



# "La novella degli Scacchi e della Tavola Reale"

("The story of Chess and Backgammon")

Review by Gianfelice Ferlito

A new critical edition of the Pahlavi text "**Wizarisn i catrang ud nihisn i new-ardaxsir** (WCNV) by Prof. Antonio Panaino, 1999, Milan. Prof Antonio Panaino lives in Milan. Associate Professor at the University of Bologna for Iranian philology he reads at the Faculty of Cultural Assets Preservation in Ravenna. He is an outstanding scholar of pre-Islamic Iran, with marked attention to religion (Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity in Central Asia) and to the evolution of sciences or pseudosciences of antiquity, especially in regards of astronomy and astrology. He has published already several monographs and one hundred essays.

Worth mentioning are two studies about **Tistrya**, the god of the star Sirius. He published "*Tistrya I. The Avesta Hymn to Sirius*" (Rome, 1990) and "*The Iranian nyth of the star Sirius*." (Rome, 1995). These two books earned him in 1998 the "R. et T, Ghirsham" prize from the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres of Paris.

Now he proposes to all chess scholars and to a greater public a new critical edition and translation of an anonymous Pahlavi text on **catrang** (chess) and **new-ardaxsir** (backgammon) known by the title "*Wizarisn i cotrang ud nihisn i new-ardaxsir*" (WCN in short).

It is interesting to learn from Panaino that this title was probably added in 1897 by the Editor Jamasp-Asana who presented the old story on chess and backgammon in a new edition following the manuscripts **MK**, **JJ** and **TD**, among which the most indisputable and oldest is the Ms **MK** which was copied in India in 1322 A. D.

The old story (WCN) sometimes has different titles, such as "*Catrang namak*" or "*Madayan i catrang*" (H. J. R. Murray), but at the outset the story had no title at all.

The Jamasp-Asana title in English reads "**The explanation of catrang (chess) and the set up or new-ardaxsir (backgammon)**".

This old story is basically the oldest document where **catrang** (chess) and the shapes of the **catrang pieces** are described for the first time ever. Thus it is of paramount importance for the history of the game.

Panaino's book, 8. 3/4"x 5 . 1/2", printed with 20 black and white historical illustrations, consists of 268 pages. The price in Italy is 35.000 lire (around £13 ), (1)

An up to-date Bibliography of 26 pages gives a full panorama of the vast chess and backgammon literature and of studies related to the Sassanian period and to Persian epics and literature.

At the end of the book there is a summary of 3 pages in English and an English translation of the Pahlavi text plus an useful Index of names, places and a Lexicon of Pahlavi words used in

the *WCN*.

The book consists of two Parts. The first Part, 16 pages, gives a brief account of the old story (Chapter I), the written tradition of the various MMS of the *WCN* (Chapter II) and the transliteration, translation and comments of the Pahlavi text (Chapter III).

The second Part, 104 pages, deals with the probable dating of the text as reported by the more accurate manuscripts called MK, JJ, TD (Chapter I), the question whether the story is fictitious or historical (Chapter II), the historical research on the leading characters, i.e. *Tataritos* - the Indian ambassador (Chapter III), *Wuzurgmihr* - the semi-legendary Persian sage who explained what was the catrang and how to play it and *Burzoy* - the doctor of the Iranian king Xusraw I (Chapter IV), the story as presented by Firdawsi (Chapter V), the panorama of past interpretations of the Pahlavi words related to the shapes of catrang pieces and the Panaino's new explanation for two of them (Rook and Queen) (Chapter VI) and finally the description and the symbolic significance of the game "*New-ardaxsir*" (backgammon) (Chapter VII).

The book is of great interest for all chess scholars, and it has a great deal of notes which gives a mine of quotations and references in the vast field of research done in centuries of investigation.

Part I describes in detail the intellectual confrontation between two kings, the great Persian "king of the kings" Xusraw I (531-579 AD) and the (fictitious) Indian king Dewisarm.

The Indian king challenges the great Persian monarch to explain the "rationale" of (1)... *one set of catrang (and) 16 pieces made of emerald and 16 made of red ruby to test the intelligence and the wisdom of lords.*" The puzzle was presented by the Indian delegate Tataritos "(2)... *with a caravan of 1200 camels loaded of gold, silver, jewels, pearls and garments, and 90 elephants.*

The challenge to the Persian king was "Explain catrang or send us a tribute". The story tells us that the Persian King asked for 3 days of time.

At the end of the third day, Wuzurgmihr, a Persian sage, "...*(5)rose to his feet*" and explained, by "(15)...*his innate wisdom, ... easily and simply*" the meaning of catrang "(9)...*Dewisarm made this catrang on purpose like a battlefield, (10) And he made the kings like two overlords, the minister like the left and right flank(s), the general like the commander of the warriors, the elephant (s) like the commander of the (royal) bodyguards, the horse (s) like the commander of the cavalry, the pawn (s) like those same infantrymen at the front of the battle*") and showed not only how to play it but furthermore defeated the same Tataritos in 3 consecutive games. The story goes on because the wise Wuzurgmihr not only was able to explain catrang but also devised a new game which he called **nev-ardaxsir** in honour of king Ardashir (c. 224-241 AD) "(19)...*the most active and the wisest among the rulers*" and proposed to his King to send the new game to Dewisarm to test this time the Indian wisdom. The caravan was prepared and Wuzurgmihr was appointed commander. When king Dewisar saw the game asked for 40 days of time but unfortunately for him "(35)...*there was nobody among the Indian sages who knew the rationale of that new-ardaxsir*".

In Part 2, we find many interesting chapters. But the most controversial to many chess scholars will be Chapter VII in which Prof. Panaino refashions the interpretation of the Pahlavi words about the original shapes of two important chess pieces, the Rook and the Queen. But let us proceed from the beginning of Part 2.

First of all the dating of *WCN*. It remains highly conjectural. Some scholars (Nöldeke, Christensen, Grignaschi) thought with some hesitation that the work could be dated around VII-IX century. A. Pagliaro (1941) thought that the *WCN* was datable around the VII century at the

latest but recognised that the last two chapters of the WCN (37-38) were certainly later additions. Prof. Panaino is of the opinion that the dating of WCN is even earlier, i.e. between the VI and the VII century, supporting the idea however that some additions were made later on to the Pahlavi Sassanian text. According to Prof. Panaino the anonymous Persian author was, with good probability, a secular literate at the court of the Sassanian King.

The WCN is "a didactic and delightful little booklet for young people of good Iranian society", and it "has little social and religious merit. The plot of the story is obviously anti-Indian.. .which is understandable in a climate of political and cultural *révanche* which was peculiar to the period of Xusraw I "(p. 86-88).

According to Prof. Panaino a further proof against a later dating and in favour of the relative antiquity of the WCN could arise from the paintings of the VIII century found at Panjikent in Central Asia where two men are playing at a table game in front of a king. The game board does not seem to be adequate for chess or backgammon (only 36 squares) but we do not know if the painter made some artistic modifications to it.

In chapter II, Prof. Panaino examines the possibility of having an historical identification for the Indian king Dewisarm. The most important attempts were those made by Marquart-de Groot (1915) and Olaf Hansen (1935) who identified the Indian king with Yasodharman who is historically known for an inscription dated 533 A.D. But to this identification Prof. Panaino, with many other scholars, objects for reasons too complicated to explain here.

In reality, according to Panaino, we are not in a position to identify the Indian king who seems to be a fictional figure.

Even more complex is the identification of **Tataritos**. We do not know anything about him. Many learned suggestions have been advanced but all unconvincing.

The book analyses (Chapter IV) also the other protagonist of the story, i.e. the wise **Wuzurgmhir**. Panaino writes: "This man cannot be associated with the famous Burzoy, the physician of the time of Xusraw I, who translated the *Pancatantra* and other Sanskrit fables in the *Kalilag ud Dinnag* but is an independent person; in addition there are some arguments against the identification of W. with the homonymous astrologer, who translated the *Anthologies* of Vettius Valens in Pahlavi"(p. 246)

A short chapter (V) is dedicated to "the literary comparison of the narrative structure of the WCN with those offered by Firdawsi and the Arabic historian Tha'alibi where some original elements of the Pahlavi version are underlined (p. 246)

One of the most important sections of the book, for chess scholars, is in my opinion Chapter VII where the transliteration, transcription and translation of catrang pieces (chap. 10 of WCN) is analysed in detail and depth. Apparently there are philological problems for the catrang pieces we now for chess call "Rook" and "Queen". The other 4 pieces are clearly described, i.e. the King, the elephant (= Bishop), the horse (=Knight), the foot-soldier (=pawn) and they do not present problems.

In the Pahlavi text the passage of the "Rook" is rather deteriorated and therefore actually difficult to read. The author remarks that any reading of the text is based upon an interpretation of the Pahlavi letters which complete the edition for making some emendation. The transliteration is "**m' tgd' [n] l'n OL W dsnk**" which transcription is, according to Panaino and with the support of MacKenzie, "**madayaran o hoyag ud dasnag homanag**" and the translation is "**the ministers (madayaran) as the right and left flank (rox)**".

Many scholars gave their own interpretation, for example **m'tgd' [n] I'n** was transcribed by Salemann (1887) and by Tarapore (1932) as "madiyavaran" ("essentials"), by Sanjana (1885) as "madyawaran" ("regulating, keeping with bonds"), by West (1898) as "val madigan - i Rukhon" ("with essential of Rukhs"), by Pagliaro (1940) as " matikan raxw" ("the chariot ... for showing selected troops"), by Nyberg (1974) as " matak-var" ("administrator"), by De Blois (1997) as "madayaran rox o hoyag ud dasnag" in "the castles are as selected troops on the right and left flank".

According to Panaino there is no definitive interpretation but the most convincing translation for him is "Deputies of the king (= ministers) at left and at right flank(s)". It is most likely that these ministers, in real battles of Sassanian period, were transported on carts together with their guards. Thus the possibility to have historically some pieces represented by carts later on (see Aphrosiab chariot) and not ministers as the Pahlavi words may indicate. But military speaking it is well known that war chariots were already obsolete at the time of Sassanian battles.

The other philological puzzle regards the piece we call "Queen" in chess. The transliteration of the Pahlavi passage is "*hwm'n' k plcyn OL Ityst'I'n' srd' I'*" and the transcription according to Panaino is "frazen o artestaran-salar homanag" which translates as "the general like the commander of the warriors".

Pagliaro (1951) read the word "frazen" as "parzen", meaning of which, he said, should be derived from "*mask i (a)parzen*", i.e. "*tent (mask) of the command*". So according to him the Queen in catrang was represented by a tent. Instead according to Panaino, on MacKenzie's suggestion (1997), the "plcyn" should be read "fra-zen" which translated means "guard" or as suggested by Brunner (1978) "general/protector".

As we can see the old story reveals a lot of surprises even today.

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