But it probably does come from India

It is common ground today that chess originated somewhere in Asia. In a paper in 1998, "Wo das Schachspiel nicht herkommt – Facts to think about", Ricardo Calvo put forward four "facts" in support of his case that wherever it did come from, chess did not come from India. In another longer paper published the same year by Chess Collectors International, Calvo put forward the same arguments, and also contended that the traditional view that the Persians accepted that chess came there from India was based on a misreading of the relevant texts. I propose to consider each of the points made by Calvo, and then to consider the alternatives.

1. The source of chess as indicated by Persian and Arab texts

This has traditionally been accepted as India. However, Yektai and Calvo have suggested that the references in these texts are to an area of what is now south west Persia and Iraq rather than to India. This is based on the use of the word "Hend" or "Hind" to describe the place of origin in the available texts, which it is said was not the word used to describe India until about 1100AD.

This theory cannot stand when these texts are considered in full. Firdausi clearly has India in mind. He refers to the place of origin as being Kanauj, a well known city of north west India, and the capital city of Harsha in whose reign, in Bana's *Harshacharita* we find the first surviving Indian reference to chess. Several other writers, including al-Adli and al-Masudi, refer to the *Kalila-wa-Dimna* - the Arabic translation of the Sanskrit *Pancatantra* - as coming from the same place as chess. They too must, therefore, have been referring to India.

The name of the king who sent chess to Persia, "Dewasarm" in the *Chatrang-namak*, also bears a striking resemblance to the Indian king "Devasarman" featured in the *Pancatantra*. These names, Dewasarm and Devasarman, have recently been shown by Renate Syed to bear a striking resemblance to the Maukhari king Sarvavarman, who is called on his coins deva sarvavarmma. He reigned in Kanauj (identified by Firdausi as the source of chess) between about 560 or 565 and 585, and his reign thus overlapped with that of Khusrau Anushirvan, the Persian king to whom chess is said to have been brought from India.

Whether true or not, the Persian and Arab tradition was clearly that chess came from the Indian sub-continent in the latter part of the 6th century AD.

If Calvo is right about the term used and its first use as the name for India in the 11th century (and I have not checked either point) then the explanation must lie in the fact that the earliest surviving manuscripts containing these references date from the 14th

century. The authors of those manuscripts, or of those from which they were copied, must have used the modern term for India rather than some earlier term which had fallen out of use.

2. **"Indian literature has no early mentions of chess but Persian literature does."**

This "fact" is immediately contradicted by Calvo himself when he draws attention to Bana's *Harshacharita*, which he dates to between 625 and 640. He contrasts this solitary reference with two pre-Islamic Persian references which he ascribes to the 6th to 7th centuries, the *Karnamak* and the *Chatrang-namak*. He may or may not be right as to the dates of these works – they have been variously dated in my experience to between the 7th and 9th centuries. Even if he is right, however, a majority of two surviving texts to one of about the same period 1400 years ago is hardly evidence that game began in the place from which the two texts came, or suggestive that it did not come from the other place.

There is, in any event, evidence of old Indian texts which have not survived. Al-Adli was familiar with the rules of chess in India, while al-Masudi specifically refers to Indian writings on chess. It is also the case that such early Indian references as survive clearly pre-suppose a knowledge of chaturanga on the part of the reader.

Calvo also argues that technical chess literature was a rarity in India. Surviving texts are certainly rare, but so what? No technical chess literature has survived from Persia, and it was centuries later in Baghdad that the game developed and experts emerged. So too, modern chess began in Spain in the 15th century, yet technical chess literature was a rarity there, and it was in 18th century Italy and France that the new game developed.

3. "India has no early chess pieces but Persia does."

Calvo refers to the Afrasiab pieces, dated to the 7th to 8th centuries by Burjakov, and found in the same layer as a coin of 761. It is by no means clear that three other pieces, to which he also refers, including a carving of a bird said to be a rukh, are chess pieces at all.

It is incontestable that there are relatively early chessmen which have been found in Persian territory and no similar finds have been made in India of any pieces which can clearly be identified as chessmen. Nevertheless, the fact that a single part set has been found in Afrasiab dating well after the earliest references to chess, and a century or more after it is said by contemporary Persians to have come from India, proves nothing as to the origin of the game.

We have no clearly identifiable Indian chess pieces, and few, if any, Indian games pieces dating from between the 6th and 15th centuries, although there are several

known Indian works dealing with, or referring to, chess, and outside writings on chess in India from at least the 10th century onwards, and al-Masudi refers to ivory as being principally used in India for the carving of chess and nard pieces. The absence of known playing pieces before the 16th century does not mean that there was no two or four-handed chess in India before that time, or that games in general were not played in India in that time span.

4. "The Arabs introduced chess in India after taking "Shatrang" from Persia"

This is pure assertion. Calvo argues that in later Indian writings, chaturanga is used to refer to the four-handed dice chess variants, while the two-handed game is called buddhibala or buddhiyuta. He says that this shows or suggests that chaturanga was at all times a four-handed dice game. He states that two-handed chess was brought to India by the Arabs around 1100AD, and that the terminology for two handed-chess was Persian not Indian. These assertions are misconceived for a number of reasons:

1. In the *Nitivakyamrta*, cited by Renate Syed in an article in *Arbeitspapiere zum Privatissimum "Seidenstrasse" Berlin, 20 und 21 Februar 1998*, there is reference to the relation between the king and his minister in chaturanga. This would seem likely to be a reference to the two-handed game, as there is no minister in any known Indian four-handed game. So too, Andreas Bock-Raming has pointed out that the title of the section on the two-handed game in the *Manasollasa* is *chaturangavinoda*.
2. In those texts, in the *Balakahitabuddhibalakridanam* and in other works cited in Murray and by Dr. Rajendran in his 1997 paper on *Traditional Caturanga as preserved in Kerala*, the terminology is purely Indian.
3. The names of the two-handed games in other countries nearby derive from chaturanga. These include countries to the east of India. In Burma, the name is *sittuyin*, derived from *sit,* the word for army. It is highly improbable that they adopted as the name for the two-handed game the name of the four-handed game.
4. There seems no good reason for supposing that long before 1100AD the two-handed game would have travelled across the Arab world to the west and to China in the east, but not have reached India (supposing that it did not originate there).
5. The evidence, considered below, is that the four-handed game in India was a variation of the two-handed game.
6. It is clear that al-Adli and al-Masudi understood that the game played in India was a two-handed game. Al-Adli describes changes in the rules compared with those in India. They relate to the moves of the pieces and not to the number of players.
7. If Calvo were right that the four-handed game did come first to India, then one would have to ask where it came from and as to its relationship to the two handed game of skill. Did the two-handed game develop outside India

from the four-handed game? If so, how is it that there is no trace of a four-handed game outside India? Or did it, by coincidence, develop separately, with the same moves for the pieces and similar objectives?

What seems to have happened is that in India, at some stage, there was a change in name of the two-handed game to distinguish it as a game of the intellect from the four-handed game of chance played with dice, but that before that time the two-handed game was called chaturanga.

Arguments that early chess was four-handed seem to be based on a misunderstanding of the word "chaturanga", a misunderstanding of al-Beruni, and the argument of Calvo, already referred to, that two-handed chess was not called chaturanga in India.

Chaturanga, long before the 6th century, meant simply army. The Code of Manu, for example, refers to a chaturanga of six parts. Even reading it as an army of four parts, however, it did not refer to the number of players, as some writers have suggested.

Al-Beruni described a chess variation which was being played with a set for the two-handed game. He wrote that "The name of the Shah here applies to the Firzan". As the firzan does not exist in any known version of the four-handed game in India, it would seem likely that the firzan from a two-handed set was being used as the Shah in the four-handed game. This inference is supported by the accompanying diagram in the earliest manuscript seen by Murray, who confirmed in correspondence (at p.5 of a long letter to Paul Seyferth dated 6 January 1936, now in vol.166 of his papers) that that diagram showed that only two colours were used for the four sides.

According to Bock-Raming, the pieces in the four-handed variation in the *Manasollasa* were also two colours only, red and white. The first reference to four colours being used in a four-handed game is in a 14th century Bengali work, the *Titthitattva*, while in all other works, and in the four-handed game as played in India around 1900, only two colours are used.

Averbakh, in explaining the rules of the four-handed game described by al-Beruni, has argued that the need to capture the opposing kings in the four-handed game is the origin of the concept of checkmate in the two-handed game. This argument is doubly flawed. First, it is equally feasible that this idea derives from the concept of checkmate in the two-handed game. Secondly, it cannot be assumed that because the point scoring system described by al-Beruni existed in the 11th century, it is likely to have existed when the two-handed version of the game came into being.

The game was a two-handed game of skill as played in Persia and there is no suggestion by al-Adli, when explaining the differences between the Indian and Persian games, that there had been any change in the number of the players or in the use of dice. Further, the game which spread throughout Asia was a two-handed game. If it came from India, this would be surprising if the game in India was four-handed.

Indeed, there is no evidence of the Indian four-handed chess spreading beyond India at all. If the two-handed game did not begin in India, it would be odd if it reached India only as a four-handed variant, and it is inconceivable that a four-handed version would have emerged in India unconnected with the two-handed game.

"Etymology is unclear"

Chaturanga, in Sanskrit, meant "army", as Calvo accepts. The original meaning of 4 parts, or an army of 4 parts had long since been lost. The only meanings suggested for the Persian word "Chatrang" are that it came form the same root as "Chaturanga" and meant four sided or square, and Calvo's suggestion, following Hyde, that it derived from the word for the mandrake plant. Hyde, of course, knew nothing of Sanskrit or of chaturanga when he put forward that suggestion, and there is no reason why a war game should be named after a plant just because the roots of the plant can resemble human figures.

In all the known versions of chess in India, the identity of the pieces corresponds to parts of an Indian army. The Persian name, *rukh*, has no obvious military meaning. Even in the *Chatrang-namak*, where there are descriptions of the likeness of all the other pieces, no description is offered for the *rukh*, suggesting that the writer did not know what the rukh represented, and no explanation is to be found elsewhere. Early Chinese texts refer to this piece as a chariot, suggesting an Indian, rather than a Persian, source for the game.

Calvo seeks support for his theory by reference to the use of animals such as lions, crocodiles and giraffes in the Grande Acedrex of King Alfonso in the late 13th century, but it is difficult to follow how extra pieces used in a variant invented 700 years later many thousands of miles from the place where chess began (wherever that was) can have any relevance to the etymology of chatrang and chaturanga.

The etymological contest is thus between (1) a war game called the army game with pieces all of which are associated with Indian armies, and (2) a war game called after a square or a plant with a root that can look like a human figure, one of the pieces of which, the *rukh*, has no obvious military or other significance, and the name and nature of which is not explained in any old text, even the *Chatrang-namak*, where all the other pieces are explained as part of an army.

China

I am not seeking in this paper to deal with the arguments that chess originated in China. I do so elsewhere, and simply state my conclusions here. There is no evidence to suggest that chess began in China. The astrological games referred to by Needham and Bidev have no obvious connection with chess, and the arguments of Bidev in particular are seriously flawed. The first known written reference to the

game in China dates from the end of the 8th century AD. There is no evidence that it was ever played in China except in the form of *xiangqi*. The name of the game in Tibet, *chanderaki*, and the rules there, suggest that the game reached Tibet from India/ Persia and not from China. So too, the Burmese name is *sittuyin*, derived from the Burmese word for "army, *sit*, while the Khmer name is *chhoeu trang*. These names, plus the rules in use there, clearly indicate an Indian source of the game rather than a Chinese origin. There are Chinese traditions that chess began in China hundreds or thousands of years before we find it in India or Persia, but these traditions are no more supported by evidence or reason than the European traditions that it was invented by Palamedes or Xerxes.

When and how did chess begin?

This is still almost wholly speculative, but the absence of any evidence of chess or of any close predecessor of chess before, at the earliest, about 600AD, suggests that it is likely to have begun only in the 5th or 6th centuries, in India, as a two-handed game of skill. It could easily have been devised as a war game in the court in Kanauj in the second half of the 6th century and to have passed from there to Persia, as the *Chatrang-namak* suggests.

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