

INTO THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE NAMES OF CHESS PIECES IN ARMENIAN AND EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

The paper is devoted to the etymological analysis of the names of chess pieces in Armenian and European languages with the help of the comparative method of analysis. The names of chess pieces have overcome a long way over the course of time starting from Oriental culture, then appearing in the Muslim world, afterwards making route to Europe. It is of great importance to look back to the etymology of the names of chess pieces in order to understand the morals of the game and to find out why those pieces appeared on the board.

Key words: *etymology, chess pieces, comparative method, European languages, the Armenian language*

*The game of the kings or the immortal game, as chess is eloquently described, is one of the world's oldest board games whose origins date back to the 600s AD. The game, as we know it today, was born out of the Indian game *chaturanga* and it spread throughout Asia and Europe over the coming centuries, and eventually evolved into what we know as chess around the 16th century /www.chess.com/. Borrowed from Oriental culture, chess has reached an outstanding popularity in Western world. Its reputation has been growing over the centuries after it was brought to Europe. A form of *chaturanga* or *shatranj* made its way to Europe by way of Persia, the Byzantine Empire, and, perhaps most important of all, the expanding Arabian empire. The oldest recorded game, found in a 10th century manuscript, was played between a Baghdad historian, believed to be a favourite of three successive caliphs, and a pupil /www.britannica.com/.*

Chess appeared in Armenia in the 19th century, and in the museum of Matenadaran (Scientific Research Institute and the Repository of Ancient Manuscripts) you can see a manuscript belonging to the 12th - 13th centuries, which refers to chess /araratour.com/. Armenians are among the best chess players in the world. The fame of the Armenian grossmeisters is spread worldwide. Armenia triumphed in the most recent Chess Olympiad claiming the crown in 2006 and 2008 – which is two in a row /www.newstatesman.com/. There is also a BBC report in October 2009 that claims Armenia to be the cleverest nation on earth as it has triumphed over giants like Russia, China and the US /www.bbc.co.uk/.

How is chess played? As Murray describes: *“Historically chess must be classed as a game of war. Two players direct a conflict between two armies of*

equal upon a field of battle, circumscribed in extent, and offering no advantage of ground to either side. The players have no assistance other than that afforded by their own reasoning faculties, and the victory usually falls to the one whose strategical imagination is the greater, whose direction of his forces is the more skillful, whose ability to foresee positions is the more developed” /Murray, 1913: 25/. The original Oriental version of the game represented a battlefield, whereas, the European game represents a military court or a tournament. In European chess there are queens, as well as, kings, jesters and bishops, as well as, knights and foot-soldiers, and the court is associated with a medieval castle, or, perhaps, is protected by archers in towers mounted on elephants /Candler, 2014: 81/. European chess is a direct descendant of an Indian game played in the 7th century with substantially the same arrangement and method as in Europe five centuries later, the game having been adopted first by the Persians then handed on by the Persians to the Muslim world, and finally borrowed from Islam by Christian Europe /Murray, 1913: 27/.

Besides being played all over the world as a fun board game, chess is more than just a pastime activity. The symbolic and philosophical interpretations of chess can be referred to real-life situations. It “allegories life and morality” /Bingham, 1900/ and as Michel Raphael states in his sociological analysis of chess: “*The power of chess in its symbolic, analogical, or metaphorical form is acknowledged by intellectuals ranging from artists, poets, and historians to mathematicians, social scientists computer scientists, theologians and philosophers. Chess has given rise to breakthroughs in psychology and computer science and has contributed to our understanding of jurisprudence, anthropology, and game theory*” /Raphael, 2011: 1/. As we can see chess has strong bonds to almost all the natural and humanitarian sciences and its interpretations are strongly reflected in them.

Etymologically, the game’s name shifted from the Sanskrit *chaturanga* to the Middle Persian *chatrang*, to an adaptation of the Arabic *shatranj* to the Latin *ludus scacorum* (the game of the chessmen), and from there to the Italian *scacchi*, the French *eschecs*, the German *schachspiel*, the Dutch *schaakspel*, the Icelandic *ska’ktafle*, the Polish *szachy*, and the English *chess* /Raphael, 2011: 19/.

Historically, modern European chess is an advanced variety of Muslim chess, which has been differentiated from the parent game as the result of a long series of improvements in move and rule. When chess entered Western Europe, it took its place for the first time in the mainstream of civilization. There it became subject to those laws of development and progress which were working in all other branches of human activity. The history of chess in Europe, therefore, is a story of advance in form and rule which has ended in placing the game in its position of pre-eminence among other games of its type /Murray, 1913: 394/.

Murray believes that the ancestry of the European chess can easily be established. A number of the medieval chess terms can be traced by way of Arabic to Middle Persian /Murray, 1913: 26/. Thus, we have:

Eur. <i>ferz</i>	=	Ar. <i>fīrz, fīrzān</i>	=	Per. <i>farzin</i>
Eur. <i>alfil</i>	=	Ar. <i>(al) fīl</i>	=	Per. <i>pīl</i>
Eur. <i>roc</i>	=	Ar. <i>rukhhkh</i>	=	Per. <i>rukḥ</i>
Eur. <i>scac, check</i>	=	Ar. <i>shāh</i>	=	Per. <i>shāh</i>
Eur. <i>mat, mate</i>	=	Ar. <i>māt</i>	=	Per. <i>māt</i>

In Armenian chess was originally called ճապրակ [tshatrak], which is now used by Western Armenians and Persian Armenians. The name շախմատ [shakhmat] is derived from the Persian word for king, *shah* [shah], and մատ [mat] for died (chess.am). We can see that the Armenian interpretations of the term are pretty similar to the ones of Indian and Persian variants. It can be explained by geographical and cultural reasons as Armenian history and culture was eventually influenced by Persian dominance in the region.

The name of the game in most of the European languages, e.g. English *chess*, French *echecs*, Italian *scacchi*, can be traced back, through the Latin plural *scaci* (*scachi, scacci*, meaning chessmen), to the Arabic and Persian name of the chess King, *shāh* /Murray, 1913: 26/.

The following are the names of the chess pieces now in use among various nations in Europe /Candler, 2014: 81/:

English	Spanish	Portuguese	Italian	French	German
Chess	<i>Ajadrez</i>	<i>Xaque</i>	<i>Scacchi</i>	<i>Les echecs</i>	<i>Schachspiel</i>
King	<i>Rey</i>	<i>Rei</i>	<i>Re</i>	<i>Roi</i>	<i>König</i>
Queen	<i>Dama</i>	<i>Rainha</i>	<i>Regina</i>	<i>Reine</i> (<i>Dame</i>)	<i>Königin</i>
Rook (Castle)	<i>Roque</i>	<i>Roque</i>	<i>Rocco</i> (<i>Torre</i>)	<i>Tour (Roc</i> <i>O.F.)</i>	<i>Thurm</i> (<i>Roche</i>)
Bishop	<i>Alfil</i>	<i>Delphim</i>	<i>Alfiere</i>	<i>Fou</i>	<i>Läufer</i>
Knight	<i>Caballero</i>	<i>Cavallo</i>	<i>Cavallo</i>	<i>Cavalier</i>	<i>Springer</i>
Pawn	<i>Peon</i>	<i>Pião</i>	<i>Pedina</i>	<i>Pion</i>	<i>Bauer</i>

The various names of each piece in European languages all have historical and etymological bonds with other names of the same piece. However, there are some exceptions:

Ger. *der Laufer* – Eng. *the runner*

Ger. *der Springer* – Eng. *the jumper*

These names are evidently derived from the moves of the *bishop* and *knight* respectively.

The names of the chess pieces in Armenian are rather translations from the European adaptations than borrowings from original versions. Accordingly, the names of the chess pieces in Armenian are as follows:

Eng. <i>king</i>	Arm. թագավոր [<i>tagavor</i>]
Eng. <i>queen</i>	Arm. թագուհի [<i>taguhi</i>]
Eng. <i>rook (castle)</i>	Arm. նավակ [<i>navak</i>]
Eng. <i>bishop</i>	Arm. փիղ [<i>pigh</i>]
Eng. <i>knight</i>	Arm. ձի [<i>dzi</i>]
Eng. <i>pawn</i>	Arm. զինվոր [<i>zinvor</i>]

We can see that the Armenian equivalents are not only mere translations from European languages as the denotative meaning of *նավակ* is *boat*, *փիղ* is *elephant* and *ձի* is *horse*. *King* and *queen* are translated as they are, and *pawn* is synonym to *soldier* or *warrior* so it matches its Armenian equivalent. We may rightfully ask why some names of chess pieces vary in European languages and Armenian when it is the same game played both in Europe and Armenia and the rules nowadays are the same everywhere. To understand this, we need to go deep into the etymology of the names of the pieces and find out their peculiarities one by one.

The *king* or the *shāh* (who does not enter into the Indian game) is the royal personage whose name is identified with the game, whose life is the life of the game, and whose death denotes its termination. “The king is dead” is the cry of the victor, unless your opponent in playing is a king, in which case the cry was euphemistically softened into “The king has retired” /Candler, 2014: 82/. The *king* has the same interpretation in all European languages as it is borrowed from Persian *shāh*. *King* is the main figure in the game and the duty of all other figures is to protect him from being declared a *mate*, which means that there is no other move left for the *king* to move and other figures are not able to shield him anymore. Popular belief holds that the first royal king in chess was fashioned after the Raja. As in life, the king holds a position of protection in the game and has limited yet adroit movements allowed /www.chess.com/. The maximum the *king* can do on the board is to do one single move in any direction, and he is also able to kill or eat another piece when the latter is not protected. “The king is dead” is the literal meaning of the Armenian word *շահմատ* which is derived from Persian *shāh māt* (*checkmate*). The game of chess is played for the *kings* and it is reflected in the Armenian interpretation of the game from Persian, meanwhile European names of the game are mainly derived from the original form of the game *chaturanga*. *Chaturanga* is a Sanskrit word referring to the four arms (or divisions) of an Indian army: elephants, cavalry, chariots, and infantry, from which come the four types of pieces in that game /www.chess.com/. The *king* cannot go more than one square straight or aslant except when the player uses a combination called *castling*, in

which the king is transferred from its original square two squares along the back rank toward the corner square of a *rook* (*castle*).

The *queen*, in course of time, is allowed the privilege to move all the way in three directions: straight, aslant or diagonal /Murray, 1913: 464/. The queen has seen the most changes as one of the chess pieces. She began as a counselor or Mantri and has ended up as a General that can assume a role in offensive play that is quite powerful. She got her new position due to the reduction of pieces battling on the board and overtook that of the General, forever to be known in chess as the Queen /www.chess.com/. The present role of queen in the game is quite different from that of its older versions. Not only the functions but also the name of this figure has been changed over the time. In the Persian version of the game *queen* corresponds with the *ferz* or *ferzin*. The word implies the great man in the palace of the *shah*, the *vizier* or *emir*, the man whose business is to regulate the household of the monarch in the palace and to protect his life in the field. The *ferz* in the Persian game had very little power of movement, and though a body-guard of the king, very limited means of attack /Candler, 2014: 84/. We can see how much the power of this figure has changed, as in the modern game *queen* is the main attack force of any side, and killing one's queen pretty much means dominating the game. Etymologically, the Armenian interpretation of the figure is similar to the European ones. Moreover, the equivalent of the Persian variants *ferz* or *vizier* of the figure can be found in old Armenian intertextual stories and fairy-tales as *վեզիր* [*vezir*]. This character is meant for protecting the king and being the king's personal guard, and, thus, functionally and symbolically, it corresponds with the idea of a modern *queen*. In Latin the name of the *ferz* was changed to *fercia*, and it appears in European tongues as *fiers*, *fierce*, *fierge*, *vierge*, and so, back again in Latin, as *virgo*, *domina*, *regina*. Thus, in a Latin poem "*Miles et alphinus, roccus, rex, virgo, predesque*" and in a French poem of the twelfth century "*Romant de la Rose*" the *queen* is called *vierge* and in early English *fierce* or *fers*. So, the *vizier* became the *Queen of Heaven*, the *Holy Virgin* and, later, the *Consort of the King* /Candler, 2014: 84/.

The *rook* was known as the Chariot at first, considered the division of heavy infantry in the game. It was also known as the Ratha. It possesses powerful movement abilities, and is typically used in defence as well as to pin down the chess pieces of the opponent /www.chess.com/. The *rook* appears on European chess boards as a castle, or as a castle upon an elephant. Now a castle on an elephant could be moved about on a battlefield, but a castle or a tower would be fixed. The forms *castle*, *tour*, *torre*, *Thurm* and *turris* point to a fixed tower or a fortress. How does this meaning come from the forms *rook*, *rocco*, *roque*? The Persian for a camel or a dromedary is *rokh*. In a long Persian poem, the whole of the long last canto describes very fully a game of chess, and in this the *rokh* is

introduced, but nothing is mentioned of archers on its back. Now, the Italian has a word *rocca*, which means a fortress upon a rock, or simply a tower. The word *rokh* became in their language *rocco*. Under the analogy of *rocca*, the piece must be a castle; under the influence of Oriental forms of the piece on the board, it would be sometimes a dromedary or an elephant, sometimes an animal with a castle on its back with archers or other men of war. And thus, the English call the piece a *rook* and represent it by a castle /Candler, 2014: 83/. In the Indian version of the game *rook* is a military chariot and is associated with the mythical bird *rukḥ*. The same *rukḥ* also appears in “One Thousand and One Nights”, the pieces of the game used to be made similar to the bird’s appearance. Later, the word *rukḥ* in Europe was perceived as *rocco* and was associated with a tower, thus, those figures in Europe looked like towers or castles /chessschool.am/.

In Armenian *rook* appears as *նավ* [*nav*] or *նավակ* [*navak*]. Etymologically, there is no specific explanation why the Armenian equivalent of the *rook* is interpreted as a boat, but symbolically it may have connotations of a figure that gets involved in action at the end of the battle like armadas do in medieval battles. If the chess board is a manifestation of a battlefield then rooks may have the connotations of the fleet.

The *bishop* has a strict capability for movement, though it can leap to its goal. This chess piece was known as Gaja in the past and its present purpose has lost the ability to move vertically. The travel it makes diagonally is equal to today’s Queen /www.chess.com/. The anointing of the *bishop* in English as a modern chess piece has the longest history and it has deep etymological roots. How did the *elephant* of the Oriental game become the English *bishop*? Firstly, let us analyze the origins of the piece as an *elephant*. The word *elephant* is said to be of Phoenician origin. The first letter of the Phoenician alphabet is *eleph*, and its character is an ox. There is a connection between the sound *eleph* (*elephant*) and the character ox, and the word *elephantus* is said to be *eleph-Hind*, the Indian ox /Candler, 2014: 85/.

In the Arabian game of chess, the piece which in English is called a *bishop* was represented by an elephant, though it had not quite the same functions as the modern piece. The foreign word *elephant* was turned by them into a *al Phyl* the first syllable being mistaken for the Arabian definite article *al*. That is, they called the piece “*the Phyl*”. But when the mediaeval players of Europe adopted the game from the Arabs, they supposed that the Arab word *al*, as in the cognate cases of *algebra*, *alchemy*, etc., was an inseparable part of the word. Hence, the Latin *alpinus*, the Spanish *alfil*, the early Italian *alfino*, the French and English *alfin* or *aufin*. The Portuguese *delfin* demands some explanation. Doubtless the derivation is *do* (genitive case of “the”) *alfin*. But as *delfin* in Portuguese means a dolphin, we see a cause for the mistake in naturalising the word /Candler, 2014: 86/. In Italian the present name for the *alfino* (also *arfino*) is *alfiere*; probably, because *al Phyl*

became *alfil*, and *alfil* became *alfier* or *alfiere*; but even more because *alfil* presented no sense to an Italian, while *alfiere* has a meaning of a standard bearer. The French name for the *alfin* is *le fou*, derived as follows: *al=le*; *phyl=fil=fol=fou*. Thus, the elephant has become the fool, probably the court fool or the king's jester /Candler, 2014: 87/. Nevertheless, these investigations made by Candler do not actually solve the puzzle of the Oriental *elephant* turning into the English *bishop* over time. Candler supposes that the word *bishop* has been adopted for purposes of the game into English by “false etymology”. No modern language has applied the sound *bishop*, or any like sound coming from an Eastern origin, to the piece in question, except the English and Icelandic languages.

The Armenian equivalent of the piece *bishop* is *փիղ* [*pigh*]. Etymologically, it derives from the original European interpretations of the figure as an *elephant*. On the board it does not appear with the form of an actual elephant as it's different interpretations during time had a shape of a man or an officer.

The *knight*, the cavalier or horse-soldier, has not greatly changed in form as a piece or in the name given to it. In Latin it is sometimes styled as *cornu*, which, like English word *cornet*, appears to be derived from the form of the pennon or ensign which he carried, a streamer diminishing to one point, or to two forked points. There is, however, a good deal of confusion about the word. *Cornuz* and other derived French words usually denote the English *bishop* /Candler, 2014: 82/. In the oldest versions of the game this piece is presented as a horseback rider. During the course of time it was simplified, remaining solely the horse as it is interpreted in Armenian as *ձի* [*dzi*]. Yet, in different European languages it still has the interpretation of a rider. In French the *knight* is *cavalier*, while in German it is *der Springer*, which means *the jumper* and which has the connotations of the actions of a rider. So, it is appropriate to say that after the *king*, the *knight* is the second most loyal chess figure to its etymological roots, as it conveys the meaning of a knight whether it is on the horseback or without a horse as a runner, or just the horse itself. Little has changed for the chess piece once known as *Ashva*. The *knight* has stayed the same in regards to its movement capabilities and its shape for as long as the game has been played. The *knight* is not typically asked to lead the charge, instead use its superior flanking ability /www.chess.com/.

As the *knight* is the horse soldier, the *pawn* is the foot-soldier. The English *pawn* is the French *pion* or *pieton*; it is the Italian *pedina*, an erroneous corruption of *pedone*; and it is the Latin *pedes*. Littré in his *Dictionnaire* derives the *pawn* from *paon* or *paonnet*. The French language was largely derived from or mixed with Italian sources through the Provençal. The Provençal for a *pawn* was *peonet* and for a foot-soldier was *peon*. Comparing this word with the corresponding words in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, it is clear that the root of the Provençal word, with both meanings (i.e., the chess-man and the foot-soldier) was the same, namely

ped, a foot; but when the word was adopted for a *pawn* by the French, they derived it neither from the root *ped*, nor from the word *pieton*; not knowing what to make of it, they allied it with *paon*, and so called it *paon*, *paonnet*, and even *pavonnet* /Candler, 2014: 83/.

In European languages the *pawn* mainly conveys the connotation of an infantry soldier, i.e., a foot-soldier, while in German the word *der Bauer* is translated as a *peasant* or a *farmer*. Etymologically, *peasant* is the man who works on land and accordingly his feet (*pieds* in French) touch the ground. So, different interpretations of the *pawn* are connected with the idea of walking, or a land person, which corresponds with the function of the piece *pawn* on the board of the game. The *pawn* does not go more than one step straight forward and in chess terminology it is not even considered as a figure. It might seem a weak piece for those who are beginners in the game, probably also because of its connotations, but the experienced chess players know how important this piece might appear if one knows how to place it strategically. The *pawn* is considered expendable and can be likened to the foot soldiers in a typical army troop. It can be used to define both offensive and defensive options and can be quite useful for strategy at the endgame. You are well advised to protect your pawns, especially when you are opening. Italians have a saying, “When the chess game is over, the pawn and the king go back to the same box” /www.chess.com/.

The Armenian interpretation of the *pawn* is similar to its European equivalents. The *pawn* in Armenian is *զինվոր* [*zinvor*], which means a *soldier*. It has similar connotations as its original or European variants. There are eight pawns on the board of the game and their duty is to shield other figures. They are standing on the second row of the board which is considered to be the front line as infantry is standing on the front in the battlefield.

To sum up, chess is not just a board game played as a pastime activity. It is the interpretation of a complex hierarchy ruling system represented on a battlefield which is the board. Two opposing sides with the same amount of forces (pieces) stand in front of each other. King and queen are the rulers and other figures are meant to protect them, but as in real life the classes of different levels cannot fight without each other, and thus, everyone’s role is very important. To understand this, we needed to look back to etymological peculiarities of the names of chess pieces to find out that both original Oriental and European names convey specific connotations which imply for the roles of those pieces in the game. European adaptation of the game is now adopted worldwide including Armenia, but Armenian interpretations of the names of chess pieces are not only borrowed from European equivalents but also have Oriental influence following the historical and geographic factors. Armenia has its special place in modern chess world being on the highest level twice in recent years.

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Հ. ԴԱՆԻԵԼՅԱՆ – Շախմատային խաղաքարերի անվանումների ծագումնաբանական վերլուծությունը հայերենում և եվրոպական լեզուներում. – Սույն հոդվածը նվիրված է շախմատային խաղաքարերի անվանումների ծագումնաբանական վերլուծությանը հայերենում և եվրոպական լեզուներում՝ հետազոտության համեմատական մեթոդի կիրառմամբ: Շախմատային խաղաքարերի անունները ժամանակի ընթացքում երկար ճանապարհ են հաղթահարել՝ դուրս գալով արևելյան մշակույթից, հետո հայտնվելով մահմեդական աշխարհում, այնուհետև ճանապարհ բռնելով դեպի Եվրոպա: Շատ կարևոր է հետադարձ հայացք նետել շախմատային խաղաքարերի անվանումների ծագումնաբանությանը՝ հասկանալու այս խաղի բարոյա-հոգեբանությունը և բացահայտելու խաղաքարերի նշանակությունը:

Բանալի բառեր. ծագումնաբանություն, շախմատային խաղաքարեր, համեմատական մեթոդ, եվրոպական լեզուներ, հայերեն

А. ДАНИЕЛЯН – К вопросу об этимологии названий шахматных фигур в европейских языках и в армянском. – Данная статья посвящена этимологическому анализу названий шахматных фигур в европейских языках и в армянском с помощью сравнительного метода исследования. В статье отмечается, что наименования шахматных фигур преодолели долгий путь, зародившись в восточной культуре, через мусульманский мир проложили путь в Европу. Для того чтобы понять мораль игры и выяснить причины появления шахматных фигур на доске, представляется важным выявление этимологии наименований этих фигур.

Ключевые слова: этимология, шахматные фигуры, сравнительный метод, европейские языки, армянский язык

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