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HOW THE ELEPHANT BECAME A BISHOP: AN ENQUIRY INTO THE ORIGIN OF THE NAMES OF CHESS PIECES.

By HOWARD CANDLER, M.A.¹

The origin of chess "se cache dans une profonde nuit." Many contradictory explanations have been put forward, and some of them are self-contradictory. The explanation here offered does not offend against etymology or historical continuity, while it is borne out by definite facts.

It seems there was a four-handed game played in India called *chatranga*. The pieces used were elephants, horses, foot-soldiers, and chariots, and they represented the four ranks (Sanskrit *chatr*=Latin *quattuor*=four, and Sanskrit *anga*=rank) and the board was the field of battle of the contending forces. This game was adopted and modified by the Persians, who, ignorant of the meaning of the Sanskrit word, called it *chatrang*, or *shatranj*, and connected it with the name of the king or *shah*.²

The Arabians borrowed the game from the Persians, and invented the phrase *shah mata* (the king is dead) to indicate the end of the game. The Arabic word *mata* was incorporated into the language of the Persians in a similar sense.³

Finally the different races of Europe learnt the game

¹ Read before the Institute, April 19th, 1907.

² There is a word *satringe* in Bengalese, meaning a carpet; and Mr. D. Barrington (*Archaeologia*, ix, 23) connected this word with a chess board in accordance with the chequered pattern. This derivation, however, will not hold, in view of what is advanced above, though there may be still some connection between the words, as in the case of our *chess*, *Ecchequer*. A more doubtful point arises from the existence of the Sanskrit word *kshatra*—a chief of royal or military rank. It is the same as Old Persian *kshathra*, which perhaps is the older word.

³ Murray's Dictionary, *sub nomine* *Mate*, says, "Gildemeister, Dozy, and other modern scholars dispute the customary view that the Persian word is adapted Arab. *mat*, 'he has died.'" The derivation here indicated is that the Persian *shah mat* means "the king is helpless." With this agrees the mediaeval Latin *mattus*, defined as *tristis* in Gloss., Paris, tenth century, and with it may be compared the O.F. and Provençal, and the modern Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian words, *mat*, *mate*, *matto*, dull, foolish, mad.

from the Arabians and the Moors of Cordova, and, with it, adapted the words they found to their own tongues. Thus in English we get *chess*, *check*, *chequers*, *Exchequer*, and other familiar words. Especially interesting as approaching the original *chatranga* is the Spanish word *ajedrez* for chess, if the history of that very ancient word should give reason to believe that it was derived through medial sources from the Indian root.

The following are the names of the pieces now in use among the various nations of Europe :—

English.	Spanish.	Portuguese.	Italian.	French.	German.
Chess.	Ajedrez.	Xaque.	Scacchi.	Les échecs.	Schachspiel.
King	Rey	Rei	Rc	Roi	König.
Queen	Dama	Rainha	Regina	Reine	Konigin.
Rook (Castle)	Roque	Roque	Rocco (Torre)	Tour (Roc O.F.)	Thurm (Roche).
Bishop	Alfil	Delphim	(n) Alfere	Fou	Läufer.
Knight	Caballero	Cavallo	Cavallo	Cavalier	Springer.
Pawn	Peon	Pião	Pedina	Pion	Bauer.

It will be observed in the course of this paper that the various names of each piece in the above list have nearly all close historical or etymological connection with the other names of the same piece. There are, however, exceptions. *Der Läufer* (the runner) and *der Springer* (the jumper) are names evidently derived from the moves of the bishop and knight respectively. *Der Bauer* (the peasant) denotes the lowly position of the pawn and may be compared with the old French names of the piece, *garçon* and *fevre* (the workman). The Italian *pedina* (compare our English word "street-walker") denotes contempt. But the word should properly be *pedone*, a foot-soldier, as we shall see later on. The word *bishop* will demand particular examination.

Before proceeding to consider the names of the pieces separately, it may be pointed out here with advantage that, whereas the Oriental game represented a battlefield, the European game rather represents a military court or a tournament. We have queens as well as kings, jesters and bishops as well as knights and foot-soldiers, and the court is associated with a mediaeval castle, or, perhaps, is protected by archers in towers mounted on elephants.¹

¹ "Les rocz sont elefans portans tours sur leur dos, et des hommes dans les tours." *Plaisant jeu des Echaz.*

In considering the pieces, we will not take them in order of dignity, but in order of the difficulty of the problem to be attacked, dismissing with a word or two the pieces about which there is little to be said.

The king or the shah, (who does not enter into the Indian game), is the royal personage whose name is identified with the game, whose life is the life of the game, and whose death denotes its termination. "The king is dead" is the cry of the victor, unless your opponent in playing is a king, in which case the cry was euphemistically softened into "The king has retired."

The knight, the cavalier or horse-soldier, has not greatly changed in form as a piece or in the name given to it. In Latin it is sometimes styled *cornu*, which, like our word cornet, appears to be derived from the form of the pennon or ensign which he carried, a streamer diminishing to one point, or to two forked points. There is, however, a good deal of confusion about the word: *cornuz* and other derived French words usually denote our bishop, but a line from a poem cited by Du Cange under the heading *Pedites*—

Roy, fierce, chevalier, auffin, roc, et cornu—

raises further difficulties.¹

We shall see later on that bishops in chess were called *cornuti* from their mitres. This title is also given to bishops in ecclesiastical fashion, apart from the game. I quote an amusing quatrain from Du Cange :—

Nostri Cornuti sunt consilio quasi muti,
Et quia non tuti, nequeunt sermonibus uti,
Sunt quasi confusi, decreto legis abusi ;
Sic perit ecclesia, juris et ipsa via.²

As the knight is the horse soldier, so the pawn is the foot-

¹ The whole passage (from *Le Roman d'Alexandre*, no date), is :

Li paon d'esmeraudes vertes com pre herbu,
Li autres de rubis vermaus com ardent fu ;
Roi, fierce, chevalier, auffin, roc et cornu
Furent fet de saphir, et si ot or molu ;
Li autre (*sic*) de topace, o toute lor vertu.

This can only mean that the pawns on one side were emerald, on the other

ruby ; while the five principal pieces on the first side were sapphire, on the other topaz. But what of the words "roc et cornu" ? Sir F. Madden suggests the substitution "et roc cornu," making "cornu" an adjective. This would give sense, but one would be glad of authority for a *horned dromedary*, or a *horned castle*.

² I presume that the last line is intended to be a pentameter. Or is it intended to rhyme ?

soldier. Our *pawn* is the French *pion* (that is, *piéton*); it is the Italian *pedina*, an erroneous corruption of *pedone*; and it is the Latin *pedes*. Littré in his *Dictionnaire*, *sub nomine Pion*, derives the *pawn* from *paon* or *paonnet*. "L'ancien français donne *paonnet* et *poon*; or *poon* est une des anciennes formes de *paon*. On doit penser que primitivement une des dénominations de cette pièce a été tirée du *paon* ou du petit *paon*, à cause que le *pion* avait la figure de cet oiseau. Puis *poon*, *peon* s'est confondu avec *pion*" (in the sense of *piéton*, *fantassin*). The last part of this statement is not very clear. The French language was largely derived from or mixed with Italian sources through the Provençal. Now, the Provençal for a pawn was *peonet* and for a foot-soldier was *peon*. Comparing this word with the corresponding words in Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese, it is clear that the root of the Provençal word, with both meanings (*i.e.*, the chess-man and the foot-soldier) was the same, namely *ped*, a foot; but when the word was adopted for a pawn by the French, they derived it neither from the root *ped*, nor from the word *piéton*; not knowing what to make of it, they allied it with *paon*, and so called it *paon*, *paonnet*, and even *pavonet*. But, further, Littré tells us that the pawn "had the form of a little peacock." It is difficult to prove from a negative, but after a careful review of the bibliography of the subject and some study of the museums of Cluny and the Louvre, I cannot find any ancient pawn represented as a peacock. If, however, such a form exists it would not go further than to shew that it was supposed that a piece called a *paon* ought to be a peacock. Of course, the present form *pion* comes from a correct derivation and not from an alteration of *poon*, *paonnet*.

We pointed out the humble forms of *Bauer*, *pedina*, and *ferre* for the pawn. In a similar manner the word *pion* is used contemptuously by French school-boys for an usher.

We now come to the rook. This piece appears on European chess boards as a castle, or as a castle upon an elephant. Now a castle on an elephant could be moved about on a battlefield, but a castle or tower would be fixed. The forms *castle*, *tour*, *torre*, *Thurm*, *turris*,

point to a fixed tower or fortress. How does this meaning come from the forms *rook*, *rocco*, *roque*?

The Persian for a camel or a dromedary is *rokh*. Zambaldi in his *Vocabolario Etimologico Italiano* translates it *cammello con sopra gli arcieri*, which would suit us very well. In a long Persian poem the whole of the long last canto describes very fully a game of chess, and in this the *rokh* is introduced, but nothing is mentioned of archers on its back. Now, the Italian has a word *rocca*, which means a fortress upon a rock,¹ or simply a tower. Here, then, we get the explanation. The word *rokh* became in their language *rocco*. Under the analogy of *rocca*, the piece must be a castle; under the influence of Oriental forms of the piece on the board, it would be sometimes a dromedary or an elephant, sometimes an animal with a castle on its back with archers or other men of war. And thus, too, the English call the piece a rook and represent it by a castle.

And what about the queen?

One of the pieces in the Persian game is called the *ferz* or *ferzin*. The word implies the great man in the palace of the Shah, the vizier or emir (primarius aulae praefectus, Du Cange), the man whose business it was to regulate the household of the monarch in the palace and to protect his life in the field. This *ferz* in the Persian game had very little power of movement, and though a body-guard of the king, very limited means of attack. In Latin the name was changed to *fercia*, and it appears in European tongues as *fiers*, *fierce*, *fierge*, *vierge*, and so, back again in Latin, as *virgo*, *domina*, *regina*. Thus in a Latin poem:—

Miles et alpinus, roccus, rex, virgo, pedesque,

and in a French poem of the twelfth century:—

La grans roine, la grans dame
Ki du ciel est roine et fierce.

and in the *Romant de la Rose* the Queen is called *vierge* and in early English MSS. *fierce* or *fiers*. Thus the vizier became the Queen of Heaven, the holy Virgin, and, later, the consort of the King.

¹ Sicuro quasi rocca in alto monte (Dante, *Purg.*).

The rest of this paper concerns itself with the question how the elephant of the Oriental game became the English bishop. The word elephant is said to be of Phoenician origin. It appears that the word is not found in Sanskrit or in Egyptian hieroglyphics. The first European use of the word is in the Greek *ἐλέφας* in the sense of "ivory," showing that the knowledge of the article preceded the knowledge of the animal. In Latin, ivory is sometimes *ebur Indicum* and sometimes *ebur Lybicum*. The Hebrews seem to have got their gold, ivory, apes and peacocks from Ophir, which is now hypothetically placed in Africa. It seems more likely that this ivory was African than Indian. In later usage the word *ἐλέφας* in Greek, and *elephas*, *elephants*, *elephantus* in Latin, meant an elephant. Pliny tells us that the Romans were first acquainted with the animal in their wars against Pyrrhus, when they called it *bos Lucas*, the Lucanian ox. This nominal confusion between an ox and an elephant, which we shall see extended over several languages, is one between two animals which do not appear to resemble one another in the least. A parallel instance, however, is that of a *caterpillar*, which certainly does not resemble a cat or a bear (*cf.* woolly-bear), where, however, the word is etymologically derived from the French *chat pelouse* (hairy cat), just as the Swiss style it colloquially the *teufelskatz*.¹

Now, the first letter of the Phoenician alphabet is *eleph*, and its character is an ox. Through *eleph* we get the Hebrew *aleph*, the Greek *alpha*, the Arabic *alif*, and the Latin *A*. Here again there is a connection between the sound *eleph* (elephant) and the character *ox*. This connection in Hebrew characters, before the development of the present square letters, is still more in evidence, as the earlier forms of the letter *aleph* resembled an ox; and, indeed, the word *elephantus* is said to be *eleph-Hind*, the Indian ox.

Now, in the Arabian game of chess the piece which we call a bishop was represented by an elephant, though it had not quite the same functions as the modern piece. The foreign word *elephant* was turned by them into *al*

¹ The modern French *chenille* comes from the Latin *canicula*—a little dog.

Phyl, the first syllable being mistaken for the Arabian definite article *al*. That is, they called the piece "the Phyl." But when the mediaeval players of Europe adopted the game from the Arabs, they supposed that the Arab word *al*, as in the cognate cases of *algebra*, *alchemy*, etc., was an inseparable part of the word. Hence the Latin *alphinus*, the Spanish *alfil*, the early Italian *alfino*, the French and English *alfin* or *aufin*, the Portuguese *delfin*.¹

This Portuguese word *delfin* demands some explanation. Doubtless the derivation is *do* (genitive case of "the") *alfin*. But as *delfin* in Portuguese means a *dolphin* or the *Dauphin*, we see a cause for the mistake in naturalising the word. I do not know how the piece now or in earlier times is or has been represented on the Portuguese board, but as I have seen chess-men among which our bishop has the appearance of a prince (as indeed it was sometimes called), it is quite possible that the Portuguese complete the family group of king and queen with an eldest son, heir to the throne. Many corresponding errors (arising from some confusion with regard to the article) can be detected in language. Thus *an eke-name* becomes *a nickname*, and we get indifferently *an eft* and *a newt*. The Italian *all'erta* becomes the French *alerte* and the English *alert*. In Switzerland the place *Lavaraz* becomes *L'Avare*, and an explanatory legend grows up.² In France the *lapis lazuli* give us *azur* for blue, and our English *azure*.³ Again, the Italian fish (of a yellowish character) *orata* (Zeus Faber) becomes the French *dorée* (de-aurata) and the English *John Dory*. And correspondingly, to return to chess, in Italian the present

¹ How the Arabs got the last *l* in *al Phyl* out of the *n* in *elephant*, and how the European nations got the *n* (in such words as *alfin*, *alphinus*) out of the Arabian *al Phyl*, is a problem I am quite unable to solve. I am told on trustworthy authority that the oldest known Arabian word for an elephant has no *n* in it. But cf. *μεγάλος* = magnus, *νύμφη* = lympha, *sol* = sun, chimney = (Scotch) chimley.

² So, Virgil tells us, *Æn.*, I, 366-9, the citadel of New Carthage was named Byrsa from the conditions of sale of the merchantman, that as much ground

should be brought as could be surrounded by an ox-hide. There can be no doubt that the word Byrsa is not connected with the Greek *Βύρσα* (a hide) but with the Phœnician word which means a citadel, and is familiar to us in the O.T. under the form Bozrah.

³ *Lazuli* - *Lazuri* = *L'azur* = *azur*, the intermediate *l* becoming, as so often, *r*, as we shall see with the word *alfil*. It is worthy of note that in the first French edition of the *Travels of Marco Polo*, the *lapis lazuli* (the stone itself, not the colour) is called *le azur*.

name for the *alfino* (also *arfino*) is *alfiere*; probably, assonantly, because *al Phyl* became *alfil*, and *alfil* became *alfier* or *alfiere*; but even more because *alfil* presented no sense to an Italian, while *alfiere* has a meaning, *i.e.*, a standard-bearer.¹

The French name for the *alfin* is *le fou*, derived as follows: *al=le*; *phyl=fil=fol=fou*; and so in the *Romant de la Rose* the *alfin* is *le fol*.

Thus the *elephant* has become *the fool*—probably the court fool or the king's jester.

But how are we to get to the English name of this piece—the bishop—a name which moved the indignation of the grave Sir Philip Sidney, who in his *Defence of Poesie* expostulates at the indignity of giving to “a peece of wood the reuerend title of a Bishop”?

This is a question of immense difficulty, not, so far as I know, in the way of being solved in any of the treatises devoted to the question of the names of chess-men. Judging by analogy of such words as *chess*, *rook*, *pawn*, *le fou*, *delfin*, *alfiere*, *vierge*, *check mate*, etc., we might expect the word *bishop* to have been adopted for the purposes of the game into our language by false etymology. But of this there is not the slightest evidence, and this quest must be abandoned. No modern language, I think, has applied the sound *bishop*, or any like sound coming from an Eastern origin, to the piece in question, except the English and the Icelandic peoples.

But if the piece has not been generally given the *name* of *bishop*, the ecclesiastical character has been recognised repeatedly, and that from very early times. There are English chess-men denoting *bishops* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the British Museum. Sir F. Madden (*Archaeologia*, xxiv, 203) discovered these bishops of the middle of the twelfth century in the Isle of Lewis. Mr. Douse (*Archaeologia*, xi, 403) refers us to Saul's *Game of Chess Play* (1640), where the bishops represent the clergy “with high cloven heads like bishops' mitres,” and he quotes Pamphilus Maxilianus to the

¹ Zambaldi in his Italian Etymological Dictionary suggests that this word *alfiere* comes direct from the Arab *al faris* a cavalier. This, however, would

be the derivation of the *literary* word, and not of the name of the piece on the chess-board, so that no contradiction or confusion arises.

following effect, in a fanciful parallelism with the planets of the mediaeval system, Mercury being omitted :

Rex est Sol ; pedes est Saturnus ; Mars quoque miles ;
Regia Virgo, Venus ; Alpinus, episcopus ipse, est
Juppiter ; et Roccus discurrens Luna.

So an old Latin author calls the piece *Calvus*, alluding to the shaven crown of a monk :—

Juxta illam (the Queen) Calvum pone quasi pro custodia.

There is also an *opusculum* of Innocent III. (who became Pope in 1198), entitled *Moralitas de Scaccario per Dñm Innocentiũ*, ppam—a translation of which I take from a book named “Chess” by an anonymous author of 1787 :—

“The Alphins are the various prelates of the Church : Pope, Archbishop, and their subordinate bishops, who rise to their Sees, not so much by divine inspiration as by royal power, interest, entreaties, and ready money. These Alphins move and take obliquely three points, for almost every prelate’s mind is perverted by love, hatred, or bribery, not to reprehend the guilty or bark against the vicious, but rather to absolve them from their sins ; so that those who should have extirpated vice are, in consequence of their own covetousness, become promoters of vice and advocates of the Devil.”

But we can go farther than that. The impossibility that a “reuerend bishop” should be a fool, and the certainty that he was a fool, exercised the ingenuity of the mediaeval writers on the Play of Chess. Sir F. Madden quotes (*Archaeologia*, xxiv, 227) :—

Ore uient le giu des alfins
Ke n’est pas poure ne srarins ;
Tut seit iceo qu’il seit cornuz,
Ne deit estre pur fol tenuz.
Kar mult p̄r ad grant mestier
Li aufins en leschekier.

That is, everybody knows that the bishops are of great authority on the chess-board and cannot be reckoned as fools. They are *cornuti*, that is, mitred folk.

Again, on the other hand :—

Sic inter schachos alpinus inutilis extat ;
Inter aves bubo,

which may be an allusion to the character of the alpinus as a recognised fool, or to the earlier movements of the piece. It could only move along three diagonal squares,

with the privilege of jumping over an intervening piece, as in the quotation above from Pope Innocent. Thus :—

Stultus saltator trivius quasi fur speculator
Si rubus in primo, nunquam candebit in imo.¹

Here is an extract from the *Morte d'Arthur* of the fifteenth century :—

Myche wondere have I, pat syche an alfyne as thow dare speke
syche wordez ;

and in Godefroy's *Dictionnaire Ancienne de la Langue Française* are many very interesting parallel passages.

The alfin, then, was a cleric of a bad character and a fool. These contrarieties may be perhaps reconciled in the following ways :

1. The licentious satire of the Middle Ages lent itself with peculiar zest to the bating of the clergy, and moral indignation and scornful laughter were frequently not without abundant cause.

2. The two-peaked cap and bells of the fool and the cloven mitre of the bishop have a certain resemblance, and might be the cause of confusion.

3. The useless moves of the alfin, considered as a bishop, might mark him as a fool.

4. In *Merrie England* we had a "Bishop of Fools," an "Abbot of Misrule," an "Abbot of Unreason," a Boy Bishop of St. Nicholas Day on the "Festival of Fools"; and on the Continent we have an "Episcopus puerorum" and a "Puer episcopali habitu ornatus."

But though we may have thus successfully bridged over the confusion arising from the same piece being at once a bishop and a fool, and though we have etymologically explained how it is that the alfin became *le fou*, we are no nearer to discovering how the alfin originally was endowed with episcopal functions.

I suggest the following explanation :

The elephant had become the Italian alfil. This must mean something. The Portuguese said it was a dolfin or a Dauphin. The Italians said it was an *alfiere*, i.e., a

¹ Observe the *stultus* and the *trivius*, and the *fur speculator*. I can guess at no meaning in the second line. If *rubus* is a false transcription for *rubet*,

the contrast with *candebit* is made clear, but not the sense. The couplet is in Du Cange.

standard-bearer. I suggest that from this notion of a standard-bearer came the notion of the high character of the piece. In any case, it was sometimes a judge; sometimes a lawyer (civil or ecclesiastical according to the colour); in Italy and England an archer; in other countries a prince.¹ In all countries a piece with the character and name of a cleric (*Calvus*, *Cornutus*, *Póp* in Poland, etc.), and among us and the Scandinavian races, from the earliest times a Bishop. "Alphinus, episcopus ipse."

¹ Thus Rowbotham (1562), as given in Murray's Dictionary:—
fooles, and some name them Princes;
other some call them Archers."
"The Bishoppes some name Alfins, some