

# Curator's Choice

October 2024

## *A Knight's Tale: Chess in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

By: Rebecca Morehouse,  
State Curator

This small ivory artifact, shaped like a horse's head, was discovered in the early 1990s during excavations under the kitchen at Cross Manor, a 18th-century house in St. Mary's County (Figure 1). When this delicately carved artifact was rediscovered during a rehousing project, its identity and purpose wasn't clear. But the MAC Lab's "small finds guru," Sara Rivers Cofield, knew immediately what it was. She identified it as the top of a chess piece, specifically a knight. The horse head would have been attached with a small pin to a simple turned baluster with a flat base (Figure 2, third chess piece from the left).

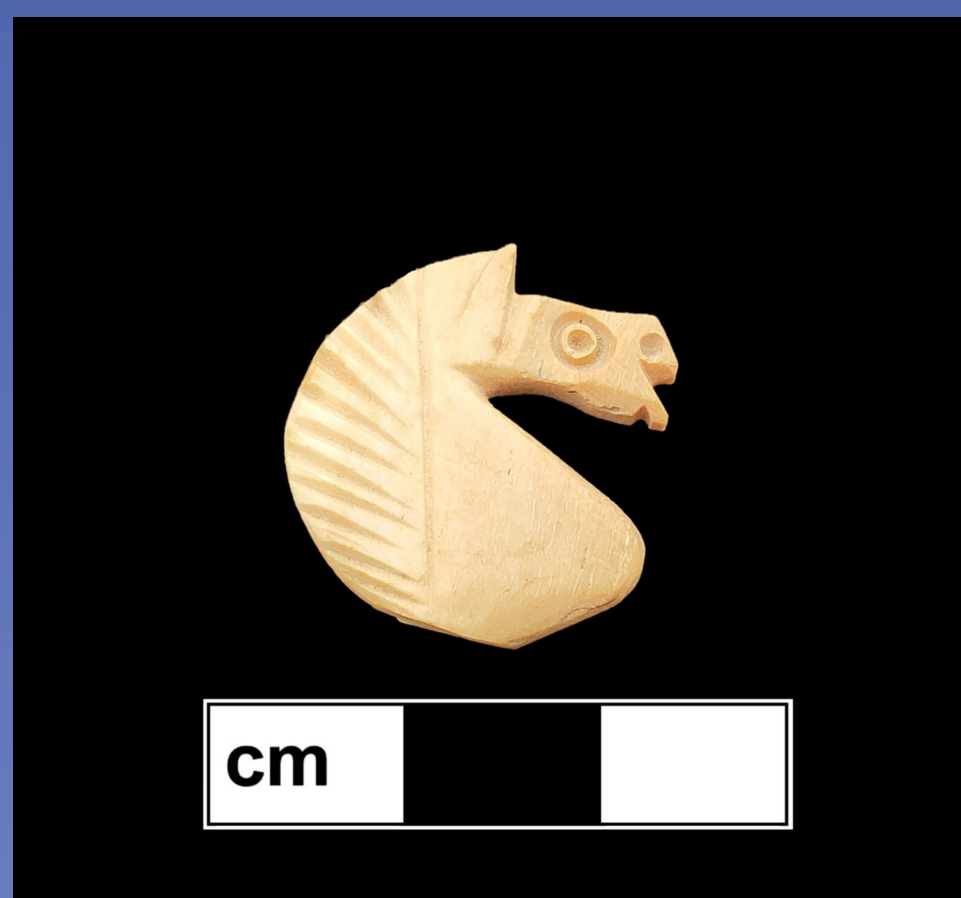


Figure 1: Ivory chess piece fragment from the Cross Manor site.

The game of chess is derived from an earlier war game from India called *chaturanga*, which is Sanskrit for a battle formation mentioned in the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata (Soltis 2024). Chaturanga dates to the 6th century CE and is considered the earliest precursor to the game of chess that is played today. The word *chaturanga* means "having four limbs or parts" and was used to describe the Indian army of Vedic times where a platoon had four divisions: infantry, cavalry, elephants and chariots (The House of Staunton 2024; Kale 2021). The pieces of the game *chaturanga* represented each of these military units and had four sets of pieces (Figure 3). The game was played with four players, two on each team.

By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, *chaturanga* had spread through Asia and Europe and evolved into a game resembling what we know as two-player chess today (Stapczynski 2023). It wasn't until the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, that chess really started to gain popularity. Standardized chess sets and modern competitive play in the form of tournaments arose in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (The House of Staunton 2024).



Figure 2: Pieces from a Barleycorn chess set from mid-19th century England (Chess Antiques 2019).

The chess piece from Cross Manor came from what is called a Barleycorn chess set, named for the ornate foliate patterns present on some of the pieces (Figures 2 and 4). These chess sets, usually carved from bone or ivory, appeared at the beginning of the 19th century, which coincided with the advent of the ornamental lathe. They were made in England and Central Europe and remained popular throughout the 19th century, one of the primary occupational periods of the Cross Manor site. Past presidents Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams were both avid chess players and each owned Barleycorn chess sets (The House of Staunton 2024). Jefferson's set can be seen on display in the parlor of his home, Monticello (Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia n.d.).



Figure 3: Four-player *chaturanga* game board with pieces representing the four divisions of the Indian army: infantry, cavalry, elephants and chariots (The Big Game Hunter n.d.).

We will likely never know how this chess piece ended up buried under the kitchen at Cross Manor, but as the only ivory chess piece found in the State's archaeological collections, it provides rare, tangible evidence of the game of chess as it was played in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Maryland.

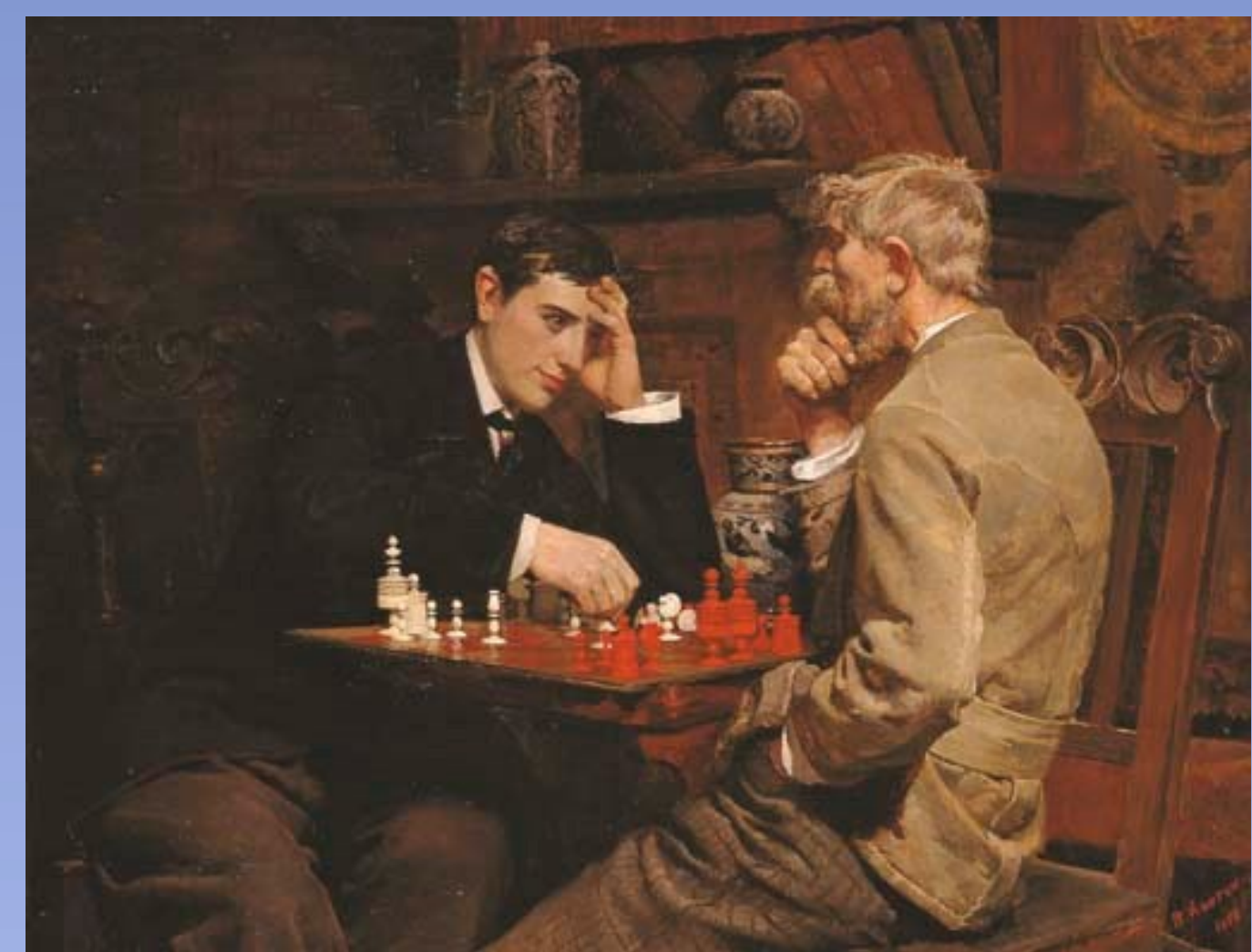


Figure 4: Painting *The Chess Game* by Julian Rossi Ashton, 1878, showing players using a Barleycorn chess set (Artnet n.d.).

### References Cited

- Artnet  
n.d. <https://www.artnet.com/artists/julian-rossi-ashton/the-chess-game-H6BdvckXbFFsqkvYAbSswv2> accessed September 30, 2024.
- The Big Game Hunter  
n.d. <https://thebiggamehunter.com/games-of-the-world/> accessed September 30, 2024.
- Chess Antiques  
2019 <https://chessantiques.com/product/type-ii-english-bone-barleycorn-chessmen/> accessed September 30, 2024.
- The House of Staunton  
2024 History of Chess. <https://www.houseofstaunton.com/history-of-chess> accessed on September 30, 2024.
- Kale, Sharwari  
2021 From Chaturanga to Chess: The History of the Origin of Chess. <https://homegrown.co.in/homegrown-voices/from-chaturanga-to-chess-the-history-of-the-origin-of-chess> accessed on September 30, 2024.
- Soltis, Andrew E.  
2024 Chess History. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/chess/History> accessed on September 30, 2024.
- Stapczynski, Colin  
2023 History of Chess: From Early Stages to Magnus. <https://www.chess.com/article/view/history-of-chess> accessed on September 30, 2024.
- Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia  
n.d. Chess Set-English. <https://www.monticello.org/research-education/thomas-jefferson-encyclopedia/chess-set-english/> accessed on September 30, 2024.