Chess has been played for more than a millennium in the Near East, and it has been our good fortune to find a dozen carved ivory chessmen in a house of the early ninth century in Nishapur. These pieces are valuable, for very few of such antiquity have survived although the game was widely spread at that time. When they were made, chess had been known in Persia for two or three centuries. It did not originate there, however, but in India, whence it spread both east and west. The invention of the game is ascribed to India not only by the Arabs, who acquired the game by their conquest of Persia, but by the Persians themselves.

The Arabs were fascinated by chess, and to no small extent its introduction into Europe was due to them. They had produced famous masters by the early tenth century, who are known by name and who were renowned both for their playing and for treatises on the game. There was a certain amount of opposition to this new pastime, however, and the people of Medina, who themselves could not resist it and even played Indian variations of the game, are recorded as saying, “Chess is only meant for the barbarians, who in company merely stare at each other like cattle.”

Mas'udi, a tenth-century Arab writer, gives us many details of the game as it was played in India and elsewhere. He tells us of the various uses of the chessboard: how it served for studying the strategy of war, for making mathematical calculations, and even as an allegory of the celestial spheres. He remarks that the chief use of ivory in India was for the manufacture of chess and backgammon pieces, and tells how the Hindu played for high stakes, for stuffs and jewels, not even stopping when he had lost the proverbial shirt. Mas'udi goes on to say, “When they play they have near them a cauldron of reddish ointment and the players wager fingers, forearm, elbow, or other parts of their body, cauterizing the wound with this ointment, which is a mixture peculiar to India and extraordinarily effective.” The custom of which I have spoken is a notorious fact.” Like earlier writers he asserts that the game was introduced into Persia from India, along with Kalileh and Dimneh, a famous book of fables, during the reign of Nushirwan (Khusrau I, A.D. 531-579).

The great Persian poet Firdausi, writing in the eleventh century and using material from, or similar to, an earlier Pahlavi manuscript, the Chatrang-nāmak, the Book of Chess, also credits India with the invention of the game. He relates in the Shāhnāmeh that chess was invented as a means of breaking to the mother of King Gav, an Indian king, the loss of her other son, Talhend, in battle with his brother, this tragedy being shown to her in miniature on the chessboard. The story ends with the ex-}

It is interesting to note that the Persian words dast-i-khūn (the hand of blood) are used for the last move at chess, or for a game in which the vanquished party stakes his limbs.
Buzurgmihr demonstrating the moves of chess to the Hindu envoy in the presence of Shah Nushirwan

Terrestrial picture of the bereaved woman, racked with anguish, neither eating nor drinking, and spending all her time playing chess until the end of her days.

Somewhat earlier in this long poem we have another lengthy description of chess, where we read that the Indian rajah sent an envoy to Shah Nushirwan with a set of chess and a message written on silk to say that unless the Persians could name the pieces and work out their moves he would cease to pay tribute. Buzurgmihr, the Persian counselor, aided somewhat by the indiscretions of the envoy, solved the problem within a week. This scene is shown in a fine miniature of the fourteenth century in the Museum (illustrated above), in which Buzurgmihr explains the chessmen and their moves to the envoy in the presence of the shah. The envoy is sitting at the left of the chessboard in “the palace which seemed all throne, and the throne all shah.”

The text under the picture then goes on to describe how Buzurgmihr invented the game of nard (backgammon), which the Persians in their turn presented to the Indians to solve, a feat which they could not accomplish. Another page from the same manuscript shows this game being explained to the rajah and his court by Buzurgmihr, who is again seen sitting at the right of the board (see opposite page). In the Shahānāme both games represented a battlefield and were very much alike, the important difference being in the arrangement of the board and the use of dice, described as being made of ivory with spots of teakwood. Unlike Firdausi, most early writers state that backgammon is older than chess.

The association of chess with the strategy of war has always been an extremely common poetical metaphor, but several early writers
maintain that chess actually was used as an exercise in martial science. The word by which chess is now known in Arabic- and Persian-speaking countries is shatrang. This is a corruption of the Pahlavi word chatrang, which comes from the Sanskrit chaturanga, a word used not only for chess but for the "four arms" of the army—the chariots, the elephants, the horsemen, and the infantry, all of which are represented among the chessmen.

When one looks at chess pieces as they now are and considers their English names, any relation with these four groups may seem far-fetched. However, a study of how some of their original names, their character, and even sex have been changed in their long journey from Hindustan to the West, will show that it is not so fantastic as appears at first sight. Confusion has been caused, not by the translation of names from one language into another, a process which has preserved the original meaning, but by the adoption of strange words from foreign tongues. Such a taking over often necessitated a change of pronunciation in order that the word might be more easily spoken. In some cases the word so borrowed and mispronounced corresponded with one that already existed in the language but that had an entirely different meaning. This native meaning was gradually substituted for that of the imported word, and the character of the chess piece as a symbol was thus affected and changed. When, however, the adopted and transformed name did not match any existing word and was meaningless except as the name of a chessman, the piece was given a new name, suggested by its shape or the character of its move. In this way, too, its symbolic meaning was entirely lost.

The fate of the piece known in English as
the bishop gives a very good idea of these changes. Originally the “elephant,” it was called by the Persians pil and by the Arabs, who have great difficulty in pronouncing the letter P, al fil. In Europe this was modified to alphinus, alfin, or aufin, the definite article al being unwittingly included. In early times, when the piece was not a true representation of the animal, it was characterized by two projections from the top, perhaps a distorted survival of the elephant’s tusks (see above). These projections took many forms and, because a resemblance to a mitre was seen, the piece was called a bishop in England. In France it became a fou and in Germany a Läufer, so that in all three languages the original significance was lost.

The chariot (rook) lost its identity even earlier in its journey to the West. From the original Sanskrit ratha, chariot, the word was corrupted in Persia to rukh, the name of the powerful and fabulous bird which we all know as the roc in the Arabian Nights. The Arabs hardly changed this word, and our word rook is merely a mispronunciation of rukhkh. It was represented in early sets by a rather thin piece marked with a deep cleft in the middle (see above), and in the thirteenth century in Europe it sometimes resembled a sort of tower with two projections from the top (see ill. p. 277). Great confusion has taken place between the rook and the bishop, probably owing to the fact that in a Hindu version of chess the elephant (bishop) occupied the cor-
XI century crystal chessmen in the Béhague collection. Rearranged from Lamm’s *Mittelalterliche Gläser.* 1/2 actual size

The piece that has changed not only its name and character but also its sex is the queen. In Persian called the firzín, or counselor, this piece was known as fers in England in the Middle Ages, but by the twelfth century, the functions of a vizier not being understood in Europe, Alexander Neckham in writing on chess (*De Scachis*) made the piece symbolic of a queen.

The knight has always been associated with a horse in the Near East and a horseman in Europe, but in Germany, although represented by a horse’s head, the piece goes by the name of Springer from the nature of its move. The pawns were the infantry, the footsoldiers, and were then as now the simplest and the smallest pieces on the board. The king, whom they protected, went by the name of shāh in Persia, and as such he was known by the Arabs. In Europe the word was literally translated into king; but in two other ways this
word *shāh*, hardly recognizable, is still employed. The game of chess in mediaeval Latin was *ludus scachorum*, the game of shahs, or kings, and chess is nothing but *shāh* by the way of the Latin and the old French *eschès*. The term *Shāh*! is used in Persian and Arabic when the king is threatened and *Shāh māl*! (the king is dead) when the king cannot be moved, and from these we have the words *check* and *checkmate*.2

The moves of most of the pieces have undergone considerable change. The knight’s leap has remained constant but others have now greatly increased powers. The queen, as a vizier, could only move one square at a time and was less powerful than the rook. The bishop (the elephant) has had several moves but was more restricted in its range. Al Biruni, an eleventh-century visitor to India, tells us that in one version of the game it could move one square either straight on or to any of the adjoining diagonal squares, these representing the “elephant’s trunk and four legs.”

The two opposing groups of our ivory chessmen were distinguished by their color, one set being dark green. In the *Shāhnāmeh* the chessmen are described as being of ivory and teakwood, both of which were easily obtained in India and were readily distinguishable. Many other materials were used for early pieces. In Egypt, in the Arab Museum, there are several of colored glass (see p. 278), made perhaps in the tenth century; and at the same time and later very fine ones were made of crystal and often elaborately decorated (see p. 275). Murray’s suggestion in his *History of Chess* that the pieces of one side were decorated and the opposing men left plain seems most unlikely. The plain and decorated chessmen probably belonged to entirely different sets; plain pieces being distinguished by material and color, for instance, crystal and carnelian, and the carved pieces by different decoration or metal settings. It is possible that the red glass noted by Lamm in his *Mittelalterliche Gläser* on the bases of some of the crystal pieces shown on page 275 might have served this purpose.

Our chessmen, though simple, are of nicely cut ivory, and most of them are in excellent condition. They are carved in a very conventional fashion and to our eyes are somewhat obscure symbols of the figures they are meant to represent. Drawings of these chessmen have been set out in the usual order at the head of this article, but it must be pointed out that this order is not invariable in the East. Of the dozen found, one rook (bottom right of ill. on p. 274) is obviously from another set, and it is possible that one of the adjoining pieces, a queen, belonged to this second set also.

Only in the case of the pawns and the knight would a modern chessplayer have reasonable success in identifying the pieces. The knight has approximately the form of a horse, yet how much more realistic is the very fine ivory knight of the eighth or ninth century from Samarkand now in the Hermitage (see p. 279. Published in Orbelli’s book *Shatrang*).

The elephant (bishop), unlike the magnificent ivory specimen in the Bargello3 (see p. 279), is reduced to a piece of ivory with a silhouette vaguely suggesting the animal, and instead of tusks there are two small projections from the top of the “head.” The chariot (rook) has a deep cleft that was the distinguishing mark of this piece for several centuries. The king is represented by what may be a throne, the counselor (queen) by another considerably thinner than that of his master. These shapes were very common for chessmen of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, except for the knight, which was usually represented in Near Eastern sets by a tallish piece with a single projection near the top. Our pieces are good evidence that conventional shapes were adopted early in the history of the game in the countries of Islam. Unlike the famous crystal pieces at Osna-

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2 In the treasury of the Norman kings of England accounts were kept with counters on a cloth divided into squares. Owing to this we have the word *exchequer*, and thus the English cheque and the American check, a paper token for money, bear witness to the far-reaching influence of chess.

3Giovanni Villani, in his *Tratto dell’ origine di Firenze* (1559), relates how the building known today as the Bargello was the scene of an early feat of skill in chess. In 1266 in the presence of the Podestà, Count Guido Novello, a Saracen named Buzetta played three games simultaneously, one over the board and the other two without looking.
brück, which, legend has it, were a present from Harun ar Rashid to Charlemagne and which had formerly been dated by that legend at the end of the eighth century or the beginning of the ninth and latterly by "style" in the tenth century, we can date our chessmen in the early ninth century by associated finds. Because of this it is now possible that some of the "Charlemagne" set of Osnabrück (see p. 278) are at least as old as the ninth century.

It might easily be assumed that the reason for making chessmen of such conventional and simplified shapes was merely one of economy, and that, for more sumptuous sets, others more elaborate and naturalistic were made, like the elephant in the Bargello and the knight from Samarkand. But the finely carved crystal conventional pieces in the Béhague collection, from Ager in Catalonia (see page 275), dispose of this assumption. That such crystal pieces were considered valuable is evident from the castrensisian will (that is, one drawn up in camp before battle) of the Count of Urgel in Catalonia in the first decade of the eleventh century, by which he left his Eastern pieces to the convent of Saint Giles. It is also evident that chessmen were made in the Near East in these curious forms to comply with the religious prohibition against the representation of living creatures. We know that the Persians, the early Abbasids in Mesopotamia, and the Fatimids in Egypt did not always obey this law, and several fine chess pieces bear witness to that. But there was always opposition to freedom of representation, and some chess players were undoubtedly quite orthodox and preferred to enjoy themselves without contravening the religious law.

No trace of any board was discovered in the excavations at Nishapur, and we are entirely dependent on literary and pictorial references for information about chessboards. These would seem to have sometimes been made of pliable material such as cloth or leather. Mas'udi, in an Arabic poem, describes how two loyal friends played chess with a red leather chessboard between them, the scene evoking the memory of war though no blood was
Glass chessmen in the Arab Museum, Cairo. Two typical Near Eastern knights are shown on the bottom row. Reproduced from Lamm's "Mittelalterliche Gläser." About 3/4 actual size

Some of the so-called Charlemagne crystal chessmen. Reproduced from "Der Domschätz zu Osnabrück," by Fritz Witte. About 3/4 actual size
sought, and the warriors engaged in combat without the sound of trumpets or the waving of banners. In the early game, as played in the Near East, the board was usually divided into sixty-four squares, eight to a side. There were, however, many variants of this form; we read of one with a hundred squares, necessitating the use of “camels” as well as the “horses” and “elephants.” Even in the thirteenth century a board with twelve squares to a side was known in Spain. Oblong and circular boards are also mentioned by Mas'udi. There was an important difference between the early Arab and Persian board and that used in Europe, for in the former there was no distinction in the color of the squares. This can be seen very clearly even in the fourteenth-century paintings in the Shāhnāmeh (see p. 272). The chess problems in the very fine Florentine manuscript of the thirteenth century known as the Bonus socius are accompanied by drawings in which all the squares are white and the names of the pieces written in black and red. But in the contemporary manuscripts of Alfonso the Wise the boards are checkered, even though Arabs are shown playing, as can be seen on page 277.

There are many references to show that chess was very popular with the early caliphs and the court, just as in Europe a century or two later there are legends and writings to show that it was a pastime of kings, courts, and clergy. Ma'mun, a caliph of the early ninth century, called skilled players to his court, but that did not prevent him from making the observation that chess and politeness did not go well together. Sets of chess, often of great value, were given as presents between rulers and persons in high places, not only in Europe, but by Muslims to Christians. We have the legend of such a gift to Charlemagne from Harun ar Rashid, and we also know that Louis IX received one of crystal and gold from the Old Man of the Mountains, the last of Hassan Sabbah’s line to reign in the famous castle of the “Assassins” at Alamut before they were swept away by the Mongols.

In spite of such high patronage, however, there were many Muslims who objected not only to backgammon, which was almost entirely a game of chance, but to chess also, although it was considered a more intellectual pastime; for both games were played for stakes. There was much heated theological controversy about chess and Ash Shafī’i, one of the greatest of the orthodox divines, laid down conditions that had to be fulfilled to ensure lawfulness: the game must not be played for a stake nor allowed to interfere with prayer, the player must refrain from improper language, and the game must not be played in the street or in any public place.

In Europe, too, where chess was often played for stakes, difficulties with the Church arose, as well they might when we hear that at the very beginning of the eleventh century Mathilda, daughter of Otto II, was “won” as the result of a chess match between Ezzo, the Count Palatine, and her brother, Otto III. The clergy themselves were susceptible to the fascination of the game, and in the same century Cardinal Damianus, Bishop of Ostra, wrote to reprove a bishop for sporting away his evenings with the vanity of chess and so defiling with the pollution of a sacrilegious game the hand which offered up the body of the Lord.

Chess has survived all these onslaughts and has undergone remarkably few changes considering that it has existed for some fourteen hundred years, a lingua franca between the civilizations of the East and West.