The short Middle Persian prose text which bears the (modern) title Wizārisbn ā catrang ud nībisbn ā nēw-ardasībr (Explanation of Chess and Invention of Backgammon [hereafter EC]) probably was written down in the ninth century A.D. Yet it may have flourished in essentially its present form, but as a courtly tale transmitted orally, from the reign of the Sasanian king Xusraw I (A.D. 531–79). The text depicts well the culture of Xusraw’s time (see below), and its story is part of the lore of this period in the accounts of the Arab historian Tha‘ālibī and of the Persian epic poet Firdausī.1 EC may have been recorded in writing even during the Sasanian period—if not in the Book of Kings (Xwaday Nāmag), then perhaps in the Book of Manners (Ewēn Nāmag). The latter is mentioned in an appendix to EC (see the translation below, sections 37–38) and is the likely source of the precepts there added. The Book of Manners, a heterogeneous collection of didactic material, discussed various subjects with which a properly educated noble should be familiar,2 and these included board games. The fact is illustrated by another didactic text set at Xusraw I’s court, Xusraw, Son of Kawād, and a Page (Xusraw Kawādān ud rēdag-ē). A young page, in the course of describing his training, informs the king: “I am more advanced than my peers in playing chess, backgammon, and ‘eight-foot’.3 One would expect that the Book of Manners did not merely give rules and precepts, but that it included entertaining illustrative narratives in the manner of New Persian instructional (andarz) literature.

2 See A. Christensen, L’Iran sous les Sassanides (Copenhagen, 1944), 62; A. Tafaqqlūlī, “Ā’inānāma,” Dānishnāma-yi Īrān u Islām (Tehran, 1976), 266.
3 J. M. Jamasp-Asana, The Pahlavi Texts Contained in the Codex MK (Bombay, 1897), 28, sec. 15; C. J. Brunner, “Selected Texts from Pre-Islamic Iran” (Special Supplement to The Asia Society Grapevine No. 2, New York, 1977), 7. ‘Eight-foot’ (basht-pāy) translates Sanskrit aṭṭāpada, the term for a board of 64 squares. Perhaps the Middle Persian term designates a variant of chess, e.g., dice chess with two or four players.
EC has drawn attention chiefly because it suggests a reasonable and fairly precise time for the dissemination of chess westward from India. The narrative may indeed contain this grain of truth, but in other respects it must be treated as legend exemplifying the familiar epic theme of a battle of wits between two rulers. The contact between Iranian and Indian courts described in EC may be a reminiscence of an actual exchange of embassies, and Xusraw's concern over the Hephthalite domination of the eastern provinces of his realm would have been sufficient motive to seek relations with Indian rulers. On the other hand, the Indian motifs in Arabic accounts of the Sasanian kings are usually quite legendary. For instance, Xusraw's eastern campaign is much exaggerated, and an Indian adventure is attributed to Wahrām V (A.D. 420–38). A more remarkable introduction of an Indian motif occurs in the Middle Persian Book of Deeds of Ardashīr, Son of Pāpak (Kārnāmāg i Ardāšīr i Pābagān). In that text the first Sasanian dynasty (A.D. 224–41) is depicted as learning the future of his empire from "the soothsayer of the Indians." This episode may have been added to the original oral narrative under the influence of late Sasanian literary fashion.

One point in EC is surely legend—the pretension that backgammon was invented only in the sixth century. The hero's explanation of why that game is called nēw-ardashīr ("noble-(is)-Ardashīr") by no means suffices. The name could, as EC claims, commemorate Ardashīr I; but alternatives are Ardashīr II (A.D. 379–83) or even some noble (most probably in either of these reigns) who bore "New-Ardashīr" as his honorific. In any case, the term may hint at an earlier story (itself probably legendary) telling how backgammon came to Iran, a story which EC supplanted.

Three features of EC relate it closely to the time of Xusraw I, even if they do not fully prove the date of composition: (1) In that reign the physician Burzoe undertook a mission to India; one result was that he translated into Middle Persian the collection of Sanskrit allegorical tales

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5 Middle Persian literature contains, besides numerous collections of aphorisms, two lively contests: (1) the Text of Yōst of the Friyān (Mādīyān i Yōst i Friyān), ed. and trans. in M. Haug and H. Jamaspji Asa, The Book of Arda Vīna (Bombay-London, 1872), 207–66; (2) the Iranian debate fable The Babylonian Tree (Draxt i asūrī), ed. and trans. in M. Nawwāb, Manzūma-yi drakht asūrī (Tehran, 1967), and with additional commentary in C. J. Brunner, "The Fable of The Babylonian Tree," JNES (in press). Yet EC could reflect, in addition to Iranian wisdom traditions, a degree of Indian literary influence. See the examples of riddle solving in Indian literature collected in T. Benfey, "Die indischen Märchen von den klugen Rathsellosern und ihre Verbreitung über Asien und Europa (Ein Beitrag zu der Geschichte der Märchen)," Kleinere Schriften (Berlin, 1892), 2:156–223.
6 His next major successor, Xusraw II (A.D. 591–628) may have exchanged gifts with Indian rulers through embassies; see texts implying contact with India cited in J. Markwart, Ernährbar nach der Geographie des Ps. Moses Xorenac'i, Abb. der König. Ges. der Wiss. zu Göttingen, phil.-hist. Kl., N.F. 3/2 (Berlin, 1901), 33.
known as the *Pancatantra*. The frame narrative of the original text features an Indian king named Devasarman. The versions which derive from the Middle Persian translation call him Dabsharm (Syriac) or Dabshalm (Arabic); and the Dewisharm of *EC* apparently represents the same character. Thus at least this detail of *EC* should be later than Burzöö’s translation, and the entire composition may have been motivated by a fashion in Indian wisdom literature at the Sasanian court which was stimulated by Burzöö.

(2) Xusraw I’s reign was a period of diverse intellectual activity at the court, which included the study and advancement of the astral sciences of astronomy and astrology. One illustration is the revision at this time of the *Horoscope of the Sovereigns (Zayc i Shabryārān).* The Sasanians’ concern for better tools of astrological prediction must have been motivated, in part, by the approach of the tenth century of the tenth millennium according to Zoroastrian cosmic chronology—a time when various celestial signs might be expected. The more sophisticated techniques of Indian astral science found a warm reception at the Sasanian court and helped spur debate among the several schools of specialists. Both *EC* and the *Book of Deeds* display a keen awareness of astrology which seems appropriate to the sixth century. This awareness is also significant for consideration of the following point.

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13 On the influence of Indian astronomy and astrology during the Sasanian period, see E. S. Kennedy and B. L. Van Der Waerden, “The World-Year of the Persians,” *JAOS* 83 (1963), 326; D. Pingree, “Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran,” *Isis* 54 (1963), 241–42. Use of Indian sources is attested in *Dēnkard* 4 (ed. Madaan, 428; J. de Menasce, “Notes iraniennes,” *JA* 237 [1949], 1–3). In the ninth century, the Zoroastrian priest Manucirá refers to the problem of reconciling three systems of horoscopy: the *Zayc of the Sovereigns*, the *Indian Zayc*, and the *Zayc of Ptolemy* (B. N. Dhabhar, ed., *The Epistles of Manuscbibhar* [Bombay, 1912], 2.2.9–11); and these were already familiar in the Sasanian period.
(3) The hero of EC is the alleged "vizier" of Xusraw I famous in literature, Wuzurg-Mihr (Arabic Buzurjmihr, "Great-[is]-Mihr"). But it may be debated whether his presence proves that EC originated in that reign or, rather, that it belongs to the Islamic period. One theory has held that the wise minister belongs only to Iranian literary tradition and not to history; and his story seems indeed to echo vaguely that of the ancient sage Ahyaq. A. Christensen argued for the identification of Wuzurg-Mihr with the historical personage Burzoe: "Burzoe," since it is a hypocoristic name, may represent a full name "Burz-Mihr ("Lofty-[is]-Mihr"). This form might have been corrupted by writers of the early Islamic period into "Buzurjmihr," then translated back into Middle Persian as "Wuzurg-Mihr." But this supposition remains highly uncertain. While the wisdom of Burzoe and that of Wuzurg-Mihr inevitably share common features, the two figures are clearly distinguished in Islamic literature by name (including the latter's patronymic), profession, and intellectual training. It has been noted that Wuzurg-Mihr's name is absent from historical sources contemporary with the Sasanians; but this point is neither decisive nor surprising. The Middle Persian sayings attributed to Wuzurg-Mihr (see below) refer to him, not as vizier (wuzurg-framadar), but as "* administrator (*treasurer?) of the harem of the mighty empire, Xusraw's director at court."16

Wuzurg-Mihr, in sharp contrast to Burzoe, is consistently associated with the sciences of the heavens. Even his name can bear an astrological connotation, since the god Mihr, the watchful judge over the world, is lord of the heavenly bodies. He may be identified with the Buzurjmihr who wrote a work titled Selection [s] (Middle Persian *Wizidag, according to the Fibrist of Ibn al-Nadim. The Selection was a commentary on the Anthologiae of the astrologer Vettius Valens (second century A.D.). The horoscopes collected by Buzurjmihr in this work were undoubtedly added to regularly during the remainder of the Sasanian period. But his version of the "horoscope of the world" (zayc i geban), of which a fragment survives, probably belongs to the original work; compare the intact Middle Persian version from the book of the Original Creation (Bundahishn).20

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To this Wuzurg-Mihr is attributed a Middle Persian *Memoir (Ayādgār)*, a collection of religious apothegms; and a rather different collection, in Persian, occurs in Firdausi's *Book of Kings.* Attributions of authorship for collections of Zoroastrian aphorisms are admittedly of quite doubtful validity. Yet, among these particular ponderings on dogma and ethics, one section deals pithily with the problem of reconciling astral determination with individual responsibility:

> Do the things which come to people happen through fate (*baxt*) or by action (*kunisbt*)?

Fate and action together are just like body and soul. For the body without a soul is useless shape, and the soul without a body is intangible air. When they are joined together, they are strong and very functional. What is fate and what is action? Fate is the reason (*cim*), action the cause (*wabiinig*), for the things which come to people.

This concise defense of traditional Zoroastrian emphasis on “good thoughts, good words, good deeds” and the fundamental rationality of a disturbed universe is especially appropriate to the astrologer sage. He is made to enunciate a position notably more complex than that expressed in a Middle Persian gloss to *Wīdēwīdād* V. 9 of the Avesta: “Material things are by fate, immaterial things by action.”

This saying perhaps represents the average believer’s resolution of the question. *EC* associates Wuzurg-Mihr not only with an elaborate astrological analogy but with the philosophical term *cim,* rendered above as ‘reason’ and below, in *EC,* as ‘rationale’. The terms ‘cause’ and ‘reason’ in Wuzurg-Mihr’s dictum must have undergone considerable discussion among Zoroastrian priest-philosophers, little of which is reflected in surviving literature. But the ninth-century apologist Mardān-Farrux uses the terms often in his *Doubt-Resolving Explanation* and attempts to establish their relationship:

> The cause and reason of an action are prior to its necessity (*ahāvast*). The necessity does not exist until the reason for the action’s necessity occurs (*rasēd*). The reason for an action is [derived] from the cause which impels in one the necessity of that action. Necessity is the willing (*kāmistan*) of something on the basis of a cause (*wabiinig*).

Mardān-Farrux also cites a major example of ‘reason’ from Zoroastrian cosmogony:

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24 Hoshang Jamasp, ed., *Vendidād* I (Bombay, 1907), 152.
The knowingness (danlsbn) of the creator, by reason of the necessity for creatures [in order to defeat the Evil Spirit], through the action of means (carg-kunisbna), created creatures for activity (kayr).

Since cim is a significant philosophical term, its translation in EC should be carefully determined. A rendering as ‘symbol’ represents an easy error. For the text’s conceit is that chess is a fully acted parallel to a battle. (The game’s literary equivalent would be a parable.) Backgammon, similarly, parallels the structure and processes of the cosmos. Such equations in the games’ surface structure as “chess elephant stands for royal bodyguard” are adequately described by the precise term bangosbidag ‘analogy’ (used in section 31). Cim goes beyond this and refers to the games’ underlying truth: their manifestation of the realities and dynamics of material existence. The term lends emphasis to the didactic nature of the text and renders the role in it of the wise astrologer and minister all the more appropriate.

It is perhaps surprising, in view of the distinct identities of chess and backgammon (reflected partly in their distinct terminologies; see the glossary, below) that EC does not strongly contrast them. Chess is given at least an implicit contrast with backgammon, which represents ‘fate’; but it could have been explicitly extolled as exemplifying ‘action’, that is, the working of free will within the bounds of natural laws.

EC was first edited and rendered in Gujerati by P. B. Sanjana. Here the version of J. M. Jamasp-Asana is followed, with consultation of that of H. S. Nyberg. Transcriptions and translations were published by C. Salemann and J. C. Tarapore before A. Pagliaro’s more detailed study.

27 Thus in J. C. Tavadia, Die mittelpersische Sprache und Literatur der Zarathustrier (Leipzig, 1956), 140.
28 Cf. the fragment of a Persian text on chess discussed in N. Bland, “On the Persian Game of Chess,” JRAS 13 (1850), 7; and the description of backgammon in EC with the medieval “Ouranomachia or Game of the Astrologers” described by Thomas Hyde (reference in D. Forbes, The History of Chess, from the time of the Early Invention of the Game in India, till the period of its Establishment in Western and Central Europe [London, 1860], 138). Zoroastrian concern with the individual’s moral initiative is expressed frequently, as in the Selected Aphorisms of the Ancient Teachers, sec. 58:

Doing good (the practice of noble action) is from exertion. Procreation is from creation; creation is from desire; desire is from consciousness; consciousness is from immaterial knowledge; knowledge is the tool which is, was, and will be (M. F. Kanga, ed., Čitak Handara'i Ponymakasân [Bombay, 1960], 12).

(1) They say that, in the reign of Xusraw of Immortal Soul, a chess game (16 counters of emerald and 16 counters of red ruby) was sent by Dewisharm, great ruler of the Indians, to test the intelligence and wisdom of the Iranians and to see to his own profit. (2) With the chess game were sent 1200 camel loads of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, and robes and 90 elephants and their things especially fashioned. Taxtritus, who was the pick among the Indians, was despatched. (3) In a letter had been written: "Since you are named as king of kings, as king of kings over us all, it is necessary that your wise men be wiser than ours. [It is so] if you explain the rationale of this chess; otherwise you send tribute [and] taxes!" (4) The king of kings asked for four days' time. There was no one of the wise men of the realm of Ėrán who could explain the rationale of chess.

(5) On the third day Wuzurg-Mihr, son of Böxtag, rose to his feet. (6) He said: "May you be immortal! Until today I have not explained the rationale of chess for this reason, that you and everyone who is in the realm of Ėrán may know that I am the wisest man in the realm of Ėrán. (7) I will easily explain the rationale of chess, and I will extract tribute and taxes from Dewisharm. I will devise and send Dewisharm something else, which he will not be able to explain; and I will take a second tribute from him. Be assured of this, that you are worthy to be king of kings and our wise men are wiser than Dewisharm's."

(8) The king of kings said three times: "Fine Wuzurg-Mihr, our Taxtritus!" He ordered 12,000 drakhms to be given to Wuzurg-Mihr. (9) The next day Wuzurg-Mihr summoned Taxtritus into his presence and said: "Dewisharm has fashioned this chess like a battle in meaning: (10) He has made the kings like two princes, the chariots to left and right like the van, a general like the commander of the warriors, the elephants like the commander of the bodyguards, the horses like the commander of cavalry, the foot-soldiers like the very infantry at the front of the attack." (11) Then Taxtritus set up the chess and played with Wuzurg-Mihr. Wuzurg-Mihr won three victories from Taxtritus, and on that account great joy came to the whole country. (12) Then Taxtritus rose to his feet. (13) He said: "May you be immortal! God has given you this miraculous power, glory, might, and victory. Be lord of Ėrán and non-Ėrán! (14) Some of the wise men of the Indians invented this chess game. It was assembled and constructed with much labor and toil. No one was able to explain it. (15) Your Wuzurg-Mihr, by his innate intelligence, explained it so easily and simply!" (16) He sent to the king's treasury all that property.

(17) The next day the king of kings summoned Wuzurg-Mihr into his presence. (18) He said to Wuzurg-Mihr: "Our Wuzurg-Mihr! What is that thing of which you said to me: 'I will fashion it and send it to Dewisharm?'" (19) Wuzurg-Mihr said: "Of the rulers during this millennium, Ardashir was most effective and wise; I will name the game Noble-(is)-Ardashir in Ardashir's name. (20) I will make the board of Noble-(is)-Ardashir like Spandarmad, the Earth. (21) I will make 30 counters like the 30 nycthemera; I will make 15 white like day, and I will make 15 black like night. (22) I will make a single die, like the revolution of the constellations and the turning of the zodiac. (23) I will make a 'one' on the die, just as Ohrmazd is one; all well-being was created by him. (24) I will make a 'two', just like the material existence and the invisible. (25) I will make a 'three', just like good thought, good speech, good works and thought, words, deeds. (26) I will make a 'four', like the four material elements of which a person consists and the world's four directions—east, west, south, north. (27) I will make a
‘five’, like the five light-sources—sun, moon, stars, fire, and the lightning which comes from the sky. (28) I will make a ‘six’, like the creating of creatures during the six periods of the year-divisions. (29) I will make an arrangement of Noble-(is)-Ardashir upon the board just like the lord Ohrmazd, when he created creatures in the world. (30) The revolving and turning of the counters according to the die is just like people in the world: Their bond has been tied to the invisible beings; they revolve and move according to the seven [planets] and 12 [zodiacal signs]. When they hit one [counter] against another and collect [the latter], it is just as people in the world smite one another. (31) When, by the turn of the die, they collect all [the counters], it is an analogy to people, who all pass out of the world. When they set them up again, it is an analogy to people, who will all come alive again at the resurrection.”

(32) When he heard that speech, the king of kings was joyful. He ordered to be arrayed as splendidly as possible 12,000 Arab horses covered with gold and pearls; 12,000 young men, the pick of the realm of Ėrān; 12,000 panoplies, [steel] seven [times] tempered [lit. ‘rendered, made’]; 12,000 Indian worked steel swords; 12,000 seven-eyed [studded] belts; and everything else which was necessary for 12,000 men and horses. (33) Wuzurg-Mihr, son of Boxtag, was made commander over them. At the time destined, by good luck and the gods’ help, he arrived among the Indians. (34) Dewisharm, the great sovereign of the Indians, when he saw them in such fashion, asked 40 days time from Wuzurg-Mihr. (35) There was no one of the wise men of the Indians who knew the rationale of Noble-(is)-Ardashir. (36) So Wuzurg-Mihr a second time extracted just as much tribute and tax from Dewisharm. He returned to the realm of Ėrān with good luck and great splendor.

(37) The explanation of the rationale of chess is this: What [is] potent [derives] from this, as the wise men have said: “To carry off the victory through wisdom, to know the principles of that unarmed battle.” (38) Playing chess [is] this: observing, striving to protect one’s own pieces, greater striving after how to be able to capture the other person’s pieces, not moving badly [lit., ‘a bad hand’] because of hope of being able to capture the other person’s pieces, always keeping one piece on the attack and the others in defense, observing with complete mindfulness, and other [points], as they have been written in the Book of Manners.

Completed in health and happiness.

Glossary to the Translation

In the left-hand column are given the terms used in the translation. In the right-hand column are the Middle Persian terms, which are followed by a literal translation, where required, and the equivalent modern terms, where different.

| Arrangement [of pieces on the board] | nibādāg ‘placement’. |
| Board | taxtāg. |
| Capture a piece | abzār burdan (for chess only) ‘carry [off] an instrument’. |
| Chariot | raxu = chess rook. |
| Chess | catrang (Persian and Arabic shatranj), loanword from Sanskrit caturanga ‘having four limbs’. The four-limbed army is bastya-aĉo-ratha-patātam ‘having elephants, horses, chariots, and |
infantry'.

- **collect**: abar cidan (for backgammon only) = (1) to set back the opponent's men; (2) to bear one's own men off the board.
- **counter**: mubrag, a gaming piece regarded simply as an object of cut stone. The Metropolitan Museum of Art holds a possible example of a backgammon man or chess pawn from the Sasanian period.
- **die**: gardanag 'causing to move or turn'.
- **elephant**: pîl = chess bishop.
- **foot-soldier**: payâdag = chess pawn.
- **game (i.e., set)**: ēw-yuxt 'having one pair'. Apparently the reference is to games for two players which oppose two identical sets of counters. The term would thus exclude, for example, Indian four-man chess. The Middle Persian term for 'game' in the sense of 'play, fun' is kâdag.
- **general**: frazen protector = chess queen.
- **hit**: zadan (in backgammon only).
- **horse**: asp = chess knight.
- **king**: shâh = chess king.
- **move (n.)**: wâzîshn (in chess only), implying more or less linear motion, 'movement'.
- **Noble-(is)-Ardashir**: nêw-ardashîr = backgammon. The familiar New Persian and Arabic term nard represents the second stage of contraction of the Middle Persian name, the first stage being n'ardashîr.
- **piece**: absar (in chess only) 'instrument'.
- **play (vb.)**: wâzîdan, extended from its basic meaning 'cause to move'. For its verbal noun, see 'move'.
- **revolving**: wardishn (in backgammon only), characterizing the overall elliptical movement of the backgammon men from point to point on the board. The term is also astronomical; see section 22 of the translation.
- **turning**: gardishn, synonymous with 'revolving'.

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31 For discussion of the term, see Macdonell, *Early History of Chess*, 118.
32 Accession no. 36.30.5, a find from Qaṣr-i Abū Naṣr; see further in Brunner, *Sasanian Stamp Seals*, 46.