

History of Backgammon Game



The game of order or chaos?

Fate or strategy?

The history of board games is as ancient as the origin of human beings. They have been found in ancient Mesopotamia; they were placed in the tombs of the pharaohs.



Sometimes the dead are shown playing with the gods, Rameses III (c. 1270 B.C.) playing with Isis to gain access to the nether world. It appears that at the time, playing games had cosmological and religious significance.



When did the game of backgammon come into the picture?

It seems that in late antiquity during the Sasanian dynasty in Iran board games entered into the Persian culture from India. In one of the Middle Persian texts

“Xusro and the page”, with page being a descend from a noble family line, indicated that among virtues (Farhang) acquired by nobles such as memorizing sacred texts, calligraphy, horsemanship, playing a musical instrument, poetry, and astrology, was mastering board games.

The invention of Backgammon game is attributed to Bozorgmehr, Khosrow I’s minister who was known for wisdom and abilities. As the legends say, he invented backgammon to challenge the Indian king who was a master in playing chess.

During Sasanian period, scientific knowledge going back and forth between other cultures such as India and Byzantium, especially astronomy and astrology to which the game of backgammon is related. There were practitioners as astrologer (starosmar), soothsayer (murw-nis), zodiac teller (star-gowisn), star reckoner (starhangar), and the time-knower (hangan-snas).

Bozorgmehr was known as a novice in astronomy and astrology. It is said that he invented the game in the light of cosmology central to Zoroastrian beliefs.



Backgammon (Takht-I Nard : the board of fate)

According to the Zoroastrianism of the Sassanid Period, fate (baxt) controls the human life. Unlike the game of chess which is a game modeled after battleship mentioned in the Mahabharata War in Bhagavad Gita as Chaturanga, backgammon is a game of both fate and strategy. The roll of dice determines the fate of the pieces representing human life. The dice decide one's movement based on constellations and firmament (axtaran and sipihr.)



According to the texts, the numbers on dice have also significance,

One: Ahura Mazda

Two: Gētīg And Mēnōg, the spiritual and material world

Three : humat, huxt ud huwarst, three stages of heaven

Four: four corners of the world (Chahar sog i getig)

Five: 5 divisions of heaven (the star, the moon, the sun, fire and the eternal light)

Six: six seasonal feasts (Shash gahanbar)

During the game when hitting a piece representing death and bringing it back represents resurrection.



A copy of 14th century Shahnameh illustrating Buzurjmihr Explains the Game of Backgammon (Nard) to the Raja of Hind"

In Persian poetry, there are many references to the backgammon game as a metaphor for fate and cosmology.