

## Little wooden armies

by Keith Sands

*1500 years ago*

*A king in India named Kaid, who had built a huge empire, was sick at heart. He called his minister, Sassa, to him and said : "Day and night I think about my past battles, I dream of conquests and invasions, I can't sleep for thinking about imaginary wars and victories. But I have no more enemies, and it is a sin to make war without cause. What can I do to regain my peace of mind?"*

*The minister thought of a game which he had learnt from a Greek soldier. He taught the rules to the king, who found the game so engrossing, such a perfect substitute for war, that he was a happy man again. He asked Sassa :*

*"How can I reward you? Gold? Jewels? Perhaps you want to marry one of my daughters? Choose anything you like." But Sassa said :*

*"Take a grain of rice and place it on the first square of the board. Put two grains on the second square. Keep going, doubling the number of grains each time, until you have covered all the 64 squares on the board."*

*At first they laughed at Sassa for his modesty and simplicity. But then they discovered that the rice would exceed all the wealth in the known world.*

### A mystery

The game, if you haven't guessed, was chess. It's interesting that in all the various legends of chess's origins the game is always said to come from somewhere else. Chess has a number of known ancestors– the four-player Indian game Chaturanga among them – but its ultimate place and date of birth are still a mystery. India, China, Persia, Greece? Nobody knows.

What is definitely true in the story is the point Sassa was making with his rice. Chess is pretty much infinite. We don't know the number of possible games even today, when a supercomputer can beat the World Champion. There's an Indian proverb: "Chess is a lake in which a mosquito can bathe - and an elephant can drown".

Children like to command a little wooden army, and even adults like to play Napoleon. That's how they get started. Later, players realize the technical complexity and finally, they see the game's awesome artistic beauty. It's a unique combination of war game, sport, science and art.

### A mirror of history

In its long journey around the world, chess has borrowed from the cultures that took it in. The West plays with bishops, knights and queens, because they were powerful people in medieval Europe when chess became popular. But in the East, including Russia, these pieces are named the elephant, horse and ferz (minister), as in Indian Chaturanga.

Chess moved west but it also moved East, and its Eastern versions - Chinese Xiang-pi and Japanese Shigo – also reflect history. In Shigo, some of the pieces can even change sides, like mercenary soldiers in the age of the Samurai.

The players, too, reflect the spirit of their times. Anatoly Karpov, who dominated the game in the 1970s, played Cold War chess - Iron Curtain chess. He was slow and defensive but almost impossible to beat. Garry Kasparov took the title from him in 1985, on the eve of great changes in the USSR. He played Gorbachev chess, perestroika chess. Radical solutions to problems, and risky moves with unpredictable results. His style was like a breath of fresh air.

### An extreme sport?

In my passion for chess, I'm in good company. Charlemagne, King Henry II, Napoleon, Tolstoy, Rousseau, Nabokov and Che Guevara. Chess players all.

The French artist Marcel Duchamps took his obsession further. He took three years off from art to become a chess master, and played for France in the Chess Olympiad. He was prouder of his chess mastery than all his artistic achievements.

With all these kings, artists and writers playing chess, you might get the idea that chess is the ultimate civilized pursuit. But you'd be wrong.

A Scandinavian manuscript, 900 years old, tells of how one player, who lost a game, picked up the board and smashed his opponent on the head with it. Boards were made of stone in those days. Ouch.

Grandmasters have called it "a blood sport", "like a fight to the death with broken bottles" and "very dangerous – you have to kill people."

If you agree with the old saying that life is too short for chess, play blitz chess. Five minutes on the clock. Non-players think chess is slow and boring, but blitz is a high adrenaline sport. And as aggressive as any martial art. In parks in Russia, where they gather in summer to play blitz, the players don't just take pieces, they knock them off the board onto the ground. And in the classic game, even world championship players have been known to kick each other under the table.

### **From the boxing ring to the chess board**

With all this aggression, and the stories of nervous breakdowns among chess players, it's worth remembering that chess can heal as well as harm. My own favourite chess story is that of John Healy. His autobiography, *The Grass Arena*, was made into a great film by the BBC. Healy was a failed boxer who became the most serious kind of alcoholic. He became homeless. The bottle nearly killed him. But in prison, he discovered chess, and managed to give up drinking completely. He became a successful chess player, journalist and writer.

Healy is played in the film by the British actor Mark Rylance. It's the performance of a lifetime – chess makes surprisingly good cinema. There is a moving scene where Healy tries to find the words to describe how his life has changed. "It's like boxing again...but not with fists... with the mind." King Kaid, fighting his imaginary battles, would surely have recognized him.

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