

Draughts in Siberia **– New Informations from a Forgotten Match.**

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In several treatises on the history of draughts, such as those by Murray and Van der Stoep, there is some mention of the game as actually played in Siberia. However, there is an evident lack of detailed information, so that any further documentation appears useful. Here a complete game set from Siberia is illustrated, see Fig. 1, together with the description of its finding, use, acquisition, which exist in the book written by the discoverer, S. Sommier, *Un'estate in Siberia*, Firenze 1885. Thus, we have the opportunity of separately analyzing the many aspects of this unusual game, from a century ago: date, place, players, and so on.

The place of origin is one of the several interesting circumstances. The pieces come from Bolshaja Puikova, a village on an island located directly in the estuary of the Ob river, only a few kilometers to the North of the Arctic Circle. The place is reported as being already part of the very large territory of the Samoieds, although very near to the territories of the Ostiaks – placed more to the South-East – so that a few families of these peoples were usually present during the fishing season. Ostiaks were – with Voguls and Samoieds – one of the three native local peoples and particularly they had the greatest population, roughly corresponding to 14.000 inhabitants.

The finding occurs on September 5 or 6th, 1880, while the author is compelled to stop there by the weather and visits the village in order to find ethnographically interesting objects. The location of the game was very different from a standard gaming house; the pieces were present in a chum or kot. A whole series of similar tents are described in the book. In any case, it is not the ideal place to find unnecessary tools. It is fortunate for the history of draughts that the author was a known scholar, who left many important writings and descriptions concerning natural sciences. Since he was born in Florence of French parents, and many of his studies were carried out in connection with the Florentine scientific milieu, he was probably aware of both the Italian and the French rules

of the game, although, as he states, only at the level of a weak amateur. When he walks into the chum of the fisherman, he remains highly surprised at seeing the draughtsboard, ‘

carved on a wood slab, which had some holes indicating its origin from a boat ... I considered that this game, the only one I ever saw among the natives, was a Russian import. Since the warriors of Kuchun Khan played chess, it could well be that the introduction of draughts among the Ostiaks should go back to more ancient dates.

Fortunately, Sommer was not satisfied with only observing the game set; he acquired it as an useful ethnographic document and, moreover, he also played a draughts game with the Ostiak fisherman. As a result, we obtain a strong confirmation that the draughtsboard was not there by chance.

The Ostiak, with whom I played a game, showed enough skill to beat me, and, although a great talent was not really needed, he proved to me that these Northerners can still concentrate on something other than everyday life, although their mind is almost completely devoted to survival in those harsh environmental conditions.

The board is of interest from many points of view. Its origin from a boat has already been mentioned. Moreover, it should be noted that it serves two purposes: the other side is used for scaling fish. A characteristic of this board is that it has been carved with the least possible effort; only the ‘white’ squares are engraved, while the ‘black’ ones are the original surface of the slab. However, it is without doubt not the usual 8x8 board, but rather a 7x9 one.

The pieces are perhaps the most original and interesting discovery of them all. Traditionally, any draughtsman is essentially a cylindrical disk, in which the different geometrical ‘models’ may only vary as far as the ratio height-diameter is concerned. On the contrary, they are much more differentiated in this case. The upper surface of the pieces is indeed not flat at all, but it ends in a wedge, which is also slender. Half of the pieces are notched on the top of the wedge in order to mark the ‘colour’. Each player has only eleven men, due to the board. It is curious how, by eliminating one square from those not used in the game of draughts, one can play with one piece less on the same 32 squares,

without any problem of right or left corner. This seems too convenient to be the result of chance or the discovery of an isolated fisherman.

Promotion is the last among the interesting questions deriving from this finding. Due to the actual shape of the draughtsmen – and in the absence of any different piece or mark present together – there is nothing provided for promoting the pieces, since in this case it is really impossible to put them one on top of another. Since it is difficult to think of draughts – as it is clearly stated to be – without promotion, it may be suggested that two pieces in the same square indicated the king. Such habit – although an uncommon one has sometimes been documented for other peoples in previous times.

In conclusion, the Siberian draughts set, which has been described here, shows several characteristic peculiarities, which do not appear to be related game seem to correspond more to traditional rules of Ostiak players than to the result of chance or of a discovery by a single fisherman. However, in order to be entirely confident of that conclusion, other similar findings and/or literary documentations would be welcome.

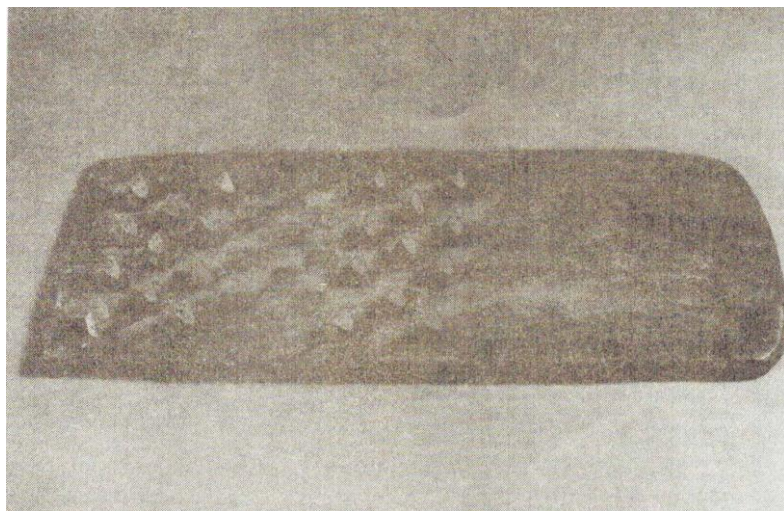


Figure 1 – Siberian game set for draughts.
Provenance Bolshaja Puikova, 1880.
Museo Nazionale Antropologico ed Etnologico, Florence.
Sommier Collection, nr. 2721.