



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

Volume 1

## **India**



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## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

#### *About This Book*

This book is the first in a series of volumes encompassing the world-class antique chess collection of António Horta-Osório. The volumes in the series are organized by the originating country/location/region of the chess sets, boards, and pieces; this volume focuses on the collection's antique chess items from India and its surrounding regions. The chapters are written as semi-independent essays by world-renowned experts within the fields of chess and history.

Our goal is to highlight Antonio's chess collection via high-quality photographs that capture the essence of these works of art, coupled with explanatory text with details about the history and special features of each set. Whether the reader's intent is to use the book as a reference guide or simply to turn the pages to enjoy the visual glory of the sets, we are confident that your desire to appreciate the best-of-the-best will be fulfilled.

#### *The Collector*

##### *António Horta-Osório*

I have always been fascinated by battles and by soldiers. When I was a small child I used to collect all the armies of the Second World War (made by Airfix) and play with them for countless hours in my room. Also with Cowboys and Indians.

I now believe that that was the start of my fascinating attraction for figural chess sets. My father taught me to play chess at the age of six, a game I most enjoyed learning and which I played for many years throughout school. My wife and I met at age eleven at a Jesuit school in Lisbon, and we used to play together for hours given it was the best place to be together and be able to speak without interruptions.



Fig. 2: Turned chessman prior to carving. / 8043

### Materials Used for Chessmen and Boards

A wide variety of materials were used: ivory, bone, horn, sandal wood, rose wood, ebony and other wood types, tortoise shell, brass, bronze, silver, gold, rock crystal, coral, semi-precious stones, textiles, glass pearls. Some authors mention the use of fossil mammoth ivory from Russia as well as walrus ivory. There is no evidence available for it.

It is reported that Indian carvers preferred ivory from Africa and Burma (= today Myanmar) to the locally available material since it had a finer grain and was less likely to turn yellowish. In any case, most pieces were probably bleached. The differing properties were attributed to the different types of food that wild animals would eat as opposed to domestic ones. The ivory was supplied by the British trading companies located in the larger cities.

### Types of Chessmen and Boards

The chess pieces from India are of two basic types: First the turned ones that often have elaborately carved additional decorative work and secondly the purely carved ones of the figural type. Chessmen of the first category are made of one piece or in sections that are joined by threads or pegs. The figural pieces can be carved out of one block or assembled with the various parts pegged together and mounted on a base.

Examples for the first category are the turned chess pieces from Visakhapatnam and Berhampore with additional elaborate carving (fig. 2 / 8043), and of course all the Muslim sets that are mostly pure turning work. In the second group we find among others the so-called John Company sets, generally made of one piece mounted on a flat base, and the polychrome Rajasthani sets, assembled from a number of individual elements that are joined by pegs.

The boards are traditional carpentry work using exclusively valuable woods and materials like ivory, bone, tortoise shell and ebony for the inlay work. This technique is used for the chess squares and for any decorative floral or geometric work on the frames. In Visakhapatnam ivory veneer was engraved or etched and the resulting pattern usually filled with molten black lac or ink.<sup>2</sup> Once dried the surface is scraped clean and polished (fig. 3 / 8044).

### Tools

Most of the tools used to shape chessmen and boards are the same or similar to the carpentry tools well known for centuries. Even the simple turning rigs like the bow driven lathe, go back a long time. A lathe is essential to achieve a precise cylindrical form. The mentioned bow lathe is already described and pictured in a manuscript from 1284 by Alfonso X the Wise kept in the Monastery of El Escorial near Madrid (fig. 4 / 8045).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Michael Mark, *Antique Indian Chess Sets*, Kelkheim, Germany, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Alfonso X "the Wise", *Libro del Axedrez, Dados y Tablas*, 1284, commented edition by Schädler/Calvo 2009, p.67.)



Fig. 3: Visakhapatnam engraved and coloured decoration. / 8044

In Africa even to this date craftsmen can be found in bazaars using this type of lathe. It consists of a simple frame with two points to hold the workpiece and is driven by hand with the help of a string bow (fig. 5 / 8046).

The tools are held in the other hand or in some cases even with the foot. We can safely assume that during British rule some simple machines were imported, probably of the spring pole type or of the pedal-driven sort that includes a flywheel (fig. 6a / 8047a, fig. 6b / 8047b, and fig. 7 / 8048).

There are no indications that any elaborate ornamental lathes like the ones produced in Britain by Holtzapffel or Evans reached India. As opposed to China, in India the so-called puzzle balls were not produced.<sup>4</sup>

These simple types of lathes have the advantage of easily achieving a low number of revolutions per minute [RPMs], an important feature to produce threads with the help of a chaser (fig. 8 / 8049). For the normal turning work, very sharp chisels or cutters are best. To work on

<sup>4</sup> *Crossing Games, Journeys between East and West*, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon, 2022, p. 51.



## CHAPTER 4

### *Medieval and Antique Pieces*

Single Pieces, 7<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries

Ulrich Schädler

In this chapter we present a few individual pieces rather than complete sets. They take us back to the early days of the European presence in India and date from the period before British colonial rule. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Indian artisans slowly began to produce objects such as furniture and other household items including board games for European, particularly Portuguese, customers, who were becoming increasingly fond of their 'exotic' style.

Although the pieces we describe here are individual items, they are all the more valuable as they provide us with information about the iconography, style and technique of early modern Indian chess sets.

Much earlier than these pieces and therefore not from the same context is a precious ivory figure of a so-called "elephant king," we will look at in more detail at the end of the chapter.

Carved from ivory, the first pictured piece is very interesting, which most likely represents a king in chess (Fig. 1 / 1146). It does not depict a mahout guiding an elephant as one might think at first glance, but a warrior king or general riding on an elephant's neck ready to fight an enemy in a duel. Such ritualised duels between military leaders are said to have been adopted in Southeast Asia, in particular in present-day Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand, from Sri Lanka. However, the introduction of modern firearms by the Portuguese led this tradition to a gradual extinction by the end of the 16th century. This gives us an important clue as to the dating of the piece, which was probably carved no later than the 17th century. The elephant is equipped with rich trappings to fix a square covered structure, perhaps a shrine on its back. With his trunk he grabs a piece of a tree trunk on the ground. Behind the structure, which perhaps serves as signal to signify the rank of the rider, is another figure difficult to identify, perhaps a steerer or even a supernatural being.

#### Next pages

Fig. 1: Indian royal king seated on an elephant, 16th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1146

Fig. 2: Medieval royal chess king, 16th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1177



## CHAPTER 5

### *The Chess Sets of the East India Company*

Jonathan Crumiller

Each type of antique Indian chess set has a notable place in a collector's subjective hierarchy of chess sets, but one particular type of set has always been placed on the highest echelons of chess collecting: chess sets that were crafted in the Berhampore area, under the domain of the East India Company.

#### *East India Company Set with the theme of Clive of India*

This first set shows the classic features of East India Company sets (Fig. 1 / 9002). The king and queen pieces are military officials or Indian royalty, riding in a howdah atop an elephant. King pieces are often covered by a canopy; queen pieces (although the riders are usually men) are often sheltered under an umbrella. But these features can vary: both pieces can be covered, or both pieces can have umbrellas... or neither!

The bishop pieces are often represented by riders on camels; knights by cavalry, i.e. riders on horses; and rooks by towers, sometimes with a flagman perched on top. Pawns are soldiers with weapons, dressed for battle. All pieces are situated on bases. There are variations on each of these details, for each piece, as shown by the collection of sets within this chapter.

In conjunction with the superb artistic merit of the East India Company sets, the rarity of these sets also contributes to their extreme desirability within the chess-collecting world. It is unknown how many such sets were made; but the sets were too time-consum-

ing to be mass-produced, given the high level of craftsmanship required and the detailed work needed to craft each separate piece. The marketplace was limited to the high society of European culture. And some of the sets have been lost to the ravages of time during the intervening centuries. But estimates of the remaining number of East India Company sets can be gleaned from the number of sets that have been offered in the major auctions over the past hundred years or so, and by extrapolating on that number, a reasonable guess would be somewhere between 100 and 150 sets extant today.

Many such sets remain hidden in private collections, but the set shown above has been in the public eye for a long time. It has been featured in various exhibitions: the Hove Museum, 1939; the India and Pakistan Exhibition, Burlington House, 1947; Eastbourne Art Gallery, 1959; and the British Museum, 1967. Moreover, this set is highlighted in one of the seminal chess-collecting books, *The Illustrated Guide to World Chess Sets*, by Victor Keats.

#### *The East India Company*

The context within which these sets were made is of great historical importance. The British East India Company stands alone amongst commercial entities, 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 commercial entity: at its peak, the company's army consisted of over 250,000 soldiers. A large 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 an alternative name, actually a nickname: the *John Company*. Some sources attribute the name as a nod to John Bull, the national personification of Great Britain, similar to the use of Uncle Sam in the United States. But more likely, 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.

In today's nomenclature within the chess-collecting world, the chess sets that had been manufactured under the aegis of the East India Company are more often referred to as John Company sets, although the two names are used interchangeably.

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 Ber-



#### **Fond Memories**

Victor Keats was the first collector I visited (in 2006, introduction by Franz Josef Lang) and I will always remember his kind hospitality and comments on his outstanding collection. John Co sets are probably my favorite sets, and I immediately recognized this set (and set 9003, Fig. 9) when I saw them twelve years later in the collection of a dear friend of mine, Emilio Ferre, who kindly agreed to part with them when I planned to write this book (in 2024) about Indian sets. / 9002

Fig. 1: East India Company set, late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century, displayed on a 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian chessboard. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 9002

#### **Next page**

#### **Fond Memories**

As Jon mentions, this was my first John Co set, bought in March 2004. I vividly remember Garrick Coleman sending me a picture of the set (I lived in Lisbon at the time), my immediately agreeing to buy it, and the set arriving by post at my house a few days later! / 0701

Fig. 3: East India Company set, circa 1815-1830. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0701

#### Double page before

##### Fond Memories

I bought this set at Maastricht in March 2007 from Trevor Philip, the first set I bought at this Antiques Fair. It is small but very well carved, and as Jon describes, has Clive of India riding the English horses. / 0733

Fig. 16: East India Company set, early to mid 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0733

time for John Company sets: the oldest ones (18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) tend to be of the highest quality, with a slight decrease of elaborate design occurring during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Regardless of any general pattern, the carving of John Company sets is so precise that one would assume that the craftsmen had used the most advanced carving tools available. In fact, the exact opposite is true. The following illustration is excerpted from the same ILN article (1851-04-26).

Another mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century source, Dickinsons' "Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851" (published in 1854), provides similar comments when referring to the Indian-made ivory items that were displayed in the exhibition:

*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."*

#### East India Chess Set with Water Buffalo and Green & Black Bases

This set has water buffalo as the bishop pieces for both sides (Fig. 16 / 0733). The set 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. This anomaly could have been introduced during the assembly process, or possibly one side's bases could have been stained at a later point in time.

The facial features of figures in John Company sets are generic, for riders and soldiers alike. This set has a notable exception to the rule: the riders on the knight pieces for the British side appear to have specific facial features; indeed, the figures are reputedly the image of Robert Clive himself.

The date of manufacture of an East India Company set cannot be an exact science, but there are often clues that can point to its approximate dating. The pawns' uniforms are one such clue. This set must be no earlier than the 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to a compelling feature, as explained in Michael Mark's exemplary work, *Antique Indian Chess Sets* (©Förderkreis Schach-Geschichtsforschung e.V., 1997): the shakos (military caps) worn by the white side were introduced early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and came to prominence in the period 1815-1830 (Fig. 17 / 8007). Hence this John Company set must not have been manufactured earlier than that date range.



Fig. 17: Sepoy uniform comparison. Sepoy image © Phillips Neal and Son, sepoy piece photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 8007

Other indicators of approximate dating of an East India Company set are the fabric patterns on elephants' ceremonial robes, a comparison of artistic features with other works of Indian art, and the general features of carving and craftsmanship of the times.

#### East India Company Chess Set with Bengal-Style Boats

The Berhampore/Murshidabad area was not the only place in Bengal where top-tier chess sets were made during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Other locations manufactured sets of equally high quality, but these sets can be differentiated from John Company sets by certain features of the pieces, e.g. different piece shapes & dimensions, facial expressions, and carving styles. Piece representations are mostly the same as the East India Company sets: elephant, camel, horse, soldier – except for one piece, the rook, which is sometimes represented as a boat in Bengal sets (Fig. 18 / 0724).

However, it is not the case that boats for rooks is an ironclad indication that a set is from another place, e.g. West Bengal. There are a few sets that retain all features of John Company sets, including facial expressions and carving styles, yet have boats for the rook pieces. In fact, the aforementioned Illustrated London News article refers directly to boat figures, both in its text and its illustration (Fig. 19 / 8008):

*"The subjects already carved are numerous, consisting of elephants, camels, bullocks, boats, palanquins, tigers, carts, a set of chessmen..."*

Furthermore, there was cross-pollination between the ivory carvers in Berhampore and in other areas of Bengal. As the article states: "... several carvers are Bengalese, and can carve anything, however elaborate, of which a drawing or model is furnished."

This set is clearly of the John Company style; the pawns themselves are evidence enough to make that assessment, as well as the other pieces. And yet the set has finely-carved "Bengal-like" boat pieces for rooks.

Another interesting feature of this set is that the bases of both sides are stained; on one side, green stain with red stain as the flooring, and on the other side, red stain with green stain as the flooring. However, it is not clear whether this staining pattern was native to the set or was added later.

Michael Mark discusses this set in his book *Antique Indian Chess Sets*: "Usually the rooks are towers, but boats, which take the place of towers in Bengali chess, are also used in a few sets, as in illustration 38. This set is also the only set of this type which I have seen which uses both traditional Indian colours of red and green. The carving of the camels in particular is reminiscent of the carving of the Clive of India pieces shown in illustration



Fig. 19: Excerpt from an article in The Illustrated London News, 1851-04-26. Public domain. / 8008

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##### Fond Memories

The most exquisite "Bengal" set (as I also call it given the boats representing the rooks) I have ever seen, with extraordinarily fine and thin carvings, and which I bought from Thomas Thomsen in October 2008. How long would the carvers take to make such an extraordinary set? And for me the "cherry on top of the cake" are the boats, especially the amazingly carved boats on the Indian side, replicating Indian style boats that I also have in the collection as single ivory carvings (not chess pieces). / 0724

Fig. 18: Bengal-style set, late 18th or early 19th century. Photo by Schacci, © António Horta-Osório. / 0724







## CHAPTER 6

### *Other Sets from Murshidabad and Berhampore*

Ulrich Schädler

Murshidabad is a city and a district situated about 220km north of Kolkata, not far from the border to Bangladesh in former West Bengal. The ivory and wood craft industry there, favoured by the then abundant indigenous elephant population, goes back to antiquity, but flourished especially since in 1716 the Nawabs of Bengal shifted their capital from Dhaka to Murshidabad. After the British East India Company had built a Cantonment at Berhampore in 1767, the British to a certain extent replaced the Nawabs as patrons and clients. Expert master craftsmen both Muslim and Hindu handed over their knowledge within their families from one generation to the other. They specialised in combs, paper knives, bracelets, fans, chessmen and other small items. Among the centres where ivory carving developed were Murshidabad itself and neighbouring Motara, Berhampore and Kasim Bazar to the south, Azimganj-Jiaganj to the north and Sylhet in modern Bangladesh. However, during the first half of the 19th century, Murshidabad and Berhampore remained the main centres. In 1903, the director of the exhibition in Delhi George Watt observed that the main centres of ivory carving in India were Delhi in the Punjab, Murshidabad in Bengal, Mysuru and Travancore in South India.

As a garrison town for the EIC it had a permanently changing population of British officers and their families, who formed a favoured clientele for souvenirs from India. The products could be easily shipped via the port of Kolkata, which was not far from Murshidabad and Berhampore. The artistic expertise of the craftsmen was such that in 1851, on the occasion of the Great Exhibition in London, the Illustrated London News published an article together with an engraving showing Berhampore ivory carvers at work (see Chapter 3, Fig. 1 / 8003).

Next double page  
Fond Memories

From Ernst Boehlen, the best/most elaborate set of this type I have, only comparable to one Dr George Dean has in his collection. I bought it from Ernst in 2010 upon a visit to his home in Berne, when I bought approximately 30 sets and boards from his collection. / 0682a

Fig. 1: "Kashmir" style set with double-headed camels, mid-19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0682



## *Other Board Games and Chess sets from Visakhapatnam*

Ulrich Schädler



### *'Pepys' Sets*

Also from Visakhapatnam workshops come the so-called Pepys sets, a group of elegant, extremely slender and decorative chessmen. They owe their name to a tradition within the Pepys Cockerell family that a set preserved in the Museum of London since 1931 was a gift from King James II to Samuel Pepys, the diarist. However, as Michael Mark pointed out, there are no documents to support this presumed gift, which is indeed unlikely. Moreover, the 1660s would seem far too early for such an intricate style of chessmen. A better candidate to link the set to the family would be Samuel Pepys Cockerell, the architect, who in 1805 designed Sezincote House in Neo-Mughal style and therefore was interested in Indian art and culture. By the way, Samuel Pepys the diarist was not a chess player at all. He mentions the game only once (diary of September 16, 1664), when a certain Francis Pargiter told him of the game as an indoor pastime of the Russians in wintertime.

These pieces are built in a particular way; see n. 0680 (Fig. 1) and 0688 (Fig. 2): Upon a circular plinth, the long and slender shaft rises from a sphere being slightly compressed by the weight over it. The pieces of king, queen and rook give the impression as if on this multi-faceted support an entire chess piece is mounted with a spheric element in openwork as its base. The long neck of the knight's horse ends in a graceful head, whose nose points vertically downwards.

Different in its structure is n. 0699 (Fig. 3), in that the sphere above the plinth is missing, and the shaft consists of a series of stacked discs turned in a variety of shapes. This structure as well as the rook's turret on a high base reminds one of certain Barleycorn type chess sets, especially those made by Charles Hastilow in the 1840s-1870s.

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Fond Memories

Huge set (n. 0680) from Doug Polumbaum, with a 20cm tall king, bought in May 2005, when I first was asked by Doug if I would be keen to acquire his collection. From the Allen Hofrichter Collection, sold at Christie's in September 2000. / 0680

Fig. 1: 'Samuel Pepys' style set, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0680







## CHAPTER 9

### *Chess Sets from Rajasthan (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries)*

Ulrich Schädler

Some types of chess sets are ascribed to the Northwestern Indian region of Rajasthan, the former region of Rajput, with cities such as Udaipur, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Jaisalmer. Rajasthani chess sets are usually figural and colourful, made principally from ivory, wood or often camel bone, but also from silver or gold. Many of these sets were clearly show pieces made for European clients, while some simpler sets were made for real play.

As far as the dating of these chess sets is concerned, one can rarely make a relatively precise proposal. In most cases it is difficult to get beyond a rather general date range. This applies in particular to those sets where the formal quality is not sufficient for a more precise stylistic analysis and comparison. Another reason is the fact that Indian craftsmen, who often inherited their know-how from their fathers, used “to keep forever to the same beaten track”, as Baden Powell put it somewhat harshly in his “Handbook of the Manufactures and Arts of the Punjab” in 1872 (p. 215).

In some cases newly introduced uniforms or uniform parts or changing clothing styles allow an upper time horizon to be defined, i.e. ‘not before ...’. On the other hand, ivory carving in Rajasthan seems to have declined in the 1880s, which in a certain sense represents a lower, though somewhat blurred time limit.

Although different typologies, techniques and styles can be described, it is not easy to attribute them to certain local schools, which would permit to link a particular set more precisely to a certain region or city within the wider geographical area that makes up Rajasthan. Contemporary sources about Indian arts and crafts as for example the catalogues

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Fond Memories

A figural set with gold polychrome representing Men against Women, a rare theme, that I bought from Garrick Coleman c. 20 years ago. This set was in the collection of Victor Keats who sold it through Garrick as I found out many years later when I saw his chess collection inventory (including sold sets). / 0694

Fig. 1: Mogul men versus women set, 18th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0694



## CHAPTER II

### *North Indian Chess Sets*

Jacob Schmidt-Madsen

The superior craftsmanship exhibited by East India Company chess sets, also known as John Company sets, produced in 18th- and 19th-century Murshidabad and Berhampore in the modern state of West Bengal cannot be disputed. Yet there were several other, if less prominent, centers of ivory carving across North India from Bengal in the east to Punjab in the west. While the chess sets they produced can rarely be traced back to specific workshops, the styles and themes can sometimes help us identify the regions from which they originated. This chapter provides examples of several such sets with discussions of their distinguishing characteristics.

#### *Boats of Bengal*

The quality of ivory chess sets from Bengal is only matched by the esteem in which the game was held by the Bengalis themselves. The philologist William Jones, who wrote the seminal article *On the Indian Game of Chess* in 1790, was told by his informant Radhakanta Tarkavagisha that “the Brahmans of Gaur, or Bengal, were once celebrated for superior skill in the game.”<sup>1</sup> And the author Lal Behari Day, who wrote an article on Bengali games and amusements in the *Calcutta Review* in 1851, claimed that “the *Shatranj* [chess] is universally prevalent in Bengal,” and that it is “held in high repute” and considered emblematic of the “entanglements of political schemes.” He also noted the perhaps obvious but nonetheless intriguing fact that “the shrewd Bengali, averse to extravagant expenditure, usually draws his figure of sixty-four squares on a common sheet of paper.”<sup>2</sup> Clearly, as has already been

<sup>1</sup> Jones 1790: 161.

<sup>2</sup> Day 1851: 336-37.





Fig. 3: Boats belonging to the Nawab of Murshidabad, including a peacock-headed mayurpankhi. Illustration from the Hastings Album by Sita Ram, 1814-15. San Diego Museum of Art, California. / 8022

The sets all have *mayurpankbis*, or peacock boats, on the Indian side and *bajras*, anglicized as budgerows, on the British side.

Two paintings from a larger series made in 1814-15 by the Bengali artist Sita Ram provide important historical context for the choice of boats. The first painting shows several vessels belonging to Ali Jah, Nawab of Bengal from 1810 to 1821, with the peacock-prowed *mayurpankbi* featuring prominently at the centre (fig. 3 / 8022), while the second painting shows the flotilla of Lord Hastings, Governor-General of India from 1813 to 1823, dominated by several large pinnacle budgerows (fig. 4 / 8023). Pinnaces, in this context, represent a mix between a budgerow and a sailing boat and were often preferred because of their greater speed and comfort, though they were less adept at navigating the rivers than the traditional budgerows.

Beyond obvious ideas of state and power, the boats carry a deeper symbolic meaning linked to stereotypical European perceptions of India as an unchanging and ahistorical country in need of a strong civilizing hand. The elegant peacock boat is not only associated with Indian royalty and elites, but also with myth and legend invoking elements of romantic love and the supernatural. When the trickster god Krishna disguised himself as a boatman to ferry his beloved Radha across the Yamuna river, he is often depicted doing so in a peacock boat evocative of their divine love (fig. 5 / 8024). And when Behula sailed her hus-

#### Before double page Fond Memories

A wonderful Bengal polychrome set, depicting the English army against an Indian army. A very similar example is at the Metropolitan Museum from the Pfeiffer Collection. I had a few pieces from this set and was fortunate enough to find many more in the collection of Elena and Roberto Innocenti, who kindly allowed me to buy them. It has undergone restoration as several of the pieces were in poor condition and some pawns were missing. The set is depicted in Mackett-Beeson's book *Chessmen* (1973). / 1597

Fig. 2: Bengal polychrome figural set, 1820-1860. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 1597



Fig. 4: The flotilla of Lord Hastings, including several pinnacle budgerows. Illustration from the Hastings Album by Sita Ram, 1814-15. British Library, London. / 8023

band's funeral raft to heaven and pleaded with the gods to bring him back to life, that raft, too, is often equipped with all the attributes of a peacock boat.<sup>10</sup> The spacious and comfortable budgerow, on the other hand, was associated with practicality and rationality. Emma Roberts, writing in 1833, remarks that the boat, despite its clumsy appearance, is "usually chosen by European travellers, to whom time and expense are objects of importance."<sup>11</sup>

Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India, elevated the boat to a symbol of empire when he had the *Sonamukhi*, or the golden-faced pinnacle budgerow, built in the late 18th century for the considerable sum of forty-five thousand rupees (fig. 6 / 8025).<sup>12</sup> Viewed through this lens, it becomes clear that John Company sets should not only be seen as models of the British colonial encounter in India, but also as models of the colonial gaze that informed it.

Another crudely carved John Company set from Bengal is unusual in having budgerows on both sides of the board (fig. 7 / 0679). They appear as simplified versions of the ones in the previous set, with oarsmen instead of sails and a distinct lack of ornamentation. The officers and soldiers in the two sets are similarly dressed with uniforms and tricorne hats on

<sup>10</sup> For a brief summary of this popular Bengali folk tale, see Roy 2024: 36-38.

<sup>11</sup> Roberts 1833: 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> Williamson 1813: pl. 12 and accompanying text.

#### Next double page Fond Memories

This is a "Bengal" set, with the typical boats as rooks, both on the English side and the Indian side. I bought this set from Doug Polumbaum in 2005, having been the first "Bengal" set I have acquired. I now have more elaborate examples but keep being very fond of this set and of the Bengal sets in general! / 0679

Fig. 7: John Company-style set with Bengal-style boats, 19th century. Photo by Pedro Lobo, © António Horta-Osório. / 0679



Fig. 5: Krishna ferrying Radha across the Yamuna River. Kolkata, c. 1890. The Cleveland Museum of Art, US. / 8024

Fig. 6: Boatman in front of the Sonamukhi built under Warren Hastings in the late 18th century. The smaller vessel in front is the Philchhara, or elephant-faced boat, attending the Sonamukhi. Painting by Charles Doyley. Reproduced from Williamson 1813: pl. 12. / 8025



the company side and *jama* tunics and cummerbund sashes on the Indian side, likely dating them to the late 18th or early 19th century.<sup>13</sup> Both sets have the bases painted in the usual red and green of Indian chess sets, and one of them even has the figures painted as well. Considering the relatively simple craftsmanship and the fact that sets intended for European customers usually only had the bases of one side stained, it seems likely that the two sets, despite their obvious imitation of the John Company style, were made for the local rather than the overseas market. This raises the interesting question of how exactly John Company sets made for a European audience impacted Indian sets made for an Indian audience.

<sup>13</sup> Reid 2009: 16; Mark 1997-98: 49.

Two other sets from Bengal, carved in local styles different from the John Company style, include a simpler type of boat which might be identified as a *pansi* (also spelled *pan-sway*). *Pansis* are light river vessels with a single pavilion or cabin used to transport cargo or passengers (fig. 8 / 8026). In the first set, dating from the 19th century, the boats appear long and elegant with a pavilion in the center and animal heads at the stern and bow (fig. 9 / 1390).

Similar designs can be found in numerous terracotta reliefs decorating village temples across Bengal and thus reflect an everyday lived reality (fig. 10 / 8027).<sup>14</sup> As is standard in Bengali chess, the boat takes the place of the rook, but where John Company sets usually have camels for bishops, this set has elephants, differentiated by their single rider from the two riders of the queen elephant and the three riders of the king elephant. The foot-soldiers are unarmed and sitting on their haunches in typical Indian fashion with the knees pressed against the chest and the backside almost touching the ground. The two sides are identical except for the red and green coloring typical of most Indian chess sets, and conjure up images of village life rather than warfare. As suggested by Michael Mark, the set was likely used for actual play, contrary to many John Company sets which were solely used for display.<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 8: Panswae (*pansi*) boat. Colored etching by Frans Balthazar Solvyns. Reproduced from Solvyns 1808-12: III, pl. 5. / 8026

The boats in the second set have neither pavilions nor animal heads, but carry a shrine between the two oarsmen (fig. 11 / 0678). The foot-soldiers are kneeling with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other, as are the larger generals which take the place of queens. The knights and bishops are represented by horses and elephants with a single rider each, while the king is represented by two elephants side by side with a shared howdah across their backs. One side, stained red, depicts Hindus with turbans and curved swords, while the other, left natural white, depicts Muslims with *topis*, or skullcaps, and short, pointed swords. Curiously, the red side appears to have been stained before the carving was complete. This can be seen from line tracings of various details which only appear fully carved

<sup>14</sup> See Deloche 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Mark 1997-98: 23.



Fig. 19: Chess set gifted to Otto von Bismarck on his 70th birthday in 1885. Bismarck-Museum Friedrichsruh, Germany. <https://3d-tour.linsenspektrum.de/tour/bismarck-museum./8029>

Germany (fig. 19 / 8029).<sup>19</sup> The Bismarck set, also believed to have been produced in Lucknow, is unstained, leaving both sides in natural ivory. Since the pieces would only have been distinguished by headwear, beards, and their facing on the board, it seems evident that the set was intended for display rather than actual play. According to an oral testimony given by the Indian civil servant Yusuf Ali in 1901, the set belongs to a specific type “common to all parts of India, being as it is much the same in Amritsar, Berhampur and Bombay.”<sup>20</sup> It is difficult to know what exactly Ali meant when he said that the type was “common,” but given that only two examples of the type are known to exist, he was probably speaking about finely carved ivory sets in general, which, as demonstrated by the present book, can indeed be found in many different parts of India.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 56 and fn. 116.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 57. Mark quotes from a book on ivory carving by L. M. Stubbs who paraphrases the opinion of “Mr. Yusuf Ali, C. S.” The person in question is probably the Indian-British civil servant and barrister Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872-1953), best known today for his highly influential translation and exegesis of the Koran.

The Lucknow set also stands out by having the kings and ministers seated on thrones. Contrary to common assumption, elevated seating has a long history in India, and Mughal rulers in particular are known to have spent fortunes on their thrones. The best known example is the Peacock Throne, built from 2,600 pounds of solid gold during the first seven years of the reign of Shah Jahan (r. 1628-58) and said to have cost twice as much as the Taj Mahal in Agra (fig. 20).<sup>21</sup> The thrones carved for the king pieces are more moderate, but follow the same principle of a royal seat - whether in the form of a *gaddi* cushion or a chair and footrest as here - placed upon a raised dais known as a *chowki*. Chess sets with seated kings appear in several examples from western India discussed in Chapter 9.<sup>22</sup> One of them (ch. 9, fig. 25 / 1703), dated to the 18th century, shows the king sitting on a chair not unlike the chair in the Lucknow set. Moving further south along the western Indian coast, and going further back in time to the 17th century, we find an Indo-Portuguese king piece also sitting on a chair, though more in the style of a European piece of furniture than an Indian throne (ch. 4, fig. 4 / 1215).

John Company sets made for a European audience were inherently British in theme, but other finely carved sets with similar aesthetics were also made for audiences with other thematic tastes. One such example is a lavishly produced 19th-century North Indian set featuring a French sepoy army against a band of armed ascetics (fig. 21 / 0702). The army can be identified as French by virtue of its general (queen) who appears to be none other than Napoleon Bonaparte

<sup>21</sup> Nicoll 2009: 207.

<sup>22</sup> Nos. 0710, 0725, 1392, 1703, 1717, and 1738.



Fig. 20: Akbar II (r. 1806-37) sitting on a copy of the Peacock Throne in his *darbar*, or audience hall, in Delhi. The original throne was looted by Nadir Shah of Persia during his invasion of the Mughal Empire in 1739. It disappeared never to resurface after he was assassinated in 1747. Painting by Ghulam Murtaza Khan, c. 1811. Aga Khan Museum, Toronto. / 8030