

The Medieval Roots of Chess

(By: Eric G. Kolber, as posted in the Oct. '99 Plague)

Today, chess is a popular game of strategy and wits. Its birth reaches back to the Middle Ages, but not as a game pursued for recreation. Early on, kings used similar layouts representing battlefields, with "pieces" representing different groups of warriors, and enemy forces for strategic purposes. The earliest mention of a game resembling what has come to be known as modern day chess was written around 600 AD, and since little else is clarified, it can be assumed that the game may have already become well-known by that time. The game mentioned was called chaturanga, a Sanskrit word referring to the four divisions of an Indian army (the elephant, cavalry, chariot, and infantry), from which come the four types of pieces in that game. Chaturanga is believed to have originated in India during the 6th century. It is even possible that chaturanga was related to a much older Chinese game.

After chaturanga had spread eastward through China, Korea and Japan, it was brought to Persia during the Islamic conquest (638-651 AD), changing it from chaturanga to shatranj, the Arabic form of the word. The spread of Islam to Sicily and the invasion of Spain by the Moors first brought shatranj to Western Europe, and trade routes trickled its influence through Russia. By the end of the 10th century, it is evident that the game was well known throughout Europe. Kings were drawn to the game for its political applications, and poets were intrigued by the fact that warfare could be reduced to a mere game board. The best games were recorded for posterity, and beginning in the 12th and 13th centuries, game layouts with designated solutions to be found became popular.

Modern chess as we've come to know it was greatly shaped by the Muslims, who used it for strategic purposes to defend themselves during the Crusades of the Holy Lands. The Muslims observed the techniques that the crusaders used to fight, and thus modified the game according to their needs. A basic attack formation, for example, involved rows of infantrymen supported by cavalry, which charged through the lines to slash at enemy warriors on either side of their horses. This is most likely why, in a modern game of chess, knights can jump over pawns (or infantrymen), and proceed three squares and then attack on one side or the other. A knight on horseback would not attack an enemy head-on.

In a modern game of chess, rooks, or castles, stand in the corners of the board to represent the round towers with spiraling staircases that crusaders built throughout the Middle East to protect their conquests. When the Muslims referred to them in their own plans, however, they were most likely stationary on the board. What is now called the bishop piece was most likely used by the Muslims to represent the Christian church, as it was a threat to their own religion. Since the Christian church closely advised the kings attacking the Muslims, it is no wonder that the bishop piece stands directly by the king piece now. During this time period, the queen did not stand beside her king as she does now on the chessboard, because queens were seldom if ever present during a battle. It was the king's general who instead took this position. The queen as a figurehead became more important during the Elizabethan era, when there was no King of England, so her presence on the chessboard may have appeared around this time.

A game of chess in medieval Europe differed from a modern game in several distinct ways. For example, the king could move as if he were a knight only once, since he had his own horse and was technically the head of the knights and cavalry. This move probably fell out of usage when nobility no longer played an active role on the battlefield. Also during the Middle Ages, pawns could only move one square at a time. Since the Middle Ages, this rule was changed when it was realized that, during battle, two armies on foot do not slowly and steadily advance towards one other. Pawns then became capable of moving two squares during only their first move, thus representing the initial charge somewhat more accurately. Later during the Middle Ages, the French developed the castling move, which involves the king moving to the corner secured by the castle to increase his own safety (illustrating a typically French plan of action!).

The purpose of chess, both during the Middle Ages and today, is to capture the other side's king. Armies are expensive, and rather than expending massive ground troops, it's wiser to merely capture or lay siege to the castle of the enemy's king. Capturing the enemy's king in chess is called a "checkmate," which comes from the ancient Persian expression "shah mat," meaning "the king is helpless," and thus defeated. Chess offers a rather large window through which to view the medieval world.