

The Historic New Orleans Collection presents
Play Chess with Paul Morphy



Lesson 2, History



Lewis chessmen kings, ca. 1150
(courtesy British Museum)

A long time ago, in 16th-century Scotland, on the Isle of Lewis, a servant noticed a sailor with a sack of treasure walking in the distance. The servant attacked the sailor, stole the treasure, and buried his newfound hoard on a beach, hoping to recover it later. However, after confessing his misdeeds, he lost his life. The buried treasure would be found centuries later, in 1831. It included a trove of carved chess pieces, which came to be known as the Lewis chessmen.

Elaborate throne design, Lewis chess piece, ca. 1150 (courtesy British Museum)





The previous story is one of many legends about where these pieces originated. It is true that they were discovered in a hoard near a beach on the Scottish Isle of Lewis, but there have been few other clues as to their provenance.

Scholars have determined that the 78 pieces, from four different chess sets, were made in the mid- to late 12th century in Norway. It was common for Vikings in the region to play the game of chess on sailing ships.



“The Worried Queen,” Lewis chess piece, ca. 1150 (courtesy British Museum)

Knights, Lewis chess pieces, ca. 1150 (courtesy British Museum)

Working backwards from the Lewis chessmen, let's trace the history of the game of chess. It was introduced to Europe during the Islamic conquest and control of Spain starting in the eighth century, and spread to the rest of the continent from there.

There have been several theories about the origin of the game prior to its introduction in Europe. Some historians have placed its beginnings in the Far East; others, a minority, have pushed the theory of Africa.



Warder (rook), Lewis chess piece, ca. 1175
(courtesy National Museum of Scotland)

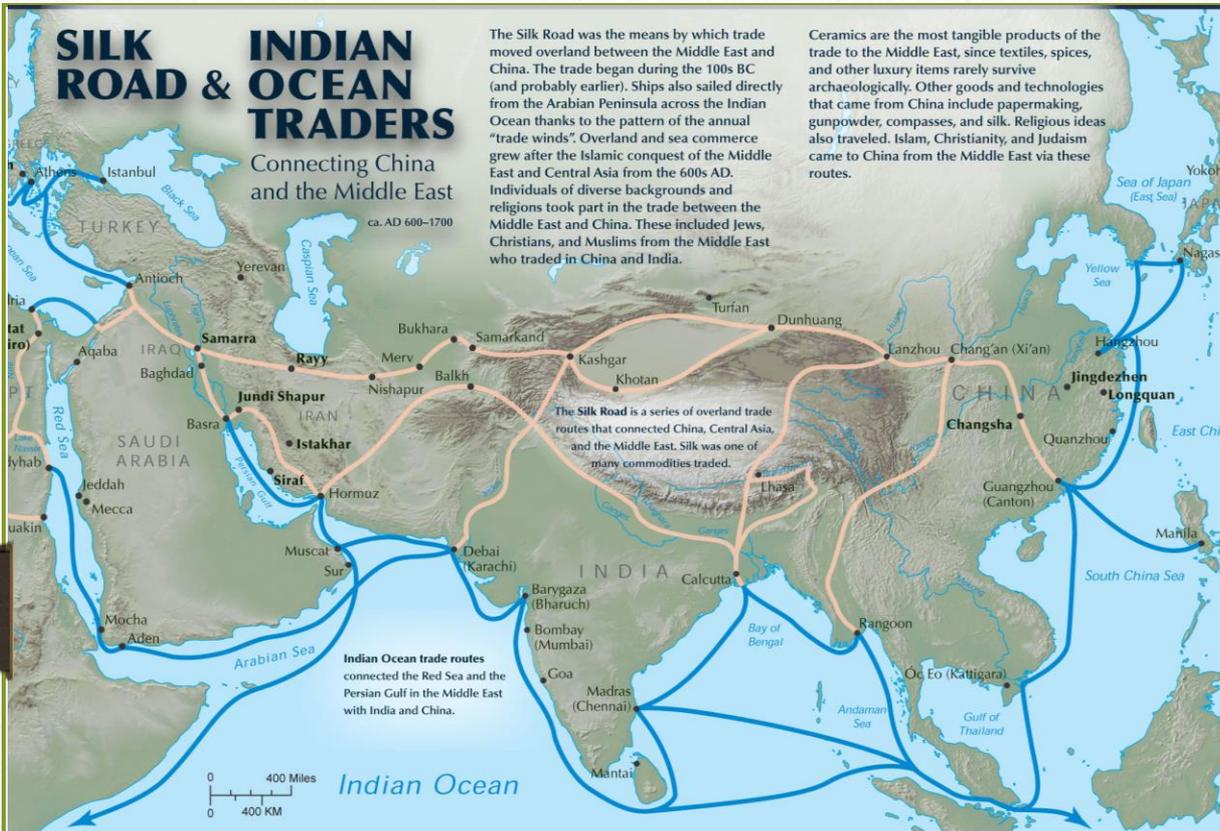
This rook is depicted as a berserker, wearing a helmet and quilted defensive jacket known as an aketon. He bites the top of his shield with his sword raised.



Queen Nefertari playing senet, ca. 1250 BC
(courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Board games had been around for millennia. Senet was a popular board game in ancient Egypt. Queens like Nefertari likely played it using a game box, while less-wealthy Egyptians may have played on a grid scratched into the floor.

While Egyptian senet might have been similar to chess, most historians have concluded that the game of chess began in India around the seventh century, during the reign of the Gupta Empire.



Silk Road trading map
(courtesy University of Chicago)

It was known as chaturanga, and this game has been widely identified as the common ancestor of all forms of modern chess. Chaturanga traveled westward along the Silk Road, where it became known as chatrang in Persia, during the Sasanian Empire (modern-day Iran).



Sculpted reproductions of the earliest-known chessmen
(courtesy BBC)

The original pieces were found in 1977 in Afrasiyab, the ancient city of Samarkand (in present-day Uzbekistan). They are dated at approximately 700 AD.

What sets chess apart from other board games is the use of pieces with distinct roles, rather than generic pieces that all have the same capabilities (for example, checkers or draught).

The earliest chess pieces from India were called shah (king), wazir (counsellor), fil (bishop), asp (knight), rukh (rook), and piyade (pawn). In the Persian version, the names changed slightly, to shah, farzin, pil, asp, rukh, and piyada.

The Persians did not use a queen, and a few of their pieces are not recognizable today, as they reflect the cultures of the military throughout Central Asia at that time. One piece, which would evolve into the bishop in Europe, was the pil. This piece was shaped like a war elephant.



Pil, 20th century (courtesy M.S. Rau Antiques)

The expansion of chatrang westward continued after the Sasanian Empire was conquered by Islamic invaders from the Arabian Peninsula. The game soon became known as shatranj, and remained so when it first entered Europe.

The masters of the game were known as aliyut, or court champions. Around 840 AD, one of these champions, al-Aldi, became the first author of a book devoted to chess, called *Kitab ash-shatranj* (*The Book of Chess*).



Turkish "Bashi-bazouk" Mercenary Soldiers Playing Chess, ca. 1870 (courtesy New Orleans Museum of Art)



Muslims playing chess, 1283
(courtesy Library of the
Monastery of San Lorenzo de
El Escorial)

The Islamic expansion of the seventh century carried chess over North Africa, sending it into Spain in the year 711. For the next eight centuries, these Muslims, also called Moors, occupied a large portion of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal), renaming it Al-Andalus. Through a number of different dynasties, the Moors presided over a multicultural, religiously tolerant society that produced great advancements in the fields of agriculture, astronomy, medicine, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and chess theory.



La Rendición de Granada (*The Surrender of Granada*), 1882
(courtesy Wikicommons)

Many of the Christian inhabitants that had previously ruled kingdoms throughout Spain fought for centuries to take back control of the land. This effort to regain power became known as the Reconquista, and in 1491 it culminated in the Moors' defeat at the Battle of Granada.



Christophe Colomb a la cour d'Isabelle II
(Christopher Columbus in the court of
Isabella II), 1840s (courtesy Library of
Congress)

Following the Reconquista, chess entered the European Renaissance, as practitioners sought a deeper understanding of the game using the scientific method. The game would go on to play a major role in nation building as towns and cities started to unify.

Lesson 3 will take us through this time, which provided many of the classic works and resources that Paul Morphy studied in becoming the most dominant player of the mid-19th century.

But now, let's play! Please move on to the next part of Lesson 2, where we will learn about the role of the bishop piece.

For more information on the history covered in this lesson, check out the resources listed below.

- [“The Lewis Chess Pieces,”](#) National Museums of Scotland
- *The History of Chess in Fifty Moves*, by Bill Price, published by Firefly Books, 2015
- [“Senet and Twenty Squares: Two Board Games Played by Ancient Egyptians,”](#) by Daniel Zwing, published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017
- [“Chess: A Chequered History”](#) [radio], produced by the BBC, 2019
- [“Chess Pieces: A History,”](#) published by Chess.com, 2007
- “Presentation as Representation: An Exhibit Review of the Islamic Moorish Spain as Opposed to Magisterial Spain,” by Elizabeth Overman, in the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2002
- [“Curator’s Corner: Irving Finkel and the Chamber of Lewis Chessmen”](#) [video], produced by the British Museum, 2017