

On The Provenance Of Manuscript 211

In the Royal Asiatic Society in London there exists an ancient manuscript known as MS 211. This 15th Century manuscript is the sole source for our knowledge of the rules of Tamerlane chess. I found myself wondering where this manuscript had been over the centuries, and what kinds of stories it could tell. So, I went to work on finding these answers, and the story that unraveled turned out to be one of love and war. And surprises. That story is here:

The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland was established on March 15th 1823 as an institution dedicated to, as their royal charter states, "the investigation of subjects connected with and for the encouragement of science, literature and the arts in relation to Asia." It is located in downtown London, and has an extensive collection of manuscripts from ancient Persia, India, and the surrounding regions. In March of 1836, almost exactly thirteen years after it was formed, the widow of a man named David Price walked into the Asiatic Society's library toting a bequeathment of dozens of old manuscripts that her husband had gifted to the society upon his death at age seventy-three.

One of those manuscripts was titled *Risalah-i Shatranj*, translated as "A Treatise on Chess". Today the library's online catalog dates the manuscript as "Probably 15th Century". It is written in Naskh script which is a small version of a rounded Islamic calligraphy. It consists of 64 folios, comprising 63 pages of text, with 15 lines per page, and 64 pages of illustrations, mainly showing two scholars engaged in games of chess. The dimensions are listed as 9.75 x 6.5 inches, and it is categorized as "defective" with pages out of order and some badly water damaged. Chess historian Nathaniel Bland visited the library in 1847 and described the manuscript as follows: "By a fate attached to all manuscripts, and especially those of any great age, this volume has been mutilated so as to have lost a considerable portion of its original contents, and even what remains has been put together in so ignorant or careless a manner as to present, on first inspection, a mere mass of confusion."

As a future tale will tell, this humble and woebegone book would become the world's only window into the rules of an ancient large chess variant known as *Shatranj Kabir*, later called Tamerlane Chess. A handful of other sources mention the game, such as Ibn Mahmud al-Amuli's book *Treasury of the Sciences*, in 1342, but no other source describes the rules. Without this ancient collection of tattered leaflets the game would be lost forever, devoured by centuries of absence, the fate of so much human culture. Without this manuscript, we could never experience the pastime that won the obsession of Timur The Great Amir, the Turco-Mongol conqueror who terrorized all of Persia for half of the 14th century and is estimated by some to be personally responsible for the deaths of five percent of the world's population during his lifetime.

In addition to outlining the rules for Tamerlane chess, the manuscript also contains philosophical musings regarding the "Ten Advantages of Chess", including food and exercise for the mind, practice for tactics in war, improved physical temperaments, and even a strengthened connection to the heavens. The text also contains mythical accounts which erroneously indicate that Tamerlane chess was the original form of chess and that the game was simplified to the 8 x 8 version in India due to that country's

perceived lack of intelligence. One of these accounts describes an Indian king who left a very young son as heir to his throne. The boy's advisers devised the 'simplified' form of chess to instruct his juvenile mind in the skills of military tactics.

The author of the manuscript is officially listed as "unknown" although at least one chess historian believes it was probably written by a man named Ali A-Shatranji, translating to Ali The Chess Player. Ali was a celebrated chess player at Timur's court and would sometimes travel for years and hundreds of miles through the desert with Timur on his various campaigns to destroy and overthrow new regions of the world. Timur, who had a permanently maimed right leg and hand, earned the nickname Timur Lenk, Turkish for Timur the Lame. This moniker would later be corrupted in English as Tamerlane. His acumen as a tactician on the battlefield, however, was anything but lame. Timur went on to rule over all of central Persia, from Turkey in the east to the edge of Ming China in the west, slaughtering every city or army that tried to defy him.

Tamerlane was as eccentric as he was ruthless, and was known for his love of scholarly people and pursuits. Spending most of his time between the year 1370 and his death in 1405 traveling around Persia conquering cities and territories, he would often spare the lives of the physicians and scholars of a city he had just razed. Usually these lucky fellows would be invited to his private chambers to speak of philosophy or sciences, or to play a few rounds of his favorite game, now known as Tamerlane Chess. One can not help but imagine this strange and nomadic world, full of desert and death, traveling across large stretches of wasteland for months and years at a time with an army of over one hundred thousand men, massive war elephants, horses and camels, always headed towards the next stone city, the inhabitants of which inevitably would suffer one of two possible fates. Submit, or be annihilated.

Endless walking in the scorching heat by day. And, for those lucky enough to be graced by the favor of Timur, casual discussions of the culture and the arts, and games of Tamerlane chess surrounded by bread and wine, by night. A romantic and cruel world. Ali the Chess Player, a common presence on these campaigns, was said to have a very arrogant manner, often boasting lavishly about his feats in the game of chess, claiming to have played fifty men at once, while blindfolded, and taking credit for the invention of many forms of the game. The writing style of the tattered manuscript gifted to the Royal Asiatic Society is similarly braggadocious, often referring to the author's own achievements, at one point stating the following: "And I have invented several positions in the Great Chess, and several tactics, which were unknown to former professors; and many of those which were left imperfect by the older players, I defended and rectified, and improved and completed what had already been discovered in Chess". It is this self grandiosity combined with his apparent familiarity with the courts of Tamerlane that has led to the conclusion by the late chess historian Duncan Forbes that the author of the manuscript is indeed Ali the Chess Player.

If this is the case, it is speculated that the manuscript was written probably shortly after Tamerlane's death, likely in the very early 1400s. The Royal Asiatic Society believes that the copy held is the original, while Nathaniel Bland felt the writing style and paper more approximates that used about 150 years or more later, in the late 16th Century. The theory here is that it may have been copied at that time, possibly by Haji Khalifa, an early 17th Century Ottoman historian and geographer, perhaps because the

original was in very shoddy condition. Whichever the case, the whereabouts of the manuscript were unknown for hundreds of years before its arrival at the RAS in London. Originally it was thought to have possibly been in the possession of the orientalist Thomas Hyde in the late 17th Century, since he discusses Tamerlane Chess in his 1696 book, *De ludis orientalibus* [On Oriental Games]. However, he only discusses the set-up of the board, not the rules of the game, and he offers no details from the manuscript. As far as I can tell, there is no evidence that he was ever in contact with the manuscript.

Where had this ancient work brought into the Royal Asiatic Society in the spring of 1836 by David Price's widow been for all those centuries? Where did it travel? What adventures did it survive? With these questions in mind, I contacted the society's librarian, a helpful man named Edward Weech, who for a fee, photographed all 64 folios of the manuscript and sent them electronically. It was in these photos that the first lead was discovered, on the inside of the front cover: A small inscription stating "The gift of" in English, followed by a name written in different ink, and in Persian, which turns out to translate as "Robert Holford". Underneath this, in the same handwriting as "The gift of" is written the name "H. Ross". Robert Holford, strangely written in Persian calligraphy, and 'H. Ross'. To solve the riddle of these names, it would be necessary to find out who David Price was, and where his life had taken him.

It turns out Mr. Price was born in Merthyr Cynog, a small hamlet in Brecknockshire, Wales, in 1762. He went to college, first at Christ College in Brecon, and then was accepted as a sizar of Jesus College in Cambridge, as a favor by the dean, who was a friend of David's father. However, he was apparently unable to support himself financially during his studies and by 1780 he was penniless and dropped out of school. With little job skills, and less places to go, he joined what was known as the East India Company.

The East India Company was formed in the year 1600 to establish a system of trade between England and Eastern India. The idea was to compete with and undermine the Spanish, who had a monopoly on the trade routes in the Indian Ocean region. As time went on however, the company turned its focus to seizing control of Indian land in the name of Great Britain. By the late 1700s the Company had taken over the majority of the Indian subcontinent by force with an army of over two hundred and fifty thousand men, a much greater force than the British army itself. Naturally the local Indian rulers in many of the regions of India resisted this hostile takeover, and a series of skirmishes and wars broke out which lasted most of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Constant recruitment of soldiers was needed for the Company to stay in power during these wars, and it was during this time that David Price enlisted. Much later in life, David wrote extensively on his adventures during his service in the East India Company, and these writings were posthumously published in 1839 under the title 'Memoirs of the Early Life and Service of a Field Officer on the Retired List of the Indian Army.' This memoir seemed to be the best chance of discovering more clues to Robert Holford or 'H. Ross', albeit a slim one, and I decided to read it.

In the late 1700s a series of wars were fought between the East India Company and Tipu Sultan, who was the ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore, which comprised most of southeast India. These are collectively

known as the Anglo-Mysore Wars. The Second Anglo-Mysore War was fought from 1780 to 1784, and was noted for its particularly violent battles. It was during this war that David Price sailed to the east bank of India to join other Company soldiers in a prolonged fight known as the Invasion of Kanara. Tipu Sultan's army attacked Price's camp on November 29th 1782 leading to a battle which lasted 2 weeks, until the Sultan retreated upon learning of the death of his father in another territory. At this point Price's general led some of his men, including Price, five miles north to attack a fort known as Merjee. During this detachment David met and befriended another East India Company soldier, by the name of Lieutenant Hugh Ross. This formed the beginning of a longstanding and intimate relationship with the man who was without a doubt, 'H. Ross'.

Price mentions Ross at length throughout his memoir and it is clear that he considered Ross his closest comrade throughout his service, and viewed him through a lens of great respect. Price credited Hugh Ross as the reason he was able to survive and endure the hardships of life during the wars. Their troop traveled north and west through Indian territories throughout most of 1783, defeating numerous cities and forts along the way. During this period, they surrounded an immensely fortified fortress known as Ancowla. With the fort seemingly impenetrable the men set up camp outside in hopes of starving out the inhabitants via siege. Sometime during the night, Hugh Ross awoke and came to realize that the fortress had been mostly abandoned. He led a group of soldiers inside and took possession of it without getting permission from, nor even informing, his superior officer.

This was considered a serious subversion and Ross was promptly arrested to deter others from engaging in similar behavior. While detained, Ross managed to convince the general of his division that taking over the fortress in the dead of night was the right decision, and he dropped the charges, deciding instead to leave Ross in charge of the fort. It was this type of ambition and wit that David Price admired so much in his friend.

The two went on to fight many future battles, and then in the fall of 1783 there was a long period of inaction. During this time, Ross often took charge of keeping up the soldiers' morale, organizing various inventive forms of entertainment. He taught the other men many types of card games and staged mock concerts, playing the flute and other instruments, encouraging others to learn to play. One day Ross announced they would be having a horse race, during which Price was winning up until the last minute when his horse bolted off in the wrong direction, leaving the entire troop in fits of laughter. It was clear that Ross was a well loved and influential man during his service with the East India Company.

Hugh Ross passed on many things to David Price during their time together in the service, and one of them was a passion for the culture of ancient Persia. Ross was an avid collector of Persian artifacts and a student of its languages. During their free time, Ross would teach Price to read some of the ancient texts, and over time Price fell in love with this hobby.

A melancholy day came when Price and Ross were separated by the Company, each following their own separate journey through most of the late 1780s, but Price continued his studies of Persian culture and language, eventually becoming somewhat of a scholar on the subject.

In 1790 The Third Anglo-Mysore War began against Tipu Sultan, and David Price found himself surrounding an Indian fort during what is now known as the Siege of Darwar. The siege lasted for several months, and although it ended in a victory for the Company, Price lost his leg in battle. After recovering from this grievous injury he was re-posted as a guard of Sir Charles Malet, the political minister of Poona, a city on the western bank of the Indian continent. During his service at Poona, in early January of 1791, Price received a letter from Hugh Ross describing a victorious siege that Ross had helped organize under General Charles Cornwallis, now known as the Capture of Hooly Honore. Four days later, on January 10th, another letter arrived baring heartbreaking news. During a battle on December 29th 1790, Hugh Ross, by now holding the rank of Captain, had been examining the position of Tipu Sultan's men, when he received a shot to the head, killing him instantly. Captain John Little, commander of the battle in which Ross lost his life, described the event as such in a letter to General Cornwallis: "I have the gratification to acquaint your lordship that I had every reason to be highly satisfied with the conduct of the detachment. A return of the killed and wounded is enclosed. The service has sustained a severe loss and myself an able support and worthy friend in Captain Hugh Ross, Major of Brigade." David Price had lost his gallant friend and mentor.

Price describes the following weeks as a very dark period in his life. Then, on January 25th, a letter arrived from Captain Little. The contents of this letter cements the connection to the heart of our story. As described by Price in his memoirs, "25th Jan.-- I received from Capt. Little, a letter, enclosing a copy of my poor friend Ross's will; wherein he devised to me his collection of Persian manuscripts, and Richardson's Dictionary. I could not be otherwise than flattered by such a mark of regard, from an individual of his distinguished merit."

The story of 'H. Ross', the name inscribed on the inside of the front cover of our manuscript on Tamerlane chess, seems to have revealed itself. It is almost without a doubt that the collection of Persian manuscripts left to David Price in the will of Captain Hugh Ross contained the Risalah-i Shatranj, A Treatise On Chess. Our tattered and water damaged book, serving as the sole window into the ancient game played by Timur the Conqueror during his campaigns to control the world, had likely been acquired by Captain Hugh Ross at some point during his travels through India in service of the East India Company, possibly following alongside Ross during his battles throughout most of the 1780s. This book, created during a time of Medieval conquest, with war elephants marching towards desert cities, had now, over three hundred years later, witnessed the Anglo-Mysore Wars between the Indian ruler Tipu Sultan and the British East India Company.

As the H. Ross chapter of this story closes, we are left with the mystery of the remaining name in the manuscript. "A gift of" followed by the name Robert Holford, peculiarly written in Persian calligraphy. Did Hugh Ross originally receive the manuscript as a gift from a man named Robert Holford sometime during his service throughout India? Is it possible to get lucky twice, and also discover Holford's identity and role in this saga?

A quick search of Google reveals a man named Robert Staynor Holford, a wealthy landowner from the early 1800s in the United Kingdom. He was an avid collector of art as well as an orientalist, possessing several ancient Persian artifacts. He appeared to be the perfect candidate, but the problem is that he

was born in 1808, sixteen years after David Price received A Treatise on Chess in Hugh Ross's will, meaning he could not possibly be the man mentioned on the inside of the front cover. Still, the coincidence of a man with the same name as the inscription, living in the same region where the East India Company was founded, and possessing the same interest in Persian culture and artifacts as David Price and Hugh Ross, was too striking to ignore.

It turns out that the descendants of Robert Staynor Holford set up a trust of the family estate known as The Holfords of Westonbirt Trust, and this organization still exists today. I contacted the heritage officer of the trust, a woman by the name of Jo Baker, who was intrigued by the story, and put me in contact with a trustee by the name of Angela Potter. Angela similarly found the coincidence too bothersome to dismiss, and after a little searching of the trust archives she uncovered the answer to the riddle. Robert Staynor Holford had an uncle, an extremely wealthy businessman, who was born in 1759. The name of this uncle was also Robert Holford. Like his nephew, he was an orientalist, with an extensive collection of ancient Persian artifacts and manuscripts. She was even able to uncover the details of his professional career: He was a director in the South Sea Company, which also dealt with overseas trade and worked closely with the soldiers of the East India Company. In her searches, Angela discovered one of the only known images of Robert Holford. She forwarded me a copy, and upon opening it, I was delighted to see the activity he was depicted engaging in: playing a game of chess.

More pieces of the puzzle have fallen together, and to me it is reasonably certain that Robert Staynor Holford's orientalist uncle, Robert Holford, is indeed the identity of the name inscribed in Persian on the inside of the front cover of the manuscript. Did he cross paths with Hugh Ross at some point during his service in the East India Company, gifting Ross the Treatise on Chess manuscript, who then later left it to David Price in his will? And if so, did he himself acquire it somehow during his travels abroad in India or the Middle East? Where was the manuscript from the time it left the creative but braggart hands of Ali the Chess Player and entered the possession of Robert Holford over three centuries later? Or was Holford's name added to the inscription at a later date while already in Ross' or Price's possession? These mysteries are not yet known, however Robert Holford has one more part to play in our story.

In a later memoir of David Price, he describes a journey he took to India in February of 1803, eleven years after the death of his good friend Hugh Ross. By this time Price held the title of Major in the East India Company, and he was traveling to Gujerat, India on an assignment to hold a court martial upon an officer who had shown "unsoldier-like" behavior during a battle. When he arrived on the Indian shore on February 10th, he names the director who received his ship as being Robert Holford, Esq. He stayed for several nights in Robert Holford's private home before moving on to complete his assignment in Gujerat, and he described Holford as having "unreserved and spontaneous hospitality".

Was this the same Robert Holford who may have gifted Ali's manuscript to Hugh Ross, and if so, did either man become aware of their connection through Hugh and the manuscript? Angela Potter confirmed that her Robert Holford was indeed living in that area of India at the time and still working closely with the East India Company. I am personally convinced it is the same man, and I like to think that they did figure this out during Price's visit.

In any case, David Price went on to retire from the East India Company in October of 1807, at which time he married and began writing a series of publications on oriental history. In his later years he served as the deputy lieutenant of Brecknockshire, Wales, the place of his birth. In 1830 he received a gold medal from the Oriental Translation Fund, a Victorian printing club which published translations of works which were considered to be too specialized for commercial publication. In December of 1835 he died in his home, The Watton House, in the county of Brecon, Wales, at the age of seventy three.

Three months later in March 1836 his widow presented a package of manuscripts to the Royal Asiatic Society in London. Seventy manuscripts in total. One of these was, of course, the *Risalah-i Shatranj*, A Treatise on Chess. It sat apparently uncatalogued until 1854, when the RAS librarian William Hook Morley created a handwritten catalog system for the library at which time it became Manuscript 260. Forty years later, in 1892, RAS librarian and physician Oliver Codrington reorganized the classification system, and at this time the center of our story became known as RAS Manuscript 211. In 1929 the Carnegie U.K. Trust granted the Royal Asiatic Society the money to have MS 211 rebound in a red leather cover with blind-stamped and painted outer decoration, and also oversaw the repair of a number of the pages. It remains in this condition to this day, located at the RAS library in a container known as Box 87.

So for now, our story comes to an end. What type of story it was, is up for interpretation. At face value a simple account of the history of an ancient manuscript, it grew into a tale of Medieval world conquest and domination, and an examination of a man who could destroy entire cities and then retire to a friendly game of chess and some sharp cheese. Or perhaps it was a war story exploring how a bond between two soldiers under desperate conditions can be their lifeline for survival. Or perhaps, as is most likely, it was just the possible history of a long forgotten pile of papers that traveled across continents and centuries. Whatever the takeaway, Manuscript 211 lives on in some absurd and small way in Jamestown, NY, in the winter of 2018, in the weekly meetings of a miniscule group of people who gather to play the great conqueror Timur's old obsession, Tamerlane chess.

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