

"CHESS IS THE MAGIC CARPET OF IMAGINATION!"

Interview by René Gralla, originally printed, in condensed form, on May 22nd, 2010, in Neues Deutschland

Have you ever dreamed of sweeping across the board like the wild Mongol horsemen? Would you like to compose a match inspired by the Heroes of Strategy at Baghdad 1000 years ago? Sounds thrilling but where will you find the proper sets? Ask RICK KNOWLTON from Sarasota, Florida: The 52-years old website builder and piano player runs the internet shop AncientChess.com where the enthusiast can order old and new variants of the eternal game ranging from Arabia's classic "Shatranj" and Myanmar's mysterious "Sittuyin" to Thailand's laid-back "Makruk" and Germany's funny "Courier Chess". The Hamburg-based journalist DR. RENÉ GRALLA has talked to the Master of 'The Chess Universe'.



DR. RENÉ GRALLA: Why should we bother to buy Arabic "Shatranj", Burmese "Sittuyin" or Mongolian Chess - just to name some examples - if we have our modern chess already?

RICK KNOWLTON: Taking an interest in cross-cultural chess is like many other natural human fascinations. Would you be interested in traveling to far-off lands, learning foreign languages, sampling international cuisine or uncovering artifacts of ancient civilizations? If you love the intrigue and drama of the chessboard, you may find it a wonderful, eye-opening experience to discover how this game has captured players' imaginations all around the world for centuries.

DR. R. GRALLA: Modern chess takes a lifetime to master. Who has time to learn other chess variants - and to buy your sets?!

R.KNOWLTON: Your own language may take a lifetime to master in all its subtleties, but would you not be enriched to learn another language? Or to learn another style of painting? Or to learn the ancient roots of your own customs and cultural heritage? I promise anyone who broadens their sense of chess, to consider chess as a world phenomenon, that their own appreciation for the modern international game they know and love will only be enhanced.

DR. R. GRALLA: Shatranj is the old version of chess - before the rules of Shatranj were changed in order to transform Shatranj into modern chess. So maybe there have been good reasons to change the rules?! Maybe Shatranj is less playable than modern chess?!

R.KNOWLTON: Just to clarify, when we speak of *Shatranj*, we are referring to the form of chess taken from Persia into the Arabic world, and spread into Europe before the new rules came into effect – the rules we now play by. That change happened just at the end of the 15th century. But in fact, “shatranj” is still the Persian word for chess today, used in many eastern and middle-eastern lands – including Turkey and Sri Lanka.

But to answer your question: The old form of chess is every bit as intriguing as the game we play. It had a rich literature of analysis, had a tradition of heroic grandmasters – and was one of the greatest themes in ancient literature. That ancient form of chess existed for about a thousand years – twice as long as our modern chess has existed so far!



The big changes in the rules – the modern queen and bishop moves, the pawn's double step, castling – were basically means of expediency. It takes less time for the game to get into a gritty middle-game, where complications and possibilities are rapidly multiplying and changing. We chess players love those complications – and the modern rules offer a quicker road to that great mind-absorbing puzzle. But truthfully, many other forms of chess have found ways to make the game develop more quickly – and all maintain the full analytical engagement we cherish in the chess we know.

DR. R.GRALLA: If we have understood you well: You assess chess variants as being mirror images of the specific character of a given culture? So, by playing those variants, one gets an idea of the specific culture where that very variant has been born?

R.KNOWLTON: That's what makes the study of chess variants and evolution so intriguing. On one hand, it is basically the same game: a bunch of different pieces with different moves set out to entrap the enemy king. But somehow, in history, choices have been made all along the way to change the game one way or another – and something can be said about the cultural and aesthetic values that went into those decisions.

There are many examples; let me give you a few.

First, the Chinese game, they place their chessmen on the intersections of lines, rather than on the squares themselves. This makes sense because China had already been playing the game go - "weiqi" in Chinese - for centuries, and that is the way of placing go stones.

Secondly, also in China – and in Japan as well – the pieces are not upright sculpted figures like our pieces, but rather flat disks or tiles laid down with an ideogram painted on them. This attests to the high artistic value given to calligraphy in those countries, and to the denotative power of a picture-based writing system.

Then consider Mongolia. That country has a long and powerful tradition of clan and family identity – and so do their chess sets! With no uniform standard of chessmen, each clan has its own convention of depictions. For instance, a rook may be a truck, a cart, cart wheel, a karmic wheel, a yin-yang symbol, a bunch of flowers, or a bunch of peacock feathers ... all depending upon the specific conventions of the clan that produced the set.

DR. R.GRALLA: So chess is more colourful than many people assume?!

R.KNOWLTON: Sad to say, many chess players imagine their beloved game to be a rather black-and-white computer-like endeavor. I hope, now that computers have finally taken their rightful place as the great analysts of the game, we flesh-and-blood thinkers can return to the human aspects of chess. Chess is a great drama, a symbolic battle, a puzzle, a blank canvass upon which we can express our impulsiveness, our patience, our aggression, our equanimity and, of course, our brilliance! A computer will tell you an absolute winning or losing line, but it will never tell you how it feels to move a beautifully carved knight on a solid oak board – *with meaning*. Chess as a human phenomenon is so rich a subject, you could spend your whole life uncovering the dramas and cultural historic transformations that occurred around the chessboard. The whole world has been adorning this game with its finest craftsmanship, its greatest minds and its greatest storytellers – for centuries! It is colorful because it is infused with the richness of humanity.

DR. R.GRALLA: Your chess sets seem to be kind of virtual transportation devices that transport the buyer to different places of the world - and to different times ...

R.KNOWLTON: ... quite a claim, isn't it! Of course, I am trying to describe something almost magical. We humans love our icons and relics – our symbols of connection to a wider humanity. For many of us, chess is the magic carpet of the imagination, and the forms of chess are the countries and eras we can travel to. Learning several forms of chess is like learning several languages and cultural histories – but it's much easier!



DR. R.GRALLA: The foregoing is the background that has generated the idea to found AncientChess.com?

R.KNOWLTON: I first became intrigued by chess evolution as an impressionable teenager, back in the early seventies. But after reading about it, and making replicas of the various sets, what else could I do? The internet didn't exist! Many years later, I found myself browsing around eBay and thought – I can look for those chess variants online! And – *voila* – I had found my community! From there it followed that my interest in building web sites went into a chess web site, and that my interest in the games and chessmen went into buying, selling, sourcing and re-creating these games for sale to other enthusiasts.

DR. R.GRALLA: When have you founded AncientChess.com? How many people work there?

R.KNOWLTON: It is really just me, beginning back in 2003. I have some interesting connections now: craftsmen in various countries who provide chessmen; networks of chess collectors, game companies and cross-cultural chess writers and web designers. But AncientChess.com is my own creation and I run the whole show. I enjoy every aspect of it because – whether I'm researching, buying, selling, packaging, or answering customers' questions – it's always something intrinsically thrilling to me. It's my little corner of the wide world of chess.

DR. R.GRALLA: Let's have a second look at Arabia's Shatranj now. Playing that version seems to be like a time machine back to those Golden Age of Chess when the Great Masters, the "Aliyat", have played in front of the throne of the Caliphs at Baghdad?

R.KNOWLTON: You give yourself away with such a question! Not many people would know that "Aliyat" is a centuries-old Arabic term for a chess grandmaster. Yes, this is the point. Once you've got that feeling that chess is deeply historic, cross-cultural and, well, somewhat magical, it follows that you want to feel yourself touching the pieces, making the moves and ultimately thinking the thoughts that have occupied the minds of chess players across the globe, for centuries. That's what these great, diverse chess sets are all about.

DR. R.GRALLA: Thus your set of Shatranj helps to steer in the opposite direction of many modern prejudices with regard to the Muslim world!

R.KNOWLTON: I have to smile when I hear this question – because I feel you are steering us into something much more important than mere chess. Our modern western society owes such a debt to the Islam, we can barely begin to fathom it. Chess of course – but the intellectual heritage we borrow from the Muslim world extends to the scientific method we cherish, the libraries that preserved our western philosophy, our most basic mathematical operations (al-gebra) – even the digits we write our numbers with. It is a political convenience for our power-seeking leaders to keep us prejudiced and afraid of one another. But sharing our intellects and mutual appreciations – in chess for instance – is bound to carry with it a degree of personal respect.

DR. R.GRALLA: One more example: By playing easy going "Makruk" from Thailand, one gets beamed over there to the relaxed world of Thailand - if we disregard the current political turmoil and bloodshed in the Kingdom of Siam?!

R.KNOWLTON: Makruk is an interesting example, because the ancient Thai and Cambodian form of chess is very much alive! You can learn that game and then go play it on the streets of Thailand. And the players there will give you as high a level game as you can muster. I have not been there yet, but I did meet a fellow from Thailand here in the States, and had a very interesting conversation with him about the game.

Aside from that, yes, even playing the game in your own living room, I don't think you could help but get a feeling of other-worldliness. The style of the pieces, the twists in the game ... If you go for exotic experiences, it's a pretty direct way to take the 'trip.'

DR. R.GRALLA: There is one more way to do an inspiring trip, namely by playing "Sittuyin" from Myanmar, with its special rule that each player puts the army in that position that he prefers to occupy - behind a hiding curtain that shields him from his adversary. Later there is a big surprise after the curtain is lifted - when there is free view on the board again!

R.KNOWLTON: Yes – what a great surprise! And a brilliant way to solve the problem I mentioned at the beginning of our interview: how to make the game develop more quickly. In fact, Burmese chess is often played without the curtain system – the surprise element. But all accounts do give some instruction for each side to choose how they will arrange their pieces, before play begins. It's a great way to start a game quickly, and variations of this system have resurfaced in some modern chess variants – most recently, a brilliant new variant called "Shuuro".

Aside from the set-up element, this chess form has marvelously ancient roots. It came from northern India, centuries ago, along with a powerful monastic Buddhist tradition, and carried on as far south as the island of Sri Lanka. Burmese chess, Sittuyin, has much in common with its ancient Indian predecessor. The elephant's move is a good example: it moves one space to the four diagonals or one space straight forward. Those are the five directions of the elephant's appendages – four feet, plus a trunk in front. Also, like the ancient Indian pieces and many modern Indian chessmen, the sets are fully carved figures. While Europeans, Muslims, Thai – just about every chess tradition – has transformed its pieces into some sort of simplified geometric shape, the Burmese sets are always just this: literal carvings of the characters they represent. Other elements? Well, the pawns are set up to attack each other on the very first move; there is a big X across the board to indicate pawn promotion squares; but the pawn can't promote until its original queen is taken ... enough oddities to put your mind in a different part of the world.

DR. R.GRALLA: Where do you get the Burmese chessmen from?

R.KNOWLTON: This chess set was the greatest collaborative effort. Because the political/military situation makes normal trade with Burma impossible, I had to find an alternative way to create these sets. I was fortunate to have a friend traveling in Cambodia, who found a wood carver able to make a set in the original Burmese style. Once that set was made, I sent the pieces on to another artisan – this one in Canada – and had the pieces refined even closer to the original Burmese style, then cast in stone and finished. The final result is very true to the Burmese tradition, and is now available to anyone who wants to experience one of the most ancient living chess forms.

The Burmese chess set was a rather special project. Whenever someone buys one of these, I send a portion to the U.S. Campaign for Burma, an organization dedicated to relieving the suffering of those now trapped in Burma's current oppressive regime. I would have liked to get chess sets directly from Burma – and look forward to the day when that will be possible. My contribution is small, but you could say the project is bigger than the game itself.



DR. R.GRALLA: One can even buy "Courier Chess" at AncientChess.com! Why should one play COURIER CHESS? Why is that thrilling?

R.KNOWLTON: If I have made one single contribution to chess history and chess sets, it is the resurrection of Courier Chess, from Lucas van Leyden's famous painting of 1508, "The Chess Players", also known as "The Chess Game" or "Die Schachpartie". The painting appears in countless books of chess art and chess history, but always with only a brief mention about the game depicted.

Courier chess was an amazingly long-lived chess variant, played in Europe – especially Germany and the Netherlands – for about six hundred years, starting about 1200 AD. That's a very long run for any board game, being passed down to some 20 generations of players, and more amazing since the game is so unusual. Being played on an expanded board of 12 by 8 squares, it includes the regular ancient chessmen (king, queen, bishop, knight, rook and pawn) plus a jester (in German: "Schleich"), a king's assistant ("Mann"), two couriers ("Kuriere") and four additional pawns. Those three new pieces had new moves, unknown to the medieval chess game. We know the game existed for so long because of references in ancient texts, and we know the rules thanks to Gustav Selenus's famous treatise of 1616, "Das Schach- oder König-Spiel" ("The Chess- or King-Game").

But what I have discovered, which I find nowhere else, is that by knowing the rules of Courier chess, and carefully examining the position of pieces in van Leyden's painting, with some knowledge of historic chessmen, we can determine the actual position in the game, and exactly what each of van Leyden's mysteriously shaped pieces represents.

From there, it has become possible to recreate the entire 16th century Courier Chess game, just as it would have existed five centuries ago.

DR. R.GRALLA: Where do you get those ancient sets from? Shatranj does not exist anymore, the same amounts to COURIER CHESS that does not exist anymore. Where do you get that?

R.KNOWLTON: To me, these were chess sets just begging to be re-created. Between 1935 and 1940, the Metropolitan Museum of Art conducted excavations in Nishapur, uncovering – among much splendid artwork – pieces from two separate chess sets: one from the 12th century, and all pieces found except one darn missing pawn!!, and then pieces of a set from the 9th century! Those 9th century pieces are the oldest known representatives of the ancient Shatranj style of chessmen, and at least one of each piece was found – so why not recreate the entire set?



Besides being a chess and history enthusiast, I have some artistic inclinations. So I got the best photos and descriptions of the pieces available, and made models of the pieces. I then had them cast and finished to be as close as possible the originals. And now, thanks to these efforts, yes – you can be transported back to 9th century Persia by this magical chess set!

The Courier Chess set was an even greater labor of love. Once I had analyzed the game, I carefully scrutinized every piece shown in the painting, and came up with a good assessment of what each one must have been like in its original 3-dimensional form. These pieces – very geometric and moderately complex – took the greatest care in modeling. I kept as close as I could to the original sizes and proportions of each piece, while striving to maintain the essential character the entire set.

I took the same care in creating the 12 by 8 board just as it would have appeared 500 years ago. It was truly a labor of love.

I was fortunate to have a very imaginative old casting artisan in California, who took my odd shapes and determined the best way to seamlessly cast each piece.

DR. R.GRALLA: There has been a great African variant of chess, that "Senterej" from Ethiopia. One funny aspect of "Senterej": the first part of a given match called "Werera". That "mobilization phase" ... - before no piece has been taken nor exchanged every player moves at his own speed, he does not have to wait for the adversary to move! Could you imagine to resurrect Senterej too?!

R.KNOWLTON: I think this game looks like great fun and I can only imagine it must feel something like speed-chess in the opening. In any case, I can't possibly imagine a better solution to the problem of wanting to start the game more quickly! I have read of the game, but only in brief accounts. Thank you for pointing out the article – it's very informative and the illustrations fill out the story very well. I could make a set like that ... we'll see what my future production schedule brings!

DR. R.GRALLA: Can you live on AncientChess.com? Or do you need a second job?

R.KNOWLTON: I am sometimes more of an artist and enthusiast than businessman! I began my college education studying fine arts: theater, music, sculpture, etc. I later went back to school to complete a degree in dance/movement therapies. Later, I studied one year of a master's program in education. All the while, I cultivated my own style of piano playing and my interest in chess, mostly outside of school. Today I am trying hard to make this chess selling business turn a good profit, so I can devote all the more time to it. As it is, I supplement my income sometimes as a professional pianist, and sometimes as a web site builder.