Central and Middle East Asia, all have mainly used one or another variant of Arab chessmen.

However, the two mentioned kinds of Arab chessmen are not enough for including the various models that were used – any intermediate case between partially figurative and completely abstract can be found, particularly for elephants and horses. Also significantly different ratios can be noted among the dimensions of the pieces. It would be interesting to classify all the preserved items according to their place and time of provenance. Such painstaking work would allow us to verify a remarkable variety and evolution of Arab chessmen, much more impressive than it could appear at first sight.

The development of the profile of Arab chessmen in Europe can be studied independently of what was happening in farther Eastern or Southern countries. We find that the vertical section becomes complex, due to modifications occurring along the lateral surfaces of the figure. In particular, a reduction in width occurs at about mid height, especially for major pieces. Even the profile of the pawns tend to become thinner near the top. Nevertheless, most of the existing rotational symmetry (so useful for its production by lathe work) is preserved.

For understanding the trend in the advanced development of the profile for major chessmen, a first approximation is to consider them all as formed by two pawns, with the shape of a truncated cone, the second being placed upside down on top of the first one. Generally, the specific “marks” are added either on top of the “second” pawn or of a platform

located directly above the “first” one; sometimes, moreover, one or two chessmen of the set still keeps its original profile with straight lateral surfaces.

As mentioned before for their introduction, also the end of the utilization of Arab chessmen is not easy to fix. Given the successive modifications in the profile of Arab chessmen in Europe, it becomes a difficult task to trace a sharp demarcation line between Arab-European and European chessmen (or, as it better sounds, between old and modern chessmen). If we take into account the chessmen in Publicius’ book, printed toward the end of the 15th century, we note that the marks used for king and queen may already be considered as modern - they let the pieces become even more towering than they already are with respect to the lateral pieces. However, the overall scheme is still Arab-European, with rather common old marks for bishop, knight and rook.

As soon as the final development of Arab-European chessmen is reached, the new laws of the game urged the players to modify the standard profiles. A contribution came also from forgetting the real meaning of several chessmen (with, for instance, the rook becoming a tower). In a few decades, after having survived to the represented personages, also Arab chessmen became forgotten in Europe. In other countries, and especially in muslim ones, they have instead been used until the present century – obviously, with several other interesting modifications to their profile.

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