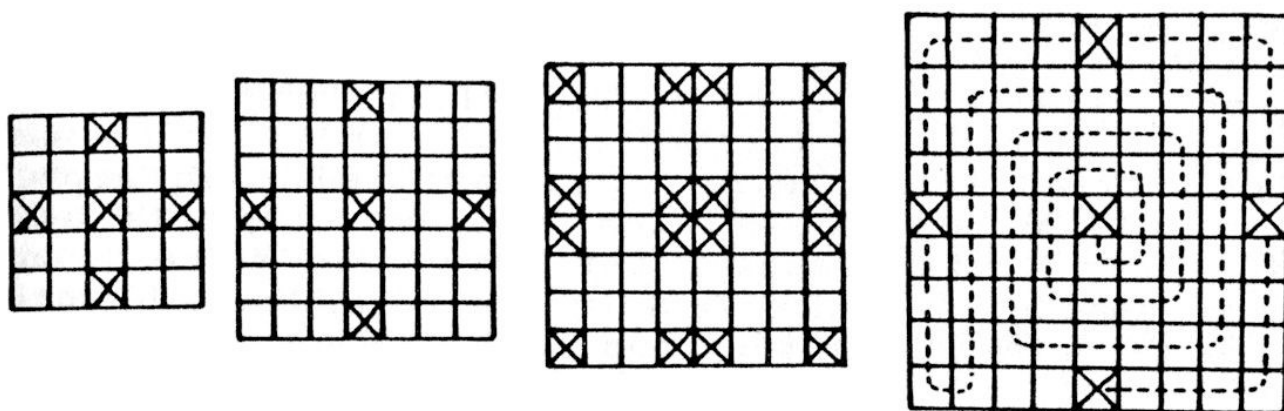


Originally published in Caerdroia 21 (1987), p.25-28

Chess is perhaps the most successful and widespread board game of all time, but few people who play this fascinating and sometimes exasperating pastime realize its origins. Like many geomantically-connected board games, Chess originated as a stylized representation of society. The original name of the game was *Chaturanga*, which comes from the Sanskrit, meaning 'quadripartite.' This term was used to describe the Indian army which had four elements, reflecting the sacred four-fold division of the world and its microcosm, society. Before the invasion of India by the forces of Alexander the Great in 326 BCE, the Indian army was composed of four different branches; elephants, cavalry, chariots and infantry. In addition to the four branches of troops, there were the king, the *Rajah*, and his counsellor, the *Mantri*. The troops consisted of elephants *Gaja*, horses *Asva*, chariots *Ratha*, and pawns *Pedati*. The failure of chariot warfare against the Greek armies of Alexander in 326 BCE led the Indians to abandon that form of warfare shortly afterwards. As Chaturanga games had these divisions, it dates the origin of the game to some point prior to 326 BCE.

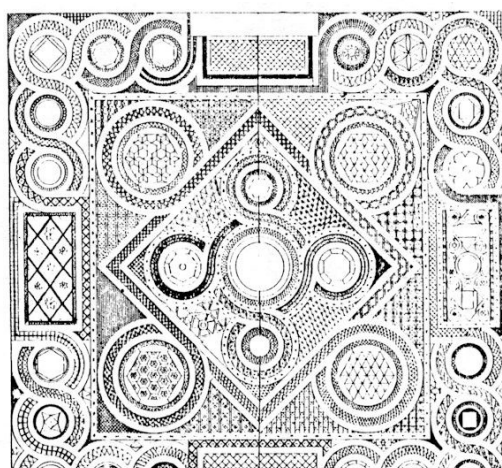
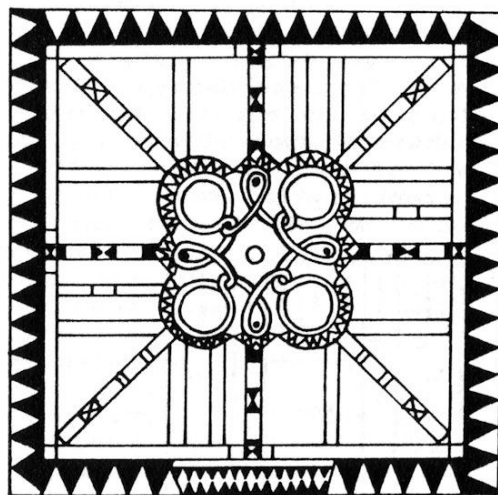
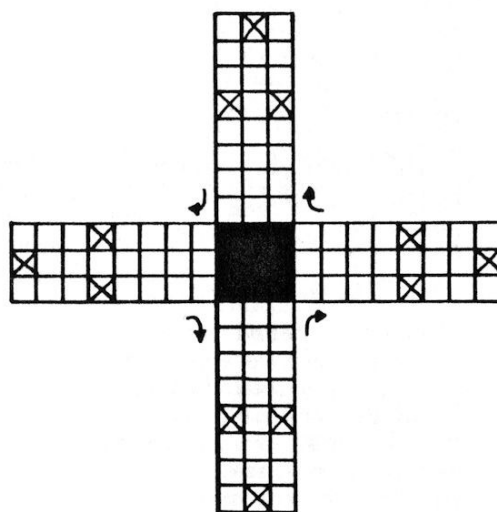
When Chaturanga was developed, it was played on the board of an earlier game known as *Ashtapada*. This is the eight by eight (64 squares) grid of a version of a race game which, like modern Ludo, was played with randomizers like cowrie shells or dice. Ashtapada is one of a group of race games played on a square board, whose movements are connected with the layout of traditional unicursal labyrinths. These games include *Thayyam*, played on a 5 by 5 (25 squares) board; *Ashte-Kashte*, 7 by 7 (49); Ashtapada, 8 by 8 (64); and *Saturankam*, 9 by 9 (81). These grids are all the basis for an unmarked pathway followed by the playing pieces which weaves across the board, ending in a spiral entry to the centre. Crosses on certain of the squares are 'castles,' which provide immunity from capture when a piece or pieces are laid upon them. The board of Ashtapada itself was the plan for traditional city-layout in ancient India, a name used overtly to describe such a gridded plan. Here, we have a direct parallel with the labyrinth description as a fort or city, respectively Troy and Jericho in the European Pagan and Christian traditions.



The board-plans for the games of (l.to r.) Thayyaa, Ashte-Kashte and Ashtapada, and the direction of play for the Sri Lankan game of Saturankam.

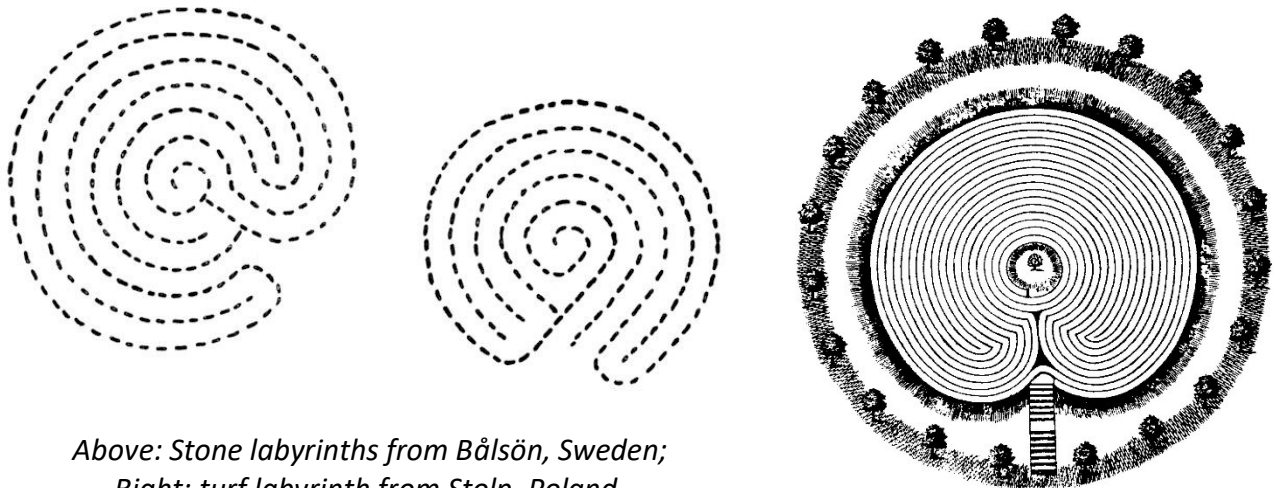
The related Indian game of *Pachisi*, the forerunner of Ludo, is in the form of a cross with a square at the centre from which the playing pieces start and at which they end. The board has 97 squares, 24 for each cross arm or quarter, and one at the centre. The central square is called *Char Koni*, or throne, because during the 16th century the Moghul emperors of India would play the game on their marble-paved courtyards. Pachisi boards remain in the palace courts at Agra, Allahabad and Fatehpur Sikri. The emperor and three colleagues would sit on the Char Koni at the centre of these boards, and used slave girls as playing pieces, four to each player, dressed in red, green, yellow or black saris depending upon the direction which they represented. Thus, human beings were moved around a four-directionally orientated board, or pitch, according to the throw of six cowrie shells or coins.

The games of Thayyam, Ashte-Kashte, Ashtapada, Saturankam, Pachisi and Ludo are all played with four groups of four playing pieces, coloured appropriately to the colours ascribed to the four directions in the Indian tradition (or in the case of Ludo, 19th century Western occultism). The cosmologist C.P.S. Menon believed that the chequered playing board came from the custom of representing the year-cycle and its subdivisions in a square format which survived in European horoscopes until the 18th century, and is still employed in laying out the figures in divinatory geomancy. Allied symbolism exists in the square cosmographic mosaic pavements of medieval Europe, such as those at Xanten in Germany and at Canterbury Cathedral and Westminster Abbey in England, whose designs are closely allied to pavement labyrinths in their execution. The medieval English alchemist Sporyly wrote of the microcosmic symbolism of the Cosmati pavement at Westminster, for these are overt symbols of the structure of the world, with the four directions, elements, and humours laid out in corresponding geometrical patterns and coloured stones. Around some of these mosaics, roundels resembling playing pieces are let into the floor. At Canterbury, they are made of stone from St. Omer, where the famous labyrinth and pavements existed. These roundels are inscribed with figures representing the labours of the seasons and the signs of the zodiac, closely resembling the set of Norman-period Backgammon pieces found at Gloucester in 1963.



*Right: (upper) Pachisi board;
(middle) The Xanten Mosaic;
(lower) The Westminster Cosmati Pavement.*

An important cosmological connexion was made by Menan, who argued that the chessboard originated as a symbolic planisphere upon which the motion of the seven planets of traditional astronomy were represented by corresponding pieces located in appropriate correspondences. He speculated that the Knight's move in chess may have originated in the movement of heavenly bodies in their orbits 'round the corner' of this square planisphere. The similar jumping moves of the *Eli*, forerunner of the chess Bishop, and other pieces in unorthodox chess games, would have the same origin and meaning. It is the unmarked pathway to the centre which gives the link between these gridded boards and the labyrinth pattern. The pathway taken by the pieces begins at the northern side of the board, going anti-clockwise round three sides of the board until the north side is reached again, when the piece commences a clockwise spiral, the number of turns depending on the size of the board. Entry into the *Char Konl* is by the north. A full Classical Labyrinth would require a grid of 15 by 15 squares, too large for a game that is traditionally chalked on a floor, or drawn in the dust. However, the unmarked path is a rudimentary form of labyrinth, based on a smaller number of squares than the Classical one. They closely resemble the kind known from Scandinavia and the Baltic, characterized by some 'aberrant' stone labyrinths at Bålsön, Sweden, which are rudimentary structures only slightly removed from a plain spiral. A more recent example, perhaps constructed by Swedish field engineers, is represented by the now-destroyed turf maze at Stolp (now known as Słupsk, Poland), which, although having many more turns than an Indian board game, begins with an anti-clockwise turn. In England, spirals existed at the centre of the destroyed turf mazes at Boughton Green, Northants, and Asenby and Ripon in Yorkshire. These spirals are in reverse directions. All of the Indian games, excepting Pachisi, have this reverse turn which distinguishes the labyrinth from the simple spiral, and they all (including Pachisi) have an initial right-hand turn, making the piece travel anti-clockwise. When Ludo was patented in England in 1696, the direction of play was reversed to clockwise, perhaps because of the European aversion to 'going widdershins.'



Above: Stone labyrinths from Bålsön, Sweden;
Right: turf labyrinth from Stolp, Poland.

In his masterly analysis of labyrinth legends and practices, *The Goddess in the Labyrinth*, John Kraft reviewed the worldwide significance of the games played in connexion with labyrinth, and their origin in Pagan liturgical usage. He notes that in Finland, some labyrinths are called *Jungfrudanser* (Virgin's Dances), where a girl would stand at the centre of the labyrinth, and young men would try to reach her by running through the gyres. In other places, more than one person ran the pathway at the same time, paralleling the playing pieces. A similar practice existed in the turf maze at Saffron Walden, where wagers and side bets were placed, echoing the practice of playing board games for money. The 18th century boisterous sport was doubtless a continuation of earlier sacred contests, shorn of their overtly Pagan elements, but retaining their essential core. Religious drama and sacred activities

have tended to become secularized and transformed into popular pastimes, and this happened with board games as well as with labyrinths. The use of girls by the Moghul emperors in their living Pachisi may have been a relic of a former sacred drama enacted on the Pachisi pattern, reduced to a pastime which by the 17th century had lost at least some of its sacred elements.

The ‘cross squares’ or ‘castles’ of the Indian board games are key points where capture is not permitted, for which there may be some parallel in labyrinth tradition. When the board is seen as an Ashtapada city, these ‘castles’ may represent bastions or barbicans in the walls. Many Roman pavement labyrinths have illustrations of towers and gates around their perimeter. A Finnish stone labyrinth tradition placed several items, including a horseshoe (for luck) in the pathway, to be encountered by the young man running the maze, having some divinatory function, or perhaps determining the progress of the runner. When we look at the Indian traditional *Paramasayika* grid, whose 81 squares are assigned canonically to specific deities, themselves related to astronomical bodies, one can see the use of similar parts of the board-game grid as a possible relic of divination using this sacred grid, the labyrinth, too, may have had certain parts assigned to deities or qualities, in which the appropriate items were placed.

Roga	Ahi	Mukhya	Bhallata	Soma	Bhujaga	Aditi	Diti	Agni
Papa-yaks-man	Rudra	Mukhya	Bhallata	Soma	Bhujaga	Aditi	Apa	Paryanya
Sosha	Rudra-jaya	Prithividhara			Apa-vatsa	Jayanta		
Asura							Indra	
Varuna	Mitra	Brahma			Aryaman	Surya		
Kusuma-danta							Satya	
Sugriva	Indra	Vivasvan			Savitr	Bhrsha		
Dauvrika	Indra-jaya	Bhrgaraja	Gandharva	Yama	Bhrakshata	Vitatha	Savitra	Antariksha
Pitarah	Mrga	Bhrgaraja	Gandharva	Yama	Bhrakshata	Vitatha	Pusan	Amila

Right: *Paramasayika* grid of 81 squares

This may be the origin of secular race-games such as *The Royal and Most Pleasant Game of Goose* (see *Caerdroia* 18, p.23-24), where players landing on certain squares are delayed or promoted depending on the nature of the object displayed in that square. The common feature in all of these motifs is the combat between the various protagonists in attempting to reach the centre first. The ancient Egyptian *Serpent Game* may have had the same end, as it was played on a stone representation of a coiled snake, with its head at the centre. As the rules are unknown, it is possible that the pieces came from the centre outwards, but the archetypal nature of such things makes me believe otherwise. Although these games were unknown in Europe before the 19th century, the significant parallels we can draw, render them worthy of consideration when we attempt to unravel the seemingly limitless mysteries of the labyrinth.

Nigel Pennick, Bar Hill, England; May 1987.

References

- Lethaby, W.R. *Westminster Abbey*. London, 1925.
- Kraft, John: "Labyrintmagi på Kuggören?" *Hälsingerunor*, Malung, 1981,
- Kraft, John. *The Goddess in the Labyrinth*. Åbo Akademi, 1985.
- Kenon, C.P.S.: *Ancient Astronomy and Cosmology*. London 1932.
- Pennick, Nigel. *Labyrinths, their Geomancy and Symbolism*, 2nd ed. Bar Hill, 1986.
- Pennick, Nigel. *Games of the Gods*. Rider & Co., 1989.
- Saward, Jeff. "A-mazing turf at Saffron Walden" *Essex Countryside*, April 1982.

The text and illustrations in this reprint are © Labyrinthos/Nigel Pennick 2019 as appropriate. Personal copies are permitted, but permission must be sought for any commercial reproduction: www.labyrinthos.net