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WIZĀRIŠN Ī ČATRANG UD NIHIŠN Ī NĒW-ARDAXŠĪR

WIZĀRIŠN Ī ČATRANG UD NIHIŠN Ī NĒW-ARDAXŠĪR [*WČN*], "the explanation of chess and the arrangement of backgammon." *WČN* is a minor Pahlavi text, mainly attested in ms MK (fols. 115-20), edited by Jamaspji Jamasp-Asana (1913) with the help of other minor codices (for its editions and translations see the bibliography; Cereti 2001, pp. 203-5; all citations of the text here are by chapter), whose content remains basic for any research concerning the earlier history of these two games (Murray, 1913; Utas, 1991; Panaino, 1999, pp. 135-223, where secondary literature is presented). Although the final attested version of this source is late, its essential core probably belongs to the late Sasanian period (Panaino, 1999, pp. 83-91), its language being relatively correct and with some archaisms (e.g., *wisē kard*, in chap. 16; cf. Parth. *wsyd kyrdan* "to send"; cf. Cantera, p. 309), but also because of its remarkable and original literary value. The brief story there narrated concerns the confrontation between two kings, the Sasanian king Ḵosrow I (*šāh Xusraw anōšag-ruwān*) and the (probably fictitious) kinglet of India, Dēwišarm, who, through the ability in playing games of their two best champions, Wuzurgmihr and Tātarītos (about this name see Panaino, 1999, pp. 101-4), try to overcome each other. Dēwišarm, in fact, sends Tātarītos to the court of Ḵosrow with a complete set of an (apparently) unknown game (chess), made of sixteen pieces of emerald and sixteen pieces of red ruby (1), to test the intelligence and the wisdom of Ērānšahr. The Indian player gives to the king of kings a letter stating that the Iranian wise men should be wiser than the

Indian ones. If they were able to explain the rationale of the *čatrang*, that statement would have been true, otherwise Ḵosrow would be obliged to pay a heavy tribute to India (3). Nobody was capable to explain the meaning of the game (4), but, after three days (5), Wuzurgmihr appeared showing his own superior knowledge (5-6) and declared (7) that he himself knew the rationale of the *čatrang*. Then, he received 12,000 drachms by Ḵosrow (8). So, the next day, Wuzurgmihr summoned Tātarītos and said that Dēwišarm had made this *čatrang* on purpose like a battlefield (9), and, thus, gave a detailed description of all the pieces of the game (10), in a passage which is still fundamental for the history of chess. Then, both champions played and Wuzurgmihr won three times (11). In his turn, according to this story, Wuzurgmihr invented a kind of backgammon, which was named *nēw-ardaxšīr* ("Noble-[is]-Ardaxšīr") in the honor of the earliest Sasanian king. He made the board game like Spandarmad, i.e. the earth (20), the 30 counters like 30 nychtemera, 15 white like the day, 15 black like the night (21). The die was made like the revolution of the stars and the turning of the firmament (22). The number "1" on it was just as Ohrmazd is one (23), "2" like the *mēnōg* (the mental dimension) and the *gētīg* (the material and living dimension) (24), "3" like Good Thought, Good Speech and Good Deeds (25), "4" like the 4 elements of which humanity is composed and like the four directions of the world (26), "5" like the 5 lights (sun, moon, stars, fire and the lightning which comes from the sky; chap. 27), "6" like the completion of the creation during the 6 *gāh* ("periods") of the *gāhānbār*s (the "year-divisions"; 28). Then, Wuzurgmihr described (29) the arrangement of the *nēw-ardaxšīr* upon the board, which was like that established by Ohrmazd, in the *gētīg* existence, while (30) the revolving and turning of the counters (in opposite directions?) according to the die was similar to the peoples, living in the *gētīg*, who are tied by a bond to the *mēnōg* and all of them turn and move according to the seven planets and the twelve zodiacal signs (see ZODIAC), according to a doctrine concerning the astral cords, which is well attested in Late Antiquity sources, particularly in Middle Iranian texts, Zoroastrian and Manichaean as well (Panaino, 1998). When the counters hit and remove (the opponent's ones by stacking up) one on the other, it happens just as the people in the *gētīg* hit one another; and when by one turning of the die the players continuously remove (the opponent's counters), it will be just as the people who all pass out of the *gētīg*; when they set the counters up again, it will be in the likeness of the people who will all come again alive at the resurrection of the dead (31). At this point, Ḵosrow authorized Wuzurgmihr to go to India with an enormous parade in order to test the Indian king and the wisdom of his saviors. Dēwišarm asked forty day's

time (34) in order to explain the rationale of that (new) game, but nobody was able to understand it (35). This way, Wuzurgmihr took again from the Indian king "tribute and taxes" as much as was fixed, and so returned to Ērānšahr. The last chapters (37-38) of the *WČN* seem to belong to another source, the so-called "Book of Customs" (*Ēwēnag nāmag;* see ĀĪN-NĀMA), and contain moral instructions about the way to play chess (Brunner, 1979, p. 43; Panaino, 1999, p. 90). This fact confirms that the final version was arranged in post-Sasanian times, but does not demonstrate that the story was in itself later.

This narration, whose historicity is very doubtful notwithstanding some supportive attempts (Marquart and de Groot; Hansen; Bidev, p. 68, but see contra De Blois, 1990; Panaino, 1999, pp. 93-99), develops an older literary pattern, already attested in many literatures and partly connected to the cycle of the Aḥiqar's legend (Nöldeke, 1913, p. 27, n. 1; Krappe; De Blois 1990, p. 20; Brunner, 1979, p. 46, n. 1; Nau), which has been developed upon ideological patterns, in particular that of the moral, cultural and military superiority of the Iranians. (About other possible relation between the cycle of Aḥiqar and the *andarz ī Ādurbād ī Mahraspandān* see De Blois, 1984).

The protagonist of the story, the semi-legendary wise Wuzurgmihr, can show his innate wisdom in playing *čatrang*, the Indian chess (*caturaṅga*), defeating his opponent Tātarītos, but he is also presented as the inventor of backgammon (the *nēw-ardaxšīr*), which originally was a Western game (Austin, 1934a, 1934b, 1935, 1940; Murray, 1952, pp. 30-31), named *ludus duodecim scriptorum*, *alea*, *tabula*, Gr. *táblē* (perhaps with an earlier background itself in Egypt and Mesopotamia; Panaino, 1999, pp. 187-92). Daryaee (2002, pp. 282-83), on the contrary, proposes an Indian derivation for the backgammon which was already known in India about the 7th century CE.

In this source, the Sasanian imperialistic ideology is clearly represented by means of an apparently innocent tale: the strong superiority of Sasanian wisdom, triumphing over the surrounding countries, and absorbing all the cultural (external) borrowings, like foreign games, which, in their turn, become Iranianized, and presented as an inner genuine invention. The character of this booklet is unimaginable without a living public, which was certainly not that of the Iranian Zoroastrians during the Islamic period, but that of young nobles of the Sasanian empire, proud of their status and of their superior education. The few religious elements appearing in the description of the backgammon constitute only a cultural element and not the actual focus of the work, while the metaphoric and opposite values of chess (rational and

warlike intelligence) and of backgammon (destiny) will later become a literary "topos" of Arabic and Mediaeval books. Then, the *WČN* can be seen as a sort of Sasanian "paideia", full of scattered pieces of information about the cultural values of that period, and not like a priestly composition (on the Sasanian education see Azarnouche). In particular, the doctrine about fate and destiny, as developed with reference to backgammon, is worthy of interest, and can be connected with the fatalism expressed in the *Pandnāmag ī Wuzurgmihr* (Brunner, 1979, p. 47; 1987, p. 864; Shaked, 1988; Panaino, 1999, pp. 55-57).

It is improbable that such a Wuzurgmihr should be associated, as Christensen (1929) suggested, with the famous Borzūya, the physician of the time of Ḵosrow I (r. 531-79), who translated the *Pañcatantra* and other Sanskrit fables in the Pahlavi **Kalīlag ud Dimnag* (Syr. *Qalilag w Ḏamnag*; Ar. *Kalīlah wa Dimnah*; Hertel; Keith-Falconer; Nöldeke, 1905; Tavadia, pp. 125-27; Shaked, 1984, p. 51, n. 8; Khalegi Motlagh; De Blois, 1990, pp. 48-50; Panaino, 1999, pp. 116-19; see KALILA WA DIMNA), and by whom an autobiographic introduction to this collection was added (Nöldeke, 1912; Ross). It is probable that Wuzurgmihr, the astrologer, and Borzūya were three independent persons; there are, in fact, some arguments against the identification of the famous vizier, named "Wuzurgmihr, son of Bōxtag" (BOZORGMEHR-E BOḴTAGĀN), as he was called in the *WČN* (and in the *Ayādgār ī Wuzurgmihr*; see Henning, pp. 76-77) with the homonymous astrologer, who translated the *Anthologies* of Vettius Valens in Pahlavi (**Wizīdag* "Selection[s]"); in his turn, we know that Borzūya was the son of Azdahar (see Panaino, 1999, pp. 105-23).

The originality of the narrative structure of the *WČN* can be deduced after a direct comparison with the attested versions of the same story offered by Ferdowsi (ed. Mohl, vol. VI, pp. 384-401, vv. 3697-3888; Pizzi, 1888, pp. 222-37; Moscow, vol. VIII, pp. 206-17, vv. 2628-2810; Qāsemi), and by the Arabic historian Ṯaʿālebi (*Ḡorar*, pp. 622-25), where no dramatic *pathos* appears in contrast with the Sasanian *Vorlage*, which presents the facts with a certain dramatic *suspense* (Nöldeke, 1892; Panaino, 1999, pp. 125-33; 160-64, 200-203). For these reasons, the idea that such a Pahlavi text would have been composed only under the later influence played by Muslim developments of the image and role attributed to the wise Wuzurgmihr (now called Bozorgmehr) seems far-fetched.

This source shows that equestrian games (like *čaw(la)gān/čowgān* "polo") and board-games (*čatrang*, *nēw-ardaxšīr*, *haštpāy*) were very important in the daily life of the Sasanian courts (Pagliaro, 1939), as documented by some other

sources (Monchi-Zadeh, pp. 65; Nöldeke, 1878, p. 39; Grenet, pp. 60-61; De Blois, 1993, p. 95; Panaino, 1999, pp. 50-54). Sasanian chess was doubtless based on an Indian model (Thieme, 1962; 1994), where the ancient traditional fourfold division (*caturaṅgabala-*) of the army (*hasty-aśva-ratha-padātaṁ* "elephants, horses, chariots, and infantry"), no longer in use at that time, determined the arrangement of this "war-game" (Panaino, 1999; 2007a). Unfortunately chapter 10 of the *WČN*, where the pieces of the game were described, presents a few philological problems; only four chessmen are clearly described: the king (*šāh*), the elephant (*pīl*) [= bishop], the horse (*asp*) [= knight] and the foot-soldier (*payādag*) [= pawn]; on the contrary, the two remaining strategic pieces, the future "rook" and the "queen", according to one possible interpretation, were respectively: 1) the *mādāyār* "the minister", associated with the *rox*, that is, following MacKenzie's explanation (in Panaino 1999, pp. 167-69), the "flank, the side" (cf. Pers. *rux* "cheek"= side of the face) and probably North Kurd. *rāx*, Central Kurd. *rōx* "side, edge," etc., and 2) the *frazēn* "the guard, the protector or general". If this solution is correct (but see De Blois in Panaino, 1999, pp. 159, n. 113, 169, n. 153), Sasanian chess (or, simply the set described in the *WČN* which cannot be assumed as an absolute standard for all the Iranian countries of the Sasanian period) probably shows the presence of a "General (in chief)" close to the king, according to the Indian pattern, where actually the *senāpati-* led the military operations on the battlefield, notwithstanding the presence of the king. The presence of a minister, or of an officer on the right and left side (*rox*) on the place of the future "rook" (and not on that of the "queen" as in later Islamic and Indian chess, where we have, e.g., *farzīn*, *farzāna*, *wazīr*, *dastūr*, or *mantrin-*, *saciva-*, "counselor", etc.) will be a matter of debate; the alternative possibility, that is the interpretation of *rox* [rahw'] as a "chariot" (Pagliaro, 1940, pp. 329-37; 1951, p. 104; Nyberg, 1974, p. 169), presents different problems, but it is not impossible that chariots (*rah*) — or officers on chariots — were still present among Sasanian and later chessmen (see, for instance, the chariot found among the chessmen of Afrasiab; Burjakov, 1994a; 1994b; Panaino, 1999, pp. 172-74; 2007b). Unfortunately the *rux* in Ferdowsi's *Šāh-Nāma* does not seem to be referred to a chariot (Panaino, 1999, p. 170). It could be a standardized designation of the flank of the army, which in Medieval Europe was not translated as "chariot", but simply transferred first into *rook*, or, e.g., Italian *rocco*, and, then, into Italian *torre* (= "tower". For a more detailed history of the interpretations see Panaino, 1999, pp. 164-85; 2005). With regard to the *nēw-ardaxšīr*, we must recall that Greek sources, like the *Palatine Anthology*, IX, 428 (Waltz and Soury, pp. 58-59), give a larger description of its rules. In the

latter sources, an epigram of Agathias Scholasticus (ca. 528-580) presents a game played by the Emperor Zeno (d. 491), from which some rules can be discerned (Austin, 1934b, pp. 202-205; Murray, 1952, pp. 32-33; Panaino, 1999, pp. 194-99). The hypothesis that the symbolic description of backgammon, as attested in the *WČN*, was based upon a Greek pattern (as assumed by Nöldeke, 1892, p. 23, n. 1) is strongly supported by later Greek sources (like Kedrenos, Isaccos Porphyrogenitos, and Suda; Panaino, 1999, pp. 206-208), which derive from a common archetype (probably Dictys, 1st century CE; Rossbach, p. 589; Kindstrand, 1979, p. 11; Panaino, 1999, p. 212, n. 73). The astrological and deterministic symbolism of backgammon was developed in the framework of Arabic and Medieval sources (Panaino, 1999, pp. 208-23).

It is a matter of debate if the story of the game between Wuzurgmihr and Tātarītos had a figurative reflex in the framework of the Sogdian paintings of Panjikent (Belenizki, 1980, pp. 81-82; Belenizki and Marshak, 1981, pp. 34-46; Semenov, pp. 70-73; Panaino, 1999, pp. 90-92; Daryaee, 2002, pp. 294-95).

See also BOARD GAMES IN PRE-ISLAMIC PERSIA.

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