

# *The Chess Sets of the East India Company*



# Introduction

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Most of the sets shown in this presentation are featured in an upcoming book, which is due to be published in early November:

## ***The Horta-Osório Collection of Antique Chess Sets***

### ***Volume 1: India***

This book will be the first of (estimated) six volumes covering the outstanding antique chess collection of António Horta-Osório. António is a member of Chess Collectors International.

Authors of this first volume are:

- António Horta-Osório
- Jonathan Crumiller
- Thomas Thomsen
- Ulrich Schädler
- Jacob Schmidt-Madsen
- Hugo Miguel Crespo
- Leander Feiler
- Raymond Keene & Jackie Eales

Other sets shown in this presentation are from the Jon Crumiller Collection.



## East India Company (“John Company”) Set, circa 1800

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# The East India Company (1600 – 1874)

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- The British East India Company stands alone amongst commercial entities, possibly even throughout history, because their mission was to facilitate and monopolize commercial trade within India by seizing and conquering vast territories.
- The company functioned as more of an occupying force than as a company: at its peak the company's army consisted of over 250,000 soldiers. The majority of these soldiers were sepoys, i.e., hired Indian servants who fought battles, and wars, on behalf of the company, so the large number of casualties on both sides of these armed conflicts were mostly Indian.
- Then, after a territory had been secured, the manufacturing of all kinds of goods, including chess sets, was undertaken, using the natural resources of the Indian territories and the well-honed skills of subjugated craftsmen and women who labored for the company.
- The East India Company had (and still has) a commonly used nickname: the John Company. It is likely that the nickname arose from a moniker of the Dutch East India Company, an early competitor which predated the British company: Jan Compagnie, with a similar pronunciation.



*East India Company  
Coat of Arms*

# The East India Company (1600 – 1874)

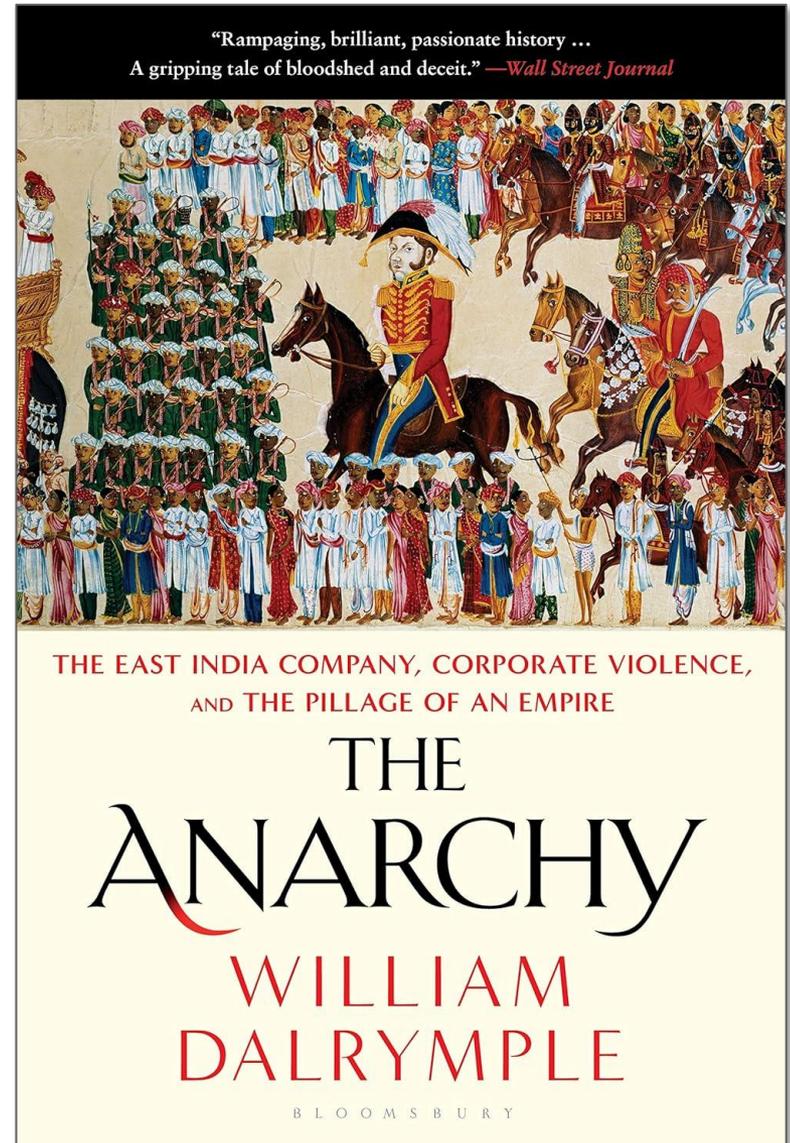
This presentation does not include a historical summary of the East India Company it is focused solely on the chess sets.

If you are interested in learning more about the company's fascinating and disturbing history, I recommend the book

**The Anarchy:  
The East India Company,  
Corporate Violence,  
and the Pillage of an Empire**

by William Dalrymple (2019).

(The title of earlier editions was *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company.*)



# John Company Set, circa 1830

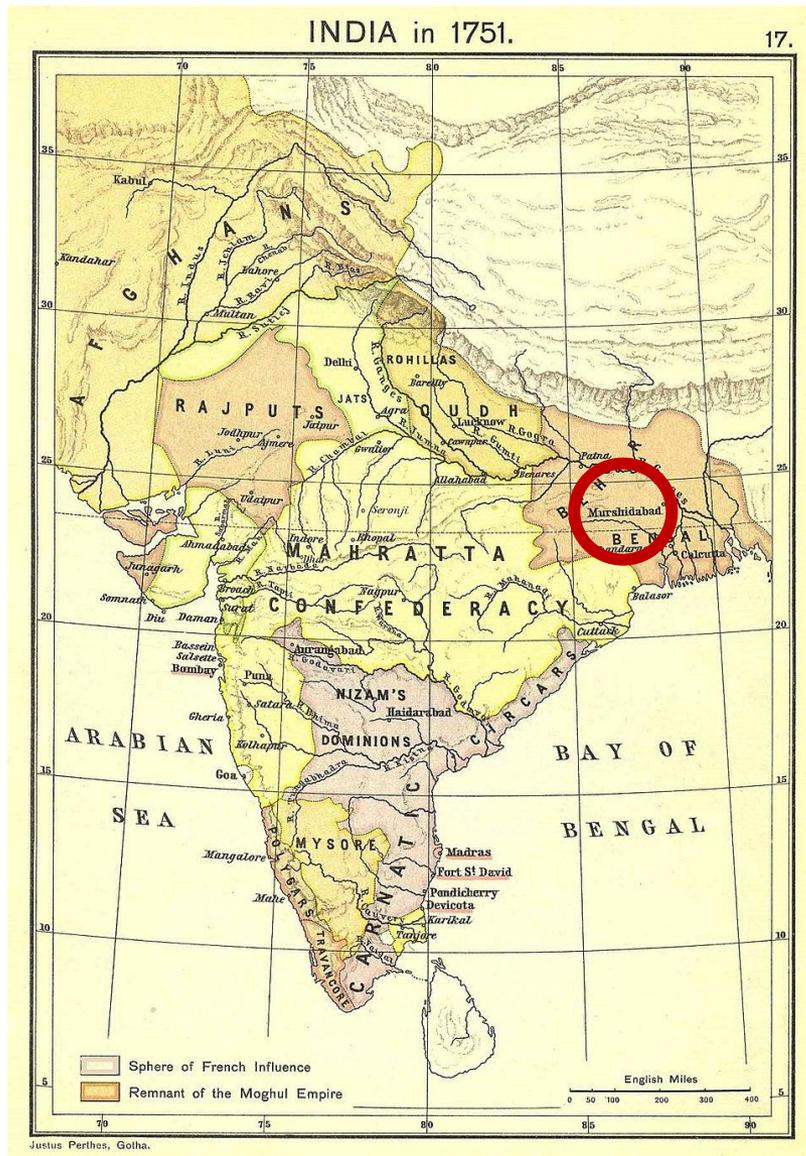
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# Ivory Workshops of The East India Company



- The company's ivory carving workshops that specialized in the manufacture of East India Company chess sets were located on the far eastern side of India, known as West Bengal, 125 miles north of Kolkata, in a pair of town-settlements: Murshidabad and Berhampore.
- Murshidabad was an early producer of top-quality ivory goods, including chess sets, during the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- Subsequently the production of East India Company goods, including chess sets, mostly shifted to the ivory workshops of Berhampore, which was only a few miles to the south.

# Ivory Workshops of The East India Company

APRIL 26, 1851.]

THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS.

335



IVORY-CUTTERS AT BERHAMPOOR (BENGAL), FOR THE GREAT EXHIBITION.

# John Company Set with Theme of “Clive of India”, late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century

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## John Company Set with Theme of “Tiger Hunt”, mid 19<sup>th</sup> century



# Ivory Workshops of The East India Company

“It would doubtless amuse many people in England if they could see the rough and primitive tools with which such minute and beautiful work is turned out; and more would it astonish artisans and others to witness the use the workmen make of their feet, which to them are equal to an extra pair of hands, the feet being constantly called into play even to picking up their tools when beyond the immediate reach of their hands.” [Illustrated London News article, 1851-04-26]



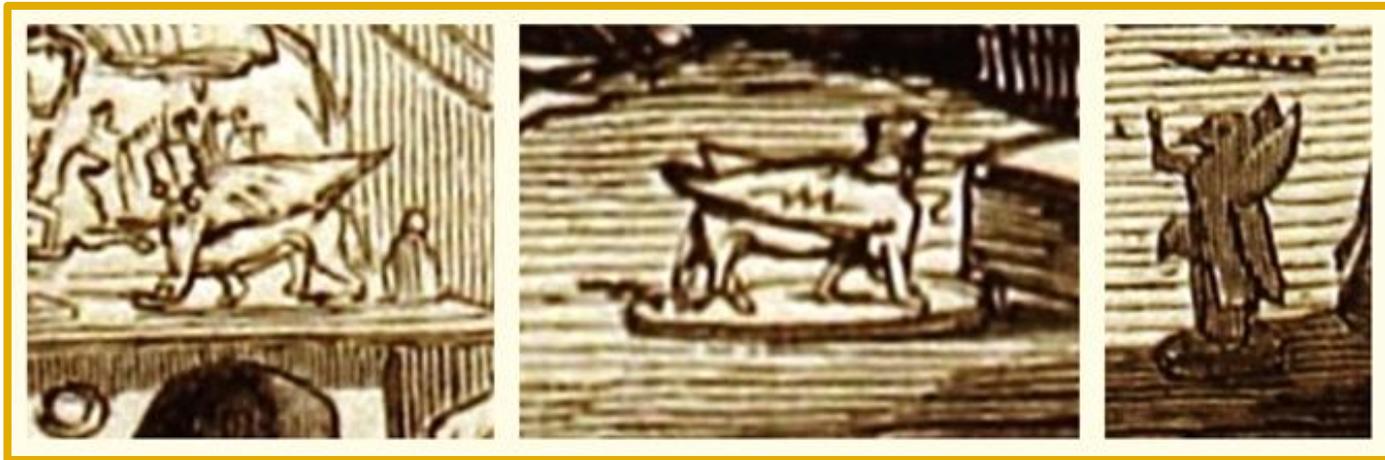
# Ivory Workshops of The East India Company

“The subjects already carved are numerous, consisting of elephants, camels, bullocks, boats, palanquins, tigers, carts, a set of chessmen representing the figures from Layard's "Nineveh"; puzzles, letters, and a variety of minor articles. ... The whole of the ivory work is at present under the guidance and superintendence of an [East India Company] officer in the army.”  
[*Illustrated London News* article, 1851-04-26]



## Ivory Workshops of The East India Company

“The ivory carvers of Berhampore contributed a variety of specimens of their work, and deserved much credit for elaborateness of detail and truth of representation. To illustrate the facility with which they could carve the most minute objects, as well of those of larger size, – there was an elephant enclosed in the shell of a pea, – and that they were capable of doing new things, when required, was shown in the set of chessmen carved from the drawings of Layard’s ‘Nineveh.’” [*Dickinsons’ “Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851”*]



## Ivory Workshops of The East India Company

A Nineveh-themed set from the Berhampore workshop can still be found in the British Royal Collection.



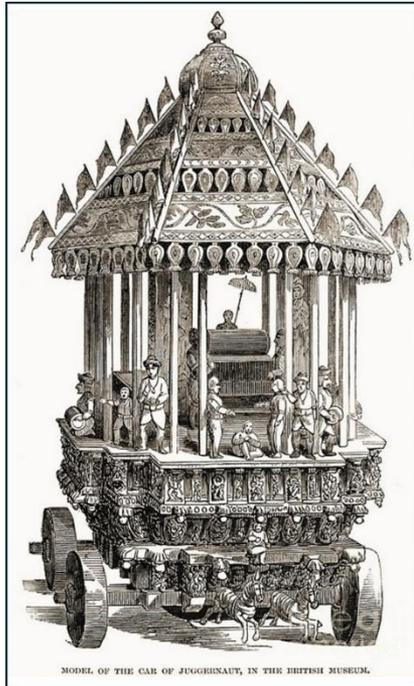
# John Company Set with Juggernaut Bishops, late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century

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# John Company Set with Juggernaut Bishops, late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century





Possibly the most sought-after piece variant within John Company sets is the Juggernaut. Instead of riders on camels, the bishops are represented as large, elaborate chariots, drawn by galloping horses or beasts of burden. The term “juggernaut”, including our modern usage as a merciless, destructible, or unstoppable force, originated “in the mid-nineteenth century and was the early rendering in English of Jagannath, an important deity in the Hinduism of eastern and north-eastern India.” (Wikipedia)

The term was subsequently associated as an allegorical reference to the Hindu temple cars of the Jagannath Temple in Puri [eastern India], which apocryphally were reputed to crush devotees under their wheels.

The illustration of a juggernaut car (above, left) is from Granger (1846).

## John Company Set with Juggernaut Bishops, late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century

Most antique chess sets do not have well-established provenance, but this set has a historical chain-of-custody that extends back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century: top chess collectors who owned this set, over time, include Messrs. Platt, Melson, Esbola, Hafler, Dean, and Horta-Osório. The set is also featured in Victor Keats' chess-collecting book.



This set combines two variants: a cart form of the juggernaut bishops along with figures of animals representing one of the pieces. In this case, rhinoceroses are included in the battle formation.

A question arises, though: specifically which chess piece are rhinoceroses supposed to represent? This set has cart juggernauts, which are usually placed as bishops; it also has camels with riders, which are usually placed as bishops; and animals. Lacking are both towers (usually rooks) and cavalry (usually knights).



# Which Animals Represent Which Chess Pieces?

- Incongruences in animal-to-piece matchups have led to perplexity within the chess-collecting world. But a simple hypothesis may be proposed as the solution, as follows.
- The ivory craftsmen did not assemble the sets themselves; they simply made individual pieces, and often the same piece over and over and over.
- Only later were the sets assembled as a separate step. During assembly, most sets followed the usual sequence of pieces: king (elephant), queen (elephant), bishop (camel or juggernaut), knight (horse), and rook (tower).
- But if some different figures had been carved, the assembler would substitute them in, with the objective of completing a 32-piece set, but without any strict adherence to which figure might adhere to a certain one-to-one correspondence.
- Thus, if some animal figures were manufactured in smaller numbers from the other pieces, it would lead to precisely the situation in today's John Company sets: a sometimes-inconsistent matchup of animal figures to specific chess pieces.





This East India Company set has indigenous animals as knights on the opposing sides. It is possible that the red bases had been re-stained at a later point in time. It has not been uncommon for a dealer, or even a collector, to “touch up” the colors or embellishments of a set.





This set, which is early-to-mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, has an unusual feature in that one side has green-stained bases whereas the other side has black-stained bases, instead of one side remaining unstained.

Probably this anomaly was introduced during the assembly process, or possibly one side's bases could have been stained at a later point in time.

# John Company Set with Juvenile Elephants and Manned Rooks

Piece Variants

This set, which probably dates to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, has young elephants mounted with riders as the bishop pieces.

Another interesting and possibly unique feature is that the rook towers are manned with a soldier!



## East India Company Set with Seated Elephants as Rooks

Piece Variants

The set shown here has another possibly unique feature: the rooks are represented by seated elephants. The camel-bishops are also mounted with two riders instead of one, which is unusual as well.

Note that the quality of carving is slightly lower than that of other John Company sets.



# East India Company Set with Bengal-Style Boats, 19<sup>th</sup> century

Piece Variants

The Berhampore/Murshidabad area were situated in what was then known as West Bengal. Boats were very important in Bengal in the 19th century, serving as the primary means of transport, trade, and livelihood due to the region's extensive river network.

Following Bengali style, boats were (rarely) substituted for towers in John Company sets. The ILN article refers not only to carved boats made by the workshop, but also craftsmen from Bengal.





## John Company Set with “Associated” Pieces, 19<sup>th</sup> century

“... the black and green bases re-stained, one green pawn and one black pawn missing, the bishops, queens and black king have slightly different bases and are likely to be from another set of the same period.”

*Bonhams auction, 2012-05-12, lot 117*



## East India Company or Northern Indian Set, mid 19<sup>th</sup> century



This set has all the normal features of a John Company set, but it shows a markedly different style of carving, with unusual poses of some pieces and other attributes that differ from other John Company sets.

On a broader basis, the question becomes: precisely what is a “John Company” set? Experts may differ on some specific attributes, but there is consensus expert agreement for a large majority of sets that could potentially be called John Company sets. Only a small number of sets would cause a difference of opinion.

The differences are typically of two categories: [1] the set could have been made elsewhere (although almost certainly in North India, including Bengal); and/or [2] the set could have been manufactured after the East India Company was decommissioned in 1874.

# Dating of East India Company Sets

- The dating of a John Company set cannot be an exact science, but there are often clues that point to its approximate dating.
- Pawns' uniforms: the shakos (military caps) worn by the chess pawn were introduced early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and came to prominence in the period 1815-1830.
- Other indicators of approximate dating are the fabric patterns of elephants' ceremonial robes, a comparison of artistic features with other works of Indian art, and the general features of carving and craftsmanship at the time.



Christie's auction, 2006-09-20, lot 35

- Another tendency, which can be used for dating purposes, was a slow-but-steady reduction in quality over time.
- The most intricate sets were made in the latter 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century; excellent sets were still made 1Q-3Q 19<sup>th</sup> century; then the quality trended downward.
- Manufacturing and marketing of sets as “John Company” sets continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but those sets are clearly substandard.

## John-Company-Style set, late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century

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The East India Company was decommissioned in 1874 and ceased to be a sponsor of the manufacture and distribution of chess sets. However, the same general patterns were used by the Indian craftsmen to continue to make chess sets, in order to make a living.

This set shows a carving style that became common in India during the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, but within that context, this set is of very high-quality carving. Note however that some pieces were made from only part of the tusk.



# Comparison of Pieces from Different John Company Sets

Shown here are side-by-side photos of one type of piece from John Company sets (from the Crumiller collection).

## *Kings*



## *Queens*



# Comparison of Pieces from Different John Company Sets

Shown here are side-by-side photos of one type of piece from John Company sets (from the Crumiller collection).

## *Bishops*



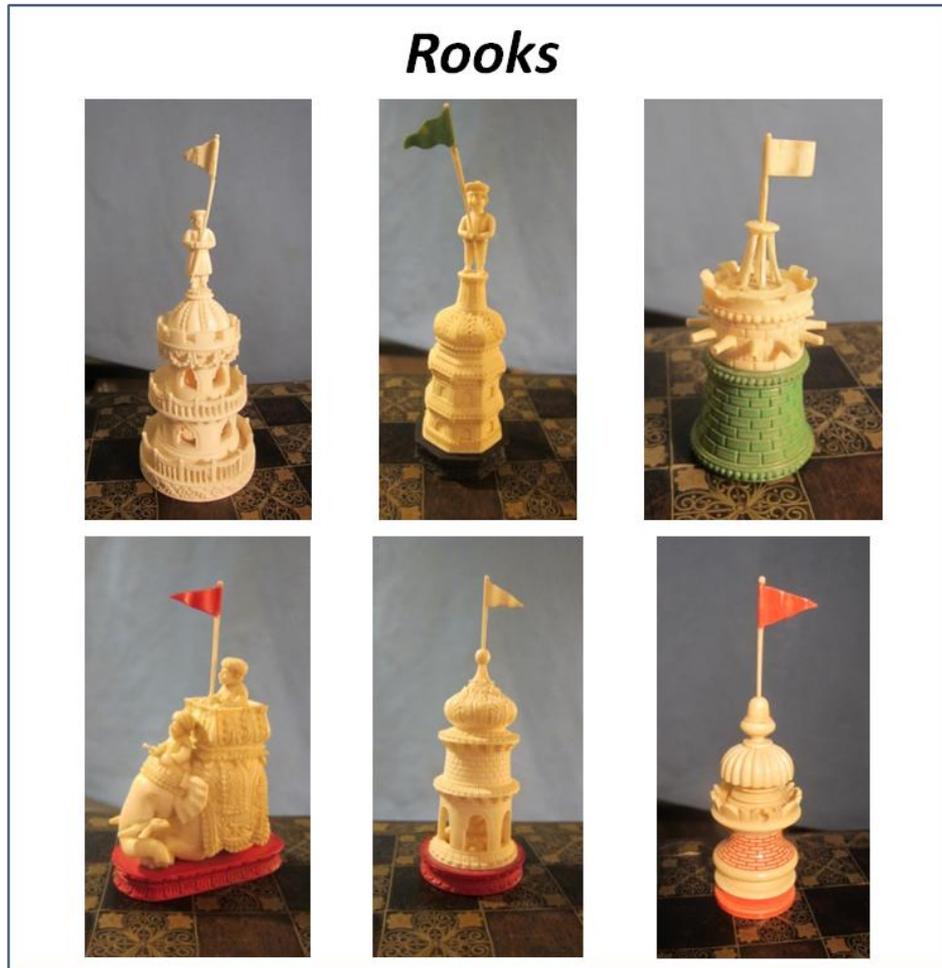
## *Knights*



# Comparison of Pieces from Different John Company Sets

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Shown here are side-by-side photos of one type of piece from John Company sets (from the Crumiller collection).



# Comparison of Pieces from Different John Company Sets

Shown here are side-by-side photos of one type of piece from John Company sets (from the Crumiller collection).



## John Company Set with Theme of “Clive of India”, mid 19<sup>th</sup> century

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We conclude our presentation with a typically beautiful John Company set with the battle-theme of “Clive of India”, consisting of elephants, camels, horses, towers, and soldiers.

## Bibliography and Further Reading

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Crumiller, Jonathan (2016) *The Chess Sets of the East India Company*.

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