

Protochess – A Framework for Pondicherry

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The November 1996 meeting in Pondicherry represents a unique opportunity to obtain reliable answers to several questions which have been much debated among chess historians. In particular, this is the first occasion ever provided to scholars from India and other countries coming near to the origin of chess, to discuss together many open questions. The various contributions expected will help us in selecting the right theories and the correct interpretation of the ancient literary and archaeological documents.

The goals for a progress in the field are many – for instance, to date and understand the introduction of chess – and their moves – on the ashtapada board, to fix the correct order of subsequent introduction for all the chaturanga variants (2 and 4 players, with and without dice), to establish the duration and rules of protochess, to determine the context of the origin of chess.

One of the most important questions to be discussed is just *protochess*, the mother variant of chess; here, the conditions for the origin of chess are involved, and it is by defining them that chess can be correctly inserted in its due place among ancient boardgames.

It is indeed an ascertained fact that various boardgames existed before the development of chess, all over the world, even though few of them can be considered forms of protochess. It is ascertained too that the same chessboard was used for different games and activities in time before and after the appearance of chess.

The first problem encountered is thus one of definition: how much extensively can be the words chess and protochess without further specifications for the “standard” game between two players without dice. I shall use chess without further specifications for the “standard” game between two players without dice. I shall use protochess for any earlier, significantly different variant suggested but WITHOUT applying this name (as should be done according to chess historians Averbakh and Linder) to boardgames played with identical men or pebbles, which I consider to belong to another family.

If I have understood well, the few absolutely certain references to “chess” from Indian sources are from later quotations, where the game is indicated as *buddhibala* or something alike. Many previous quotations indicating the game as *chaturanga* might correspond to a form of chess and/or of protochess, according to the different times and interpretations. Earlier names found for boardgames may not refer to a form of chess or even of protochess.

Thus several “theories” are now possible for protochess and its context, as analysed in the following.

A – protochess did not exist

This zero-level hypothesis is less surprising than it may appear. It suffices to suppose that earlier Indian games on the chessboard were played – with or without dice – by moving a single kind of men. This practically implies (at least in my opinion) that *chaturanga* is [almost or exactly] the same as *buddhibala*, and that with *chaturanga* we already had a game of chess, with six different pieces moved on the board. No step-by-step evolution occurred, significant inter-mediated forms did not exist. Murray, probably the greatest of all chess historians, was of this opinion – his indication to about 570 AD and Ganges valley is waiting for a confirmation.

B – protochess within war-boardgames

On the already existing chess board an old war game of the same kind of draughts or chess can be considered a protochess form especially if the number of different pieces is intermediate between six (as for chess) and 1 or I (as for modern draughts). A logical development could however imply subsequent modification within the same family of existing wargames, with increasing differentiation of army parts, up to our final form. I do not know any documentary evidence supporting the hypothesis of a gradual increase in the number of different men on the chess board. However, the evolution might have occurred rapidly, leaving no traces of intermediate forms of protochess.

C – protochess among other boardgames

Race-games [CI]. For a long time, it has been considered that *chaturanga* was a race game played with dice by four players; then the two allied armies allegedly merged with the transformation of the “second”

king into a new “minister”. From a logical point of view, this is plausible; but what about documentary evidence? Different from other cases, the game indicated here did actually exist, and was named either *chaturaji* or even *chaturanga* – the main problem is that with the information now available this seems a chess-derived game rather than a form of protochess.

Hunt-games [C2]. Known hunt games of fox-and-geese kind are based on not very different “armies” provided to the attacking and defending sides. In principle, however, a kind of protochess could be obtained by duplicating the pieces and assigning to each player both parts at the same time.

Dice-games [C3]. Differentiated chessmen can be put into correspondence with several dice or knucklebone games – with for instance the meaning traditionally assigned to a particular throw giving origin to a specific personage moving on the board.

D – protochess from other on-the-board activities

In addition to the various games mentioned, some forms of protochess could derive from other activities performed on the same board. According to several scientists, boardgames had a religious and/or scientific origin. Usually, the board was considered as a representation of the earth, and men could initially represent it [D1] or something else [D2], and were therefore naturally distinguished, according to their roles, from the very beginning. Chess origin could thus be linked with either astronomy, or divination, or other arts and sciences; in each case, it necessarily required the existence of a particular form of protochess.

Two special cases can be mentioned. One is directly connected with the search of a suitable simulation of a real battle [D3] and the study of the corresponding strategy – we have information on such early simulations, for instance from China. Another is the fact that in many places the chess-board was used as abacus [D4] for everyday counting, by moving a number of pebbles along its rows: usually these pebbles were similar, but some distinction could somehow have occurred.

I have outlined here (summarising a tentative framework published in *Informazione Scacchi*, vol. 3, 1993, N° 1, pp. 28-34) a sort of tree for chess and protochess origin. In most similar trees, all the branches are real – here the whole tree is a virtual building: the experts will eventually identify the individual branch to be acknowledged as the only true

one. Thus, I would ask the opinion of everybody in Pondicherry: which of the above A, B, C or D branches should be preferred for protochess? I understand that such a question cannot be solved democratically by a voting of the people attending the meeting. Nevertheless, I hope that each expert does not cling to a different subbranch and I am thus expecting a significant help from all of them.