

# The Symbolism of Chess

by  
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IT is known that the game of chess originated in India. It was passed on to the medieval West through the intermediary of the Persians and the Arabs, a fact to which we owe, for example, the expression "check-mate", (German: *Schachmatt*) which is derived from the Persian *shah*: "king" and the Arabic *mat*: "he is dead". At the time of the Renaissance some of the rules of the game were changed: the "queen"<sup>1</sup> and the two "bishops"<sup>2</sup> were given a greater mobility, and thenceforth the game acquired a more abstract and mathematical character; it departed from its concrete model strategy, without however losing the essential features of its symbolism. In the original position of the chessmen, the ancient strategic model remains obvious; one can recognize the two armies ranged according to the battle order which was customary in the ancient East: the light troops, represented by the pawns, form the first line ; the bulk of the army consists of the heavy troops, the war chariots ("castles"), the knights ("cavalry") and the war elephants ("bishops"); the "king" with his "lady" or "counsellor" is positioned at the centre of his troops.

The form of the chess-board corresponds to the "classical" type of *Vāstu-mandala*, the diagram which also constitutes the basic layout of a temple or a city. It has been pointed out<sup>3</sup> that this diagram symbolizes existence conceived as a "field of action" of the divine powers. The combat which takes place in the game of chess thus represents, in its most universal meaning, the combat of the *devas* with the *asuras*, of the "gods" with the "titans", or of the "angels"<sup>4</sup> with the "demons", all other meanings of the game deriving from this one.

The most ancient description of the game of chess which we possess appears in "The Golden Prairies" by the Arab historian al-Mas'ūdī, who lived in Bagdad in the 9th century. Al-Mas'ūdī attributes the invention—or codification—of the game to a Hindu king "Balhit", a descendant of "Barahman". There is an obvious confusion here between a caste, that of the Brahmins, and a dynasty; but that the game of chess has a brahmanic origin is proved by the eminently sacerdotal character of the diagram of 8 x 8 squares (*ashtāpada*). Further, the warlike symbolism of the game relates it to the *Kshatriyas*, the caste of princes and nobles, as al-Mas'ūdī indicates when he writes that the Hindus considered the game of chess (*shatranj*, from the Sanscrit *Chaturanga*)<sup>5</sup> as a "school of government and defence". King Balhit is said to have composed a book on the game of which "he made a sort of allegory of the heavenly bodies, such as the planets and the twelve signs of the Zodiac, consecrating each piece to a star . . ." It may be recalled that the Hindus recognize eight planets: the sun, the moon, the five planets visible to the naked eye, and *Rāhu*, the "dark star" of the eclipses<sup>6</sup>; each of these "planets" rules one of the eight directions of space. "The Indians", continues al-Mas'ūdī, "give a mysterious meaning to the redoubling, that is to say to the geometrical progression, effected on the squares of the chess-board; they establish a relationship between the first cause, which

dominates all the spheres and in which everything finds its end, and the sum of the squares of the chess-board . . ." Here the author is probably confusing the cyclical symbolism implied in the *ashteipada* and the famous legend according to which the inventor of the game asked the monarch to fill the squares of his chess-board with grains of corn, by placing one grain on the first, two on the following, four on the third, and so on up to the sixty-fourth square, which gives the sum of 18,446,744,973,709,551,661 grains. The cyclical symbolism of the chess-board resides in the fact that it expresses the unfolding of space according to the quaternary and octonary of the principal directions ( $4 \times 4 \times 4 = 8 \times 8$ ), and that it synthesizes, in crystalline form, the two great complementary cycles of sun and moon: the duodenary of the zodiac and the 28 lunar mansions ; furthermore, the number 64, the sum of the squares on the chess-board, is a submultiple of the fundamental cyclic number 25920, which measures the precession of the equinoxes. We have seen that each phase of a cycle, "fixed" in the scheme of  $8 \times 8$  squares, is ruled by a heavenly body and at the same time symbolizes a divine aspect, personified by a *deva*.<sup>7</sup> It is thus that this *mandala* symbolizes at one and the same time the visible cosmos, the world of the Spirit and the Divinity in its multiple aspects. Al Mas'ūdī is therefore right to say that the Indians explain, "by calculations based on the chess-board, the march of time and the cycles, the superior influences which are exerted on this world, and the bonds which attach them to the human soul ..."

The cyclical symbolism of the chess-board was known to King Alphonsus the Wise, the famous troubadour of Castille, who in 1283 composed his *Libros de Acedrex*, a work which draws largely from Oriental sources.<sup>8</sup> Alphonsus the Wise also describes a very ancient variant of the game of chess, the "game of the four seasons", which takes place between four partners, so that the pieces, placed in the four corners of the chess-board, move in a rotatory direction, analogous to the movement of the sun. The  $4 \times 8$  pieces must have the colours green, red, black, and white; they correspond to the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter; to the four elements: air, fire, earth, and water, and to the four organic "humours". The movement of the four camps symbolizes cyclical transformation.<sup>9</sup> This game, which strangely resembles certain "solar" rites and dances of the Indians of North America, brings into relief the fundamental principle of the chess-board.

The chess-board can be considered as the extension of a diagram formed by four squares, alternatively black and white, and constitutes in itself a *mandala* of Shiva, God in his aspect of transformer: the quaternary rhythm, of which this *mandala* is, as it were, the spatial "coagulation", expresses the principle of time. The four squares, placed around an unmanifested centre, symbolize the cardinal phases of every cycle. The alternation of the black and white squares in this elementary diagram of the chess-board<sup>10</sup> brings out its cyclical significance<sup>11</sup> and makes of it the rectangular equivalent of the Far-Eastern symbol of *yin yang*. It is an image of the world in its fundamental dualism.<sup>12</sup>

If the world of the senses in its integral development results to some extent from the multiplication of qualities inherent in space and time, the *Vāstu-mandala* for its part derives from the division of time by space: one may recall the genesis of the *Vāstu-mandala* from the never-ending celestial cycle, this cycle being divided by the cardinal axes, then "crystallized" in a rectangular form.<sup>13</sup> The *mandala* is thus the inverted reflection of the principial synthesis of space and time, and it is in this that its ontological

significance resides.

From another point of view, the world is "woven" from the three fundamental qualities or *gunas*<sup>14</sup> and the *mandala* represents this weaving in a schematic manner, in conformity with the cardinal directions of space. The analogy between the *Vāstu-mandala* and weaving is brought out by the alternation of colours which recalls a woven fabric of which the warp and the woof are alternately apparent or hidden.

Moreover, the alternation of black and white corresponds to the two aspects of the *mandala*, which are complementary in principle but opposed in practice: the *mandala* is on the one hand a *Purusha-mandala*, that is to say a symbol of the Universal Spirit (*Purusha*) inasmuch as it is an immutable and transcendent synthesis of the cosmos; on the other hand it is a symbol of existence (*Vāstu*) considered as the passive support of divine manifestations. The geometric quality of the symbol expresses the Spirit, while its purely quantitative extension expresses existence. Likewise its ideal immutability is "spirit" and its limiting coagulation is "existence" or *materia*; here it is not *materia prima*, virgin and generous, which is being referred to, but *materia secunda*, "dark" and chaotic, which is the root of existential dualism. In this connection one may recall the myth according to which the *Vāstu-mandala* represents an *asūra*, personification of brute existence: the *devas* have conquered this demon and have established their "dwelling-places" on the stretched-out body of their victim; thus they confer their "form" upon him, but it is he who manifests them.<sup>15</sup>

This double meaning which characterizes the *Vāstu-Purusha-mandala*, and which, moreover, is to be found in every symbol, is in a sense actualized by the combat which a game of chess represents. This combat, as we have said, is essentially that of the *devas* and the *asūras*, who dispute the chess-board of the world. It is here that the symbolism of black and white, already present in the squares of the chess-board, takes on its full value: the white army is that of Light, the black army that of darkness. In a relative domain, the battle which takes place on the chess-board represents, either that of two terrestrial armies each of which is fighting in the name of a principle,<sup>16</sup> or that of the spirit and of darkness in man; these are the two forms of the "holy war"; the "lesser holy war" and the "greater holy war", according to a saying of the Prophet Mohammed. One will see the relationship of the symbolism implied in the game of chess with the theme of the *Bhagavadgita*, a book which is likewise addressed to *Kshatriyas*.

If the significance of the different chessmen is transposed into the spiritual domain, the king becomes the heart, or spirit, and the other pieces the various faculties of the soul. Their movements, moreover, correspond to different ways of realizing the cosmic possibilities represented by the chess-board: there is the axial movement of the "castles" or war chariots, the diagonal movement of the "bishops" or elephants, which follow a single colour, and the complex movement of the knights. The axial movement, which "cuts" through the different "colours", is logical and virile, while the diagonal movement corresponds to an "existential"—and therefore feminine—continuity. The jump of the knights corresponds to intuition.

What most fascinates the man of noble and warlike caste is the relationship between will and destiny. Now it is just this that is so clearly illustrated by the game of chess, inasmuch as its moves always remain intelligible without being limited in their variation.

Alphonsus the Wise, in his book on chess, relates how a king of India wished to know whether the world obeyed intelligence or chance. Two wise men, his advisers, gave opposing answers, and to prove their respective theses, one of them took as his example the game of chess in which intelligence prevails over chance, while the other produced dice, the symbol of fatality.<sup>17</sup>

Al- Mas'ūdī writes likewise that the king "Balhit", who is said to have codified the game of chess, gave it preference over *nerd*, a game of chance, because in the former intelligence always has the upper hand over ignorance.

At each stage of the game, the player is free to choose between several possibilities, but each movement will entail a series of unavoidable consequences, so that necessity increasingly limits free choice, the end of the game being seen, not as the fruit of hazard, but as the result of rigorous laws.

It is here that we see not only the relationship between will and fate, but likewise between liberty and knowledge; except in the case of in-advertence on the part of his opponent, the player will only safeguard his liberty of action when his decisions correspond with the nature of the game, that is to say with the possibilities that the game implies. In other words, freedom of action is here in complete solidarity with foresight and knowledge of the possibilities; contrariwise, blind impulse, however free and spontaneous it may appear at first sight, is revealed in the final outcome as a non-liberty.

The "royal art" is to govern the world—outward and inward—in conformity with its own laws. This art presupposes wisdom; which is the knowledge of possibilities; now all possibilities are contained, in a synthetic manner, in the universal and divine Spirit. True wisdom is a more or less perfect identification with the Spirit (*Purusha*), this latter being symbolized by the geometrical quality<sup>18</sup> of the chess-board, "seal" of the essential unity of the cosmic possibilities. The Spirit is Truth; through Truth, man is free; outside truth, he is the slave of fate. That is the teaching of the game of chess; the *Kshatriya* who gives himself over to it does not only find in it a pastime or a means of sublimating his warlike passion and his need for adventure, but also, according to his intellectual capacity, a speculative support, and a "way" which leads from action to contemplation.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

*In my novitiate, when I had become aware of the corruptions of the lower soul and acquainted with its places of ambush, I always felt a violent hatred of it in my heart. One day something like a young fox came forth from my throat and God caused me to know that it was my lower soul. I cast it under my feet, and at every kick that I gave it, it grew bigger. I said: "Other things are destroyed by pain and blows: why dost thou increase?" It replied: "Because I was created perverse: that which is pain to other things is pleasure to me, and their pleasure is my pain".*

*Muhammad b. 'Ulyáán of Nasá*

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<sup>1</sup> In Oriental chess this piece is not a "queen" but a "counsellor" or "minister" to the king (in Arabic *mudaffir* or *wazir*, in Persian *fersan* or *fars*). The designation "queen" in the Western game is doubtless due to a confusion of the Persian term *fersan*, which became *alferga* in Castilian, and the old French *fierce* or *fierge* for "virgin". Be that as it may, the attribution of such a dominant rôle to the king's "lady" corresponds well with the mentality of chivalry. It is significant also that the game of chess was passed on to the West by that Arab-Persian current which also brought with it heraldic art and the principal rules of chivalry.

<sup>2</sup> This piece was originally an elephant (Arabic: *al-fil*) which bore a fortified tower. The schematic representation of an elephant's head in some medieval manuscripts could be taken either for a "fool's cap" or a bishop's mitre: in French the piece is called *fou*, "fool"; in German it is called, *Läufer* "runner".

<sup>3</sup> See the author's *Sacred Art in East and West* (Perennial Books, London, 1967), Chapter I, "The Genesis of the Hindu Temple".

<sup>4</sup> The *devas* of Hindu mythology are analogous to the angels of the monotheistic traditions; it is known that each angel corresponds to a divine function.

<sup>5</sup> The word *chaturanga* signifies the traditional Hindu army, composed of four *angas* = elephants, horses, chariots and soldiers.

<sup>6</sup> Hindu cosmology always takes account of the principle of inversion and exception, which results from the "ambiguous" character of manifestation: the nature of stars is luminosity, but as the stars are not Light itself, there must also be a dark one.

<sup>7</sup> Certain Buddhist texts describe the universe as a board of 8 x 8 squares, fixed by golden cords; these squares correspond to the 64 *kalpas* of Buddhism (Cf. *Saddharma Pundarika*, Burnouf, *Lotus de la bonne Loi*, p. 148). In the *Ramayana*, the impregnable of the gods, *Ayodhya*, is described as a square with eight compartments on each side. We also recall, in the Chinese tradition, the 64 signs which derive from the 8 trigrams commented on in the I—King. These 64 signs are generally arranged so as to correspond to the eight regions of space. Thus we again encounter the idea of a quaternary and octonary division of space, which resumes all the aspects of the universe.

<sup>8</sup> In 1254 St. Louis had forbidden chess to his subjects. The saint had in mind the passions which the game could unleash, especially as it was frequently combined with the use of dice.

<sup>9</sup> This variant of chess is described in the *Bhawisyas Purana*. Alphonsus the Wise also speaks of a "great game of chess" which is played on a board of 12 x 12 squares and of which the pieces represent mythological animals; he attributes it to the sages of India.

<sup>10</sup> Given that the Chinese chess-board, which likewise had its origin in India, does not possess the alternation of the two colours, it is to be assumed that this element comes from Persia; it nevertheless remains faithful to the original symbolism of the chess-board.

<sup>11</sup> It also makes of it a symbol of inverse analogy; spring and autumn, morning and evening are inversely analogous. In a general manner the alternation of black and white corresponds to the rhythm of day and night, of life and death, of manifestation and of reabsorption in the unmanifest.

<sup>12</sup> For this reason the type of *Vastu-mandala* which has an uneven number of squares could not serve as a chess-board: the "battlefield" which the latter represents cannot have a manifested centre, for symbolically it had to be beyond oppositions.

<sup>13</sup> See *Sacred Art of East and West*, Chapter 2, "The Foundations of Christian Art".

<sup>14</sup> Cf. René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross* (Luzac, London, 1958).

<sup>15</sup> The *mandala* of 8 x 8 squares is also called *Manduka*, "the frog" by allusion to the "Great Frog" (*maha-manduka*) which supports the whole universe and which is the symbol of obscure and undifferentiated *materia*.

<sup>16</sup> In a holy war it is possible that each of the combatants may legitimately consider himself as the protagonist of Light fighting the darkness. This again is a consequence of the double meaning of every symbol: what for one is the expression of the Spirit, may be the image of "dark" "matter" in the other's eyes.

<sup>17</sup> *The mandala* of the chess-board, on the one hand, and dice, on the other, represent two different and complementary symbols of the cosmos.

<sup>18</sup> We may recall that the Spirit or the Word is the "form of forms", that is to say the formal principle of the universe.