Elaborate inlaid Game Boards from Sixteenth-century India

Game boards of astonishing richness and superb skill in the making were commissioned in India during the 16th century by rich merchants and court officials of the Portuguese State of India from local workshops using exotic Indian woods and refined techniques, such as *sadeli* [micro-mosaic inlay]. They were highly prized in Europe, serving as diplomatic gifts or objects of display in the *Kunstkammer*. Particularly rare are those displaying the Game of the Goose, of which only a small handful of examples survive. These are likely to have been Italian commissions, since the game is not associated with Portugal but rather with Italy, where its roots are documented from the late 15th century.

It is a simple race game, played with two dice, in which markers representing the players, move along the spiral track entirely according to the throw. Its name derives from the series of favourable spaces, each showing a goose, where the points thrown on the dice are doubled. The race to the central space, classically numbered 63, is impeded by various hazards: the *bridge* (pay to cross), the *inn* (miss a turn), the *well* (wait for another to take your place), the *labyrinth* (go back), the *prison* (wait, as for the well), and *death* (start again). Through the medium of printing, the game was widely diffused through Western Europe towards the end of the 16th century, in a form that was largely unaltered from the classic Italian model.

Figure 1: Reversible game board showing the Game of the Goose [photo courtesy of Sylvie Lhermite-King].

Figure 2: Reversible game board showing chess/draughts and backgammon [photo courtesy of Sylvie Lhermite-King].

The game board displayed (fig. 1) follows this classic model in its arrangement of favourable and unfavourable spaces, but with several unusual aspects to the iconography, to be discussed later. The reverse of the game board (fig.2) is arranged for chess or draughts but two opposite sides are fitted with wooden strips cut to provide a raised undulating edge. The undulations, in four groups of six, are to receive the circular playing discs for backgammon, replacing the arrow-shaped 'points' found in Western boards. The two small D-shaped trays receive the discs removed from the board in the course of play: they correspond to the 'bar' in Western backgammon.

Turning now to other boards for comparison, the reversible chess board in the Victoria and Albert Museum [acc. no. 1961-1899] has a similar arrangement for backgammon on its opposite face. The decoration of the chessboard is much like that of the board exhibited:

each square has a micro-mosaic disc in its centre and the border is inlaid with delicately-interlaced flower branches. Amin Jaffer considers that this board was made in Gujarat or Sindh in the 16th century.

Figure 3: Reversible game board in the Metropolitan Museum of Art [photo Adrian Seville].

A closer comparison can be made with the reversible Goose and Chess board in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [acc. no. 62.14] (figure 3). The Museum attributes it to Gujerat, dating it to the late 16th century. Its chessboard face is also fitted out for backgammon, with flower decoration similar to that of the board exhibited. The chess squares also have central micro-mosaic discs. Though elaborate, the Met Museum board is less ornate than the board exhibited. Its Goose-game face lacks the conspicuous six-pointed stars, found both in the central space and in the corners, where they are cut off by the curve of the track. Similar stars feature on a second Goose/Chess board in the Met Museum [acc. no. 53.71.12], badly damaged and wrongly attributed to Morocco.

Detailed comparison of the Goose board on display with that of the Met Museum reveals significant differences in iconography and differences from the classic Italian model. Space 6 classically shows a bridge; here, the displayed board has a barricaded tunnel and the Met Museum board has a blank space. Space 19 classically shows an inn, as on the displayed board, where the Met Museum example blank. Both boards have the classic well at space 31, though the depiction on the Met Museum board suggests that Western perspective presented a problem for the maker. The classic labyrinth at space 42 is represented as a circular plan on the Met Museum board, while the board on exhibition shows a three-story tower with arches, perhaps the Tower of Babel. Both boards have a ship at space 52,

classically a prison, while both follow the classic model of showing death at space 58, depicting a skeleton with hourglass and scythe.

In considering these differences, it is important to recognise that the medieval Game of the Goose has a symbolic interpretation as a spiritual progress through life. The representations therefore need to be considered as symbols rather than real things. Both the blocked tunnel and the bridge can symbolise rites of passage, while the labyrinth and the Tower of Babel symbolise error. The ship at space 52 is perhaps a galley, which would make sense of the association with the prison space. During the sixteenth century, slave rowers began to appear in the galleys of the Republic of Venice, whereas previously the rowers had been free men, often soldiers.

The dice spaces at 26 and 53 indicate a special rule for the initial throw of nine: if the throw is 6 and 3, the player moves to space 26, whereas the throw of 5 and 4 leads to space 53. Without this classic provision, these throws would lead to an immediate win by hopping from goose to goose. Both boards have dice at these spaces, though the Met Museum example shows a remarkably unsuccessful attempt at perspective.

Both boards demonstrate in their use of Western-style numbers that they were intended for a Western market, though the orthography deserves comment. The board displayed has a reversed '7' at space 7 and a reversed '4' at 34. The Met Museum board uses a strange form of the number '4', turned through 45 degrees, something echoed in the flat-topped '8'. Thierry Depaulis has suggested that this orthography derives from an early Italian form of writing, perhaps even as early as the late 15th century. This, together with the relative unsophistication of the drawing, suggests that the Met Museum example is earlier than the board displayed and indeed earlier than the Museum's assigned date. The blanks on its spaces 6 and 19 remain a puzzle. It seems unlikely that this reflects an early form of the Goose game. Possibly the board was not completed because of its imperfect execution?

An intriguing question relates to the depiction of the birds on the 'goose' spaces. The birds on both boards are very similar – and quite unlike any normal depiction of a goose. Possibly the feet could be regarded as goose-like – but not the beak, which is that of a raptor, and not the tail, shown in both versions as a curious loop. Did this strange creature result from the naïve efforts of the supposed Indian artist? Yet the bar-headed goose (Anser Indicus) is, as its Latin name shows, a familiar sight in the subcontinent. In fact, the depiction shows a greater resemblance to that of the pelican in medieval Western manuscripts (figure 4). At that period, the pelican's large food pouch was not recorded. As late as the 19th century, the formal taxonomic scheme used in Italy for birds included the 'order' of the geese, naming the pelican as one of its genera – so the '*oca pelicano*' in common parlance might have been regarded as 'a sort of goose'. It has to be said that there is no independent evidence for the bold theory that the 'geese' of the familiar Game of the Goose were originally conceived as pelicans – but if they were it would be entirely consistent with the Christian symbolism of the game as a Game of Life. The pelican in medieval bestiaries is usually shown 'in its piety', pecking drops of blood from its breast to feed its young – a symbol of Christ's sacrifice for His people. With this interpretation, the humble Game of the

Goose becomes an allegory of Christian spirituality overcoming the hazards of life in the quest for Paradise.

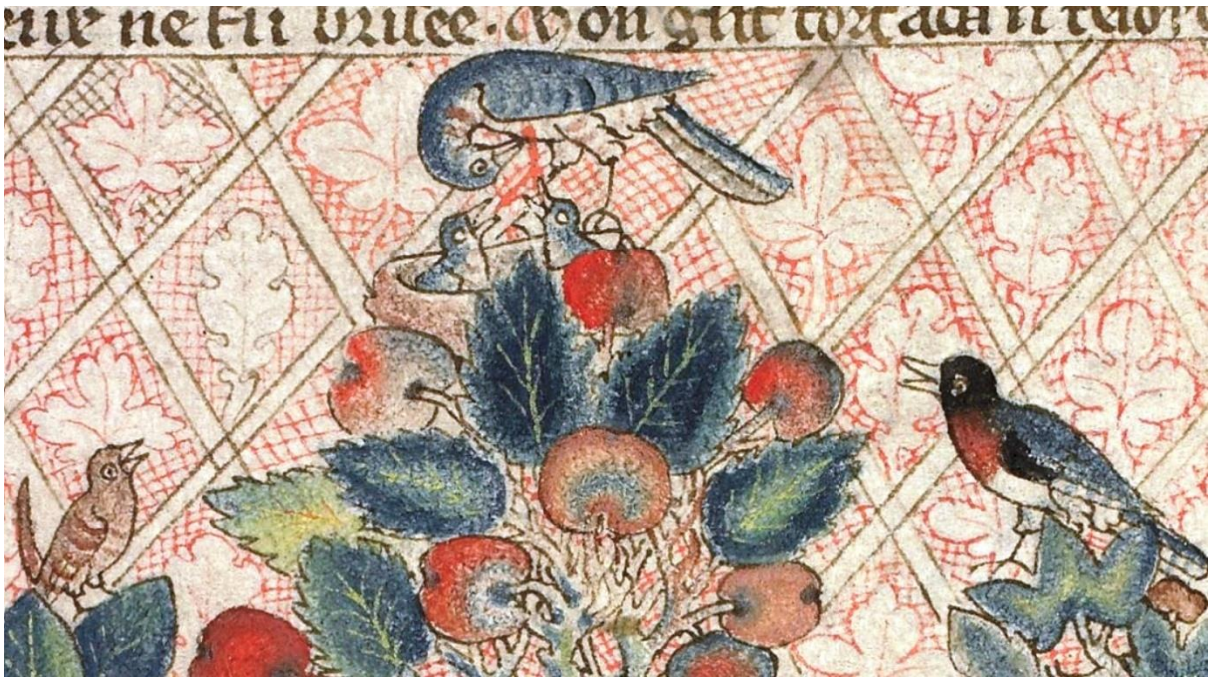

Figure 4: detail from the Holkham Bible Picture Book, showing the 'Pelican in her Piety'. Norfolk: ca. 1327-1335 (Courtesy of The British Library: Add MS 47682 f 003v).

Bibliography

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