

Chess and the Muslim Renaissance

“ACQUIRE KNOWLEDGE,” the Prophet Muhammad commanded his followers. “. . . It guideth us to happiness; it sustaineth us in misery; it is an ornament amongst friends, and an armour against enemies.”

Understanding is the essential weapon. Victory is obtained by the intellect . . .

Chess and Islam were born about the same time—chess out of a regional need to understand complex new ideas, and Islam out of the Arabs’ desperate need for discipline, intelligence, and meaningful community. In the year 612, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, a prosperous merchant from Mecca deeply troubled by the splintered, selfish nature of Arab society, emerged as the Prophet Muhammad with divine instructions on how to unite and transform his people. He called his new belief system *Islam*, meaning “peace through surrender to God.” In its essence, Islam was a strict code of ethics requiring subservience to the community and compassion toward the poor. It quickly helped Arab tribes end their constant blood feuds and create an all-powerful supertribe based not on family connection but on shared ideology and security. Islam made Arabia an instant superpower. Within two decades of Muhammad’s death in 632, the new Muslim Empire controlled Persia, Syria, Egypt, and pieces of North Africa.

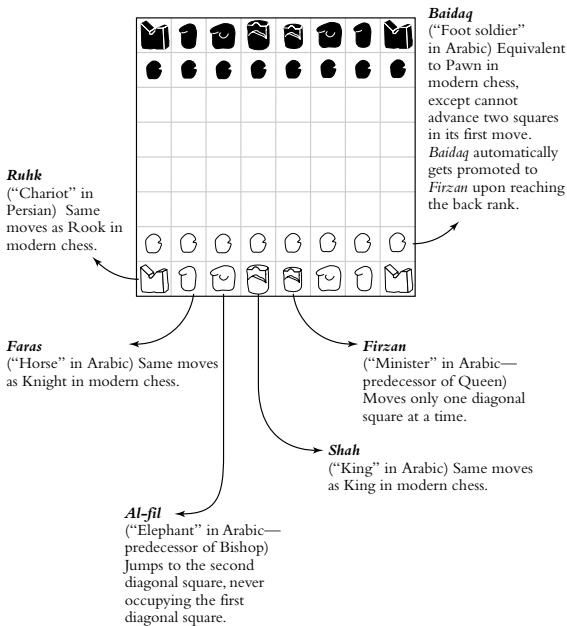
In Persia the Muslims encountered *chatrang*, the bloodless new war game which relied solely on players' intellect. Chess and Islam complemented each other well: a new game of war, wits, and self-control serving a spirited new religious and social movement organized around the same values. "The [board] is placed between two friends of known friendship," wrote ninth-century poet Ali ibn al-Jahm. "They recall the memories of war in an image of war, but without bloodshed. This attacks, that defends, and the struggle between them never languishes."

Lacking the *ch* and the *ng* sounds in their speech, Arab Muslims changed *chatrang* into *shatranj*, and quickly made the game their own. As if invented by Muhammad himself, the game seemed to speak directly to the new Muslim ideals—and found its way into the progressive rhetoric of the day. "The skilled player places his pieces in such a way as to discover consequences that the ignorant man never sees," wrote the poet al-Katib. ". . . Thus he serves the Sultan's interests, by showing how to foresee disaster."

Records show that *shatranj* quickly became woven into the fabric of the new Muslim culture. A list of prominent players of the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries includes caliphs, lawyers, immigrants, intellectuals, and even young girls. It's also clear that the game soon transcended mere play for its Islamic adopters. "I keep you from your inheritance and from the royal crown so that, hindered by my arm, you remain a Pawn (*baidaq*) among the Pawns (*bayadiq*)," wrote the poet al-Farazdaq in the late seventh century. The caste implications of chess quickly captured the popular imagination, with the array of pieces seen as a microcosm not just of a fighting army but also more generally of human society, with its all-important monarch, its privileged nobility, and its expendable peasants. A chess set was not, in and of itself, social commentary, but with its crystal clear labeling of society's constituent parts, it did strongly *invite* social commentary. Already the game was an indelible part of the Islamic landscape.

Even with its broad resonance, though, chess was not immune to controversy. From the very first exposure to the game, there had been a serious and recurring question as to whether chess was allowable un-

A GUIDE TO SHATRANJ (ISLAMIC CHESS), CIRCA A.D. 700



Ancient depiction of shatranj

Other differences from modern chess

- The board was not yet checkered.
- Stalemating the opposing King resulted in a win for the player delivering stalemate. (In modern chess, stalemate results in a draw.)
- Capturing all of the opponent's pieces except the King also counted as a win, provided that one's own King could not be left alone on the very next move.
- There was no castling option (wherein the King essentially changes places with one of his Rooks—to be explained in detail in Chapter 3).

der Islamic law. The Koran—the sacred text of revelations received by Muhammad—did not mention chess by name, but did explicitly outlaw the use of both “images” and “lots.” The prohibition of *images* was aimed at eliminating any sort of idol worship, and was instituted broadly against any directly representational art or sculpture. *Lots* included gambling of any kind. Since chess play at the time quite often involved wagers—indeed, one ancient story from India portrayed young players betting their own fingers in games, cutting them off on the spot after a loss, cauterizing the wounds, and continuing to play—many first- and second-generation Muslims considered the game altogether tainted and plainly illegal. Others regarded chess as having no purpose other than recreation, and thus falling into the category of official disapproval (though not strict prohibition).

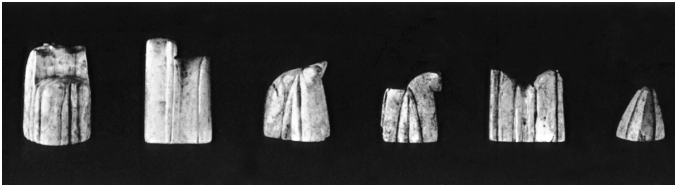
But chess did have a purpose, a deadly serious one, according to many proponents at that time. It not only broadly sharpened the mind, but also specifically trained war strategists for battle. “There is nothing wrong in it,” proclaimed Muhammad’s second successor, the pious and austere Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab. “It has to do with war.”

Eventually, a general consensus found the game acceptable in the Islamic world under certain conditions:

- no wagering
- no interference with religious duties
- no displays of anger or improper language
- no playing in public
- no representational pieces

This last item came out of the Koran’s prohibition against images. It is said that Ali ibn Abu Talib, Muhammad’s cousin, son-in-law, and the fourth caliph (*caliph* means “deputy of the prophet”), passed by a game in progress one day and asked, disapprovingly, “What *images* are these upon which you are gazing so intently?” By Indian and Persian tradition, chess pieces had vividly represented the mechanics of war, depicting tiny soldiers, elephants, chariots, horses, and so on. Islamic law

forced a complete reconception of chess's aesthetics. Muslim craftsmen abstracted the explicit Persian figures into elegant, hand-carved, cylindrical or rectangular stones with subtle indentations, bumps, and curves to symbolize a throne or a tusk or a horse's head.



Ceramic chess set from twelfth-century Iran

They created symbols, that is, of symbols. The severe abstraction made the game acceptable to most religious authorities.

BY THE BEGINNING of the ninth century, the game had also spread farther westward, to the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. In 802 the new emperor Nicephorus employed chess terminology to convey a threat to Caliph Harun ar-Rashid at his Baghdad palace:

The empress into whose place I have succeeded looked upon you as a Rook and herself as a mere Pawn; therefore she submitted to pay you a tribute more than the double of which she ought to have exacted *from* you. All this has been owing to female weakness and timidity. Now, however, I insist that you, immediately on reading this letter, repay to me all the sums of money you ever received from her. If you hesitate, the sword shall settle our accounts.

In life, as in chess, a rash player can too easily become caught up in the excitement of a single bold move and thus be utterly blind to his opponent's obvious and devastating response. The caliph, a chess player himself, did not repay or reverse the flow of the tribute. Instead, his army marched on and laid siege to Nicephorus's army at Heracleia,

forcing him to succumb to the same tribute arrangement as his predecessor.

Caliph ar-Rashid, both a warrior and an intellectual, ushered in the first true Islamic Renaissance—which later became the impetus for the European Renaissance. Acting on the Prophet’s direct wishes, ar-Rashid made acquisition of knowledge a central Islamic mission. Centuries of books from all over the world were translated into Arabic, including the pantheon of Greek philosophy. Greek medical knowledge was incorporated into the first true Islamic hospital. Islamic literature bloomed, sparking *The Arabian Nights* and other great works. In 832 ar-Rashid’s son, Caliph al-Ma’mun, completed the spectacular House of Wisdom in Baghdad, which quickly became one of the world’s great libraries. Important advances were made during this period in chemistry, astronomy, agriculture, architecture, and engineering. Mathematicians applied spherical trigonometry and the new science of algebra to all sorts of worldly observations, including a more precise calculation of time, latitude and longitude, the earth’s surface area and circumference, and the location of the stars.

Both father and son were chess fanatics; both employed top chess players and personally competed against them. Chess to these early enthusiasts wasn’t just idle fancy, a means to pass the many leisurely hours on the throne. They also recognized a direct connection between chess and the intellectual vitality they were trying to nurture in their expanding empire. “A Muslim philosopher has maintained that the inventor of chess was a [believer] in the freedom of will,” wrote medieval Islamic historian al-Mas’udi (appropriating the earlier Indian legend), “while the inventor of nard was a fatalist who wished to show by this game that man can do nothing against fate.” In the history of intellectual progress, the embrace of free will over fate was a critical step. The realization, both personal and institutional, that people could help shape their own destiny helped lay the foundations of all modern science, philosophy, economic development, and democratic culture. Chess may have helped fertilize the concept, and certainly helped some people comprehend it.

With such weighty associations, chess from the very beginning was intuitively understood by Muslims to be more than a game, and its most expert players to be engaged in more than simple recreation. Chess was a paradigm that you could legitimately spend your whole life studying. From the earliest centuries of the recorded history of the game, there is evidence of a small academic/professional class of players who studied openings, devised endgame problems, wrote about strategic approaches (now known as chess theory), and towered above all challengers. In the Islamic world, these top players were known as *aliyat*, the “highest of ranks,” the grandmasters. *Aliyat* were said to be able to see an astonishing ten moves ahead, much deeper than the second skill class, the *mutaqaribat*.

In the entire ninth century there were just five *aliyat*, each succeeding the other as the strongest known player. The first two, Jabir al-Khufi and Rabrab, competed against one another in the presence of Caliph al-Ma'mun. The caliph was a serious player who insisted that his subordinates play him at their top strength. He was also humble enough to understand his deep limitations. “Strange,” he once remarked, “that I who rule the world from the Indus in the east to the Andalus in the west cannot manage thirty-two chessmen in a space of two cubits by two.”

A few years after al-Ma'mun's death in 833, the strongest player yet emerged: the apparently unbeatable al-Adli. Possibly of Turkish descent, al-Adli dominated the game for much of his lifetime and also wrote chess's first in-depth book of analysis, *Kitab ash-shatranj* (The book of chess), circa 840. In his book he defined the five classes of skill and introduced the very first chess problems. Most of these problems were lost forever with copies of his manuscript, but some survive—thanks to the many medieval Arabic books which quoted his.

One particular al-Adli problem is still highly accessible to any modern chess player, because it includes only Kings, Rooks, Knights, and Pawns—pieces that have exactly the same moves in modern chess as they did in ancient *shatranj*.