

# War, peace and chess : Bna's references to "Terracotta Chessmen" and "Discourses on War" in the Harsacarita

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# WAR, PEACE AND CHESS

## Bāṇa's References to "Terracotta Chessmen" and "Discourses on War" in the Harṣacarita

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### *Abstract*

Bāṇa's Harṣacarita not only contains the oldest Indian reference to the game of chess, *caturaṅga*, played on the 64-square-board called *aṣṭāpada*, but also gives a hint to terracotta chessmen in the phrase *pārthivavigrahāḥ*, which is not only to be rendered as "fights among kings", but as "earthen figures" as well.

Chess, it seems, was played at Harṣa's court in Kanyakubjā/Kanauj in the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. with earthen figurative chessmen. Before the game *caturaṅga* was invented – so my thesis – the theoreticians of warfare used similar terracottas as means to teach strategy and tactics of battles in sand-tables. Further, Bāṇa's *adhikaraṇavicārāḥ* can be read as *adhika-ṛaṇa-vicāra* and translated as "thoughts on further battle(s)", pointing at continuous discussions on warfare.

Recently I discussed the poet Bāṇa's well known reference to the game of chess played on the 64-square-board.<sup>1</sup>

*Aṣṭāpadānām caturaṅgakalpanā* is one of seven remarks describing the peaceful reign of king Harṣavardhana<sup>2</sup> in Bāṇa's contemporary biography of the emperor, the "Harṣacarita", or "Life of Harṣa".<sup>3</sup> And, it is the oldest Indian reference to the game of chess, *caturaṅga*, played on the 64-square-board, named *aṣṭāpada* in Sanskrit.

Armies (*caturaṅga*), so Bāṇa, were no longer set up on battlefields, but only lined up on substitute battlefields, or gaming boards, as battles were no longer fought, but played. The word *kalpanā*,<sup>4</sup> also signifying "creating in the

1 SYED 2003.

2 King Harṣavardhana Śīlāditya of the Puṣyabhūti-dynasty ruled from 606/607 till 647 A.D. in the North Indian city of Kanyakubjā or Kanauj, an economic, religious and cultural centre, situated on the banks of river Gaṅgā (Ganges). Bāṇa's biography of the king is to be dated in the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

3 See KANE, second *ucchvāsa*, pages 26 and 27.

4 *Kalpanā* acc. to MONIER-WILLIAMS is: "making, manufacturing, preparing, practice [...] creating in the mind, feigning, assuming anything to be real, fiction hypothesis, form, shape, image", MACDONELL under *kalpanā*: "fashioning, performing, invention, fiction, hypothesis, formation, form".

mind, fake, hypothesis, fiction”, clearly indicates that Bāṇa had play in mind, operations “as if”. The arrangement of a playboard army is both fiction and imitation, the playboard army being a perfect miniature model of the real army. Both consist, as the name *catur-aṅga* (“four-member(-ed)”) for the real army as well as the miniature one used in the game of chess indicates, of soldiers (*padāti* or *patti*), horses (*aśva*), elephants (*hastin*) and chariots (*ratha*), and, of course, the king, *rājan*, plus adviser, *mantrin* or *amātya*.<sup>5</sup> The given reference proves that the game of chess was played during the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century at the court of Kanyakubjā, or Kanauj.

While Bāṇa’s reference to *caturaṅga* played on the *aṣṭāpada* is well known among Indologists and Chesshistorians, his two other hints to the game have so far escaped attention and are to be dealt with in the present paper.

I recently discovered an edition of the *Harṣacarita* including the medieval commentary of Śaṅkara, which is valuable in the explanation of Bāṇa’s metaphors and similes, his obscure words and puns. And, Śaṅkara also makes some useful remarks on the poet’s references concerning chess, which are important for the understanding of the passage.<sup>6</sup>

## 1 *Pustakarmanāṃ pāṛthivavigrahāḥ*

The second of the seven statements by which Bāṇa praises the peaceful reign of king Harṣavardhana is *pustakarmanāṃ pāṛthivavigrahāḥ*, to be rendered as: “Fights (*vigraha*) among kings/warriors (*pāṛthiva*) (were now only going on) among terracotta-objects/terracotta-makers (*pustakarman*).” King Harṣa, having conquered almost the whole of Northern India during the last decades, did, according to Bāṇa’s enthusiastic and almost endless eulogy, no longer fight himself or allow minor kings, barons or earls to quarrel with each other. Bāṇa describes the subjugated aristocrats sitting on the floor of the palace hall, awaiting an audience, *darśana*, of their lord, *parameśvara*, showing signs of respect and

5 See SYED 1994 and 1995.

6 While PARAB gives no information concerning the date of the commentator Śaṅkara, KANE in his edition of the “Life of Harṣa” says: “The only commentary available is the Śaṅketa written by Śaṅkara. [...] As to the age of the commentator, we can give only an approximate result [...] he is later than the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. but he is comparatively an early writer. He may have flourished before the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.” KANE 1965:xlix.

submission, but also of despair.<sup>7</sup> So the only quarrels going on were among objects made of earth or among their manufacturers, i.e. potters of art. *Pusta* is, according to BOEHLINGK/ROTH: “Modellarbeit, Bildneri”, (*pusta-maya* is “modelliert”); MACDONELL says: “wrought in clay”, MAYRHOFER<sup>8</sup> gives: “*pusta-* n. Modellarbeit, Bildneri [...] *pustamaya-* modelliert [...]”, while *pustakarman-* (*krt-*) is a “modeller in plaster.” MONIER-WILLIAMS says under *pusta*: “working in clay, modelling”, APTE translates: “plastering [...] working in clay, modelling, anything made of clay [...]”, (my emphasis, R. S.); *pustakarman* is “plastering” according to MONIER-WILLIAMS. So, *pustakarman*, literally, “earth-work” or “clay-work”, designates the act of modelling with clay, the object made of clay, and the worker with clay, the potter.<sup>9</sup>

I am thankful to Professor Siddharth Wakankar of the University of Varodara (Baroda) to give me the hint that *pārthivavigrahāḥ* itself includes a double meaning pointing to terracotta-figures: *pārthiva*, derived of *prthivī*, “earth”, is indeed the same as *pusta*, meaning “made of earth, consisting of earth, earthen”,<sup>10</sup> while *vigraha* is not only “war, fight, quarrel”, but also “form, figure, body”.<sup>11</sup> The occurrence of the word *vigraha* clearly indicates that Bāṇa had little figurines of warriors, elephants, horses and chariots in mind rather than non-figurative or abstract pieces.<sup>12</sup>

- 7 Bāṇa informs us that the humiliated kings, deprived of autonomy and territory were scratching the earth with their fingernails, clearly a sign of distress and discomfort, see SYED 1993.
- 8 MAYRHOFER, “*pusta*: Vielleicht zu der drav. Wortsippe von tam. *Pucu* (*puci-*) [...] to besmear, plaster, kan. [...] to smear, anoint, plaster [...]”.
- 9 *Karman* designates the doing or producing something, and equally, the object of this process. So MONIER-WILLIAMS gives under *karman* “act, action, performance [...] occupation, obligation [...] and [...] product, result, effect”. MACDONELL: “action, work, deed [...] effect, direct object of an action [...] fate (result of an act done in a former birth)”. The English “work”, or the German “Arbeit”, also mean both, the process of doing and the outcome or result.
- 10 MONIER-WILLIAMS under *pārthiva*: “earthen, earthy, earthly, being in or relating to or coming from the earth, terrestrial [...] a lord of the earth, king, prince, warrior [...] an earthen vessel.” If *pārthiva* can denote earthen vessels, then other earthen objects as well.
- 11 KANE in his commentary on the Harṣacarita already translated “earthen bodies” (p. 157), but I paid no attention. MONIER-WILLIAMS says under *vigraha*: „separation, resolution, analysis [...] discord, quarrel, contest, strife, war with [...] individual form or shape, form, figure, the body.”
- 12 We can assume that early Indian chessmen were crafted of terracotta, a cheap and replaceable material, being used in India for everyday utensils, artefacts, toys and sacred objects since centuries, if not millennia. Of course, there were terracotta objects wrought for re-

This is confirmed by the commentator Śaṅkara, who says: *pustakarman lepyam / pāṛthivavigrahāḥ mṛṇmayaśarīrāṇi, rājabhiḥ saha vairāṇi*. That is, “*pustakarman* (is) *lepya*”. *Lepya* is “plastering, moulding, modelling”, so MONIER-WILLIAMS; derived from the root *lip*, “to smear, besmear, anoint with”, while MACDONELL gives “*moulded, modelled*” (emphasis mine, R. S.). Śaṅkara takes *pustakarman* to be the act of modelling and the object made of clay only, but not the manufacturer. His next comment says: “*pāṛthiva-vigrahāḥ* (is/are) mudmade-figures”, *mṛd* being “earth, soil, clay, loam, a piece of earth, a clump of clay”, *mṛṇmaya*, “made of clay or earth, earthen”, and *śarīra* “the body, bodily frame, solid parts of the body, one’s own Person” (MONIER-WILLIAMS), indicating that the commentator thought of figurines, which were no doubt used in *his* time, some centuries later than Bāṇa. The gloss *rājabhiḥ saha vairāṇi*, “quarrels/feuds among kings”, explains the obvious meaning of *pāṛthiva-vigrahāḥ*, that is, “fights among kings”.

Bāṇa, a master of the art of ambiguity and eager to create a maximum of senses, multiple meanings and sub-texts with a minimum of apparent simple words, used equivocal words with double and triple meanings whose step-by-step decipherment granted aesthetic joy to the *sahṛdaya* (“with-heart, full of feeling, intelligent, loving”), or connoisseur, of the Sanskrit language. Bāṇa frequently employed the figure of speech, *alaṃkāra*, called “*śleṣa*”, the simultaneous expression of two or more meanings brought about by the usage of a series of sounds, which have two or more applications. In *pāṛthiva-vigrahāḥ*, plural, “warrior-fights/earthen-figures”, the poet created a multiple meaning in one expression, tickling the heart of the poetry lover, the *sahṛdaya*. Of course, only a highly learned expert in Sanskrit would be able to decode the hidden sense(s) and subtexts.

So, there are four possible translations of the expression:

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ligious purposes, being used in rituals, among other purposes to secure fertility (?), and some might have been toys for children. Anyhow, the meaning and use of the majority of the terracotta artefacts found in Northern India including pieces to be dated in the fifth and following centuries A.D. are still a question of debate among experts. I doubt the majority of the hundred thousands of terracotta objects being toys, as children did not have the attention and importance as they are having today in Western societies. And if there are playthings for kids in ancient India, than why not for adult males, playing war? So terracotta armies most probably fought battles in sand-pits *and* in sand-tables.

1. “(Only) among earthen objects (were) fights of kings.”
2. “(Only) among earthen objects (were) earthen figures.”
3. “(Only) for/among clay-workers (happened to be/were) fights of kings.”
4. “(Only) for/among clay-workers (happened to be/were) earthen figures.”

The first translation is the obvious one, running parallel with *aṣṭāpadānām caturaṅgakalpanā*. The second translation is redundant, while the third says that only workers in clay were making kings/warriors fight, and poses the question, where fights did *not* happen anymore (as it was the custom before). The answer is: among the kings and warriors themselves. The fourth translation states that only clay-workers possessed or carried earthen figures. So, who on earth, is not anymore carrying these figures of warriors, then?

My answer is: The theoreticians of war who used terracotta-figurines in teaching warfare. Estimated and honoured intellectuals in times of war, they were jobless now, because in these heavenly days of peace and love and understanding there was no need of arranging miniature armies anymore, no need to teach war and battles, not need to ponder over victorious battles, or brood over lost ones.

In these days, so the poet, not warriors, but only terracotta-figures fought. But who made them fight, if not the theoreticians of war? Obviously chess-players, who put *caturaṅgas* on *aṣṭāpadas* for play and fun.

I believe that terracotta-figurines of elephants, chariots, horses and warriors were employed in the first place by war-theoreticians to teach strategies and tactics of battle in sand-tables (as generals and strategists did all the time all over the world).<sup>13</sup> And, I am convinced that the game of chess did not come out of nothing let alone out of another game but developed out of sand-table-arrangements with miniature terracotta figurines for setting up the four members of the army and to demonstrate the elaborate battle arrays, called *vyūha*, “orderly arrangement of the parts of a whole” (MONIER-WILLIAMS). These *vyūhas*, described in detail in the Arthaśāstra, the Nītisāra, and mentioned in the Mahābhārata, the Agnipurāṇa and other texts discussing warfare, were complicated patterns, consisting of elements called wings, front, backs and centre and arranged in many complicated forms. They were called, for example, *daṇḍavyūha*, “staff-array”, *śakaṭavyūha*, “cart-array”, *varāhavyūha*, “boar-array”, *maṇḍalavyūha*, “circular array”, or *asamhatavyūha*, “loose array”. Other arrays had the form of a needle (*sūcivyūha*), a half moon (*ardhacandravyūha*), and even run zigzag, as the *gomūtrikāvyūha*. These battle arrays were applied

13 See SYED 2001.

with uttermost care, depending on diverse conditions as the composition, powers and shortcomings of the own army, the elements and strength of the hostile troops (as found out by spies); these *vyūhas* were, in addition, depending on climate or season, weather conditions, consistency of soil, vegetation, flora and fauna and so on. The best method of teaching these *vyūhas* was, of course, a three-dimensional didactic model using little (terracotta) figures as representations of the elements of army.

After having handled sand-table-battles long enough, an ingenious mind, so my conviction, put four elephants, four horses, four chariots, sixteen pawns and two kings plus their advisers on the well-known old board with 64 squares, the *aṣṭāpada*, set up rules concerning moves et cetera, and invented the game, most probably during the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. And of course he called the game by the name of its model “*caturaṅga*” that is, “army”. The *aṣṭāpada* consisting of eight rows with each eight squares and used since centuries in games, rites, divination and mathematics, and on hand everywhere (sometimes only consisting of eighteen lines scratched in the earth) proved to be the ideal basis to set up a perfect little play-army.

## 2 *Vākyavidām adhikaraṇavicārāḥ*

Bāṇa’s seventh of the seven statements concerning king Harṣa’s peaceful reign, *vākyavidām adhikaraṇavicārāḥ*, hides a third meaning behind the two obvious ones. These are, first: “Disputes (discourses) concerning *adhikaraṇa* were to be found only among experts (*vid*) of the sentences (*vākya*)”. *Adhikaraṇa* is the interesting word here, to be discussed later. The *vākyavid* were, according to the commentator Śāṅkara, the Mīmāṣakas, followers of a philosophical school occupied with the interpretation of the Veda, whose scriptures were arranged in chapters (*adhyāyana*) and smaller units called *adhikaraṇa*, “section or paragraph”. Second, *adhikaraṇa* is “magistracy, court of justice [...] a claim” and *vicāra* “[...] consideration, reflection, examination, investigation” (MONIER-WILLIAMS). Śāṅkara explains *adhikaraṇa* by *viśrāntisthāna*, that is, “place of rest”, and explains it by *rājñāṃ ca dharmanirṇayasthāna*, “a place, where kings administer justice”.

The meaning of Bāṇa’s expression is, that during Harṣa’s just reign his content subjects did not quarrel anymore so that neither courts (*adhikaraṇa*) nor lawyers had to deal with legal cases, the lawyers being authorities of the subject

matter, that is, *vākya-vid*. So, only the Mīmāsakas were left to ponder (apply *vicāra*) over the intricacies of the Vedic hymns and their interpretation fixed in *adhikaraṇas*.

But Bāṇa cleverly hid a third meaning here, because the word *adhi-karaṇa* (prefix plus noun) can be separated and understood in addition as *adhika-raṇa* (adjective plus noun), meaning “(an)other-battle(s)”; *adhika* being “additional, subsequent, later, surpassing (in number or quantity or quality), superior, more numerous, abundant, excellent, supernumerary, redundant, secondary, surplus” (MONIER-WILLIAMS), while *raṇa* is translated as “delight, gladness, pleasure, joy [...] battle (as an object of delight), war, combat, fight, conflict” (same source). MACDONELL gives under *raṇa*: “joy of battle”, BOEHTLINGK/ROTH say “Behagen, Ergötzen, Lust, Freudigkeit [...] (Kampflust), Kampf”. Ancient India by no means detested war, on the contrary, *raṇa* bears a positive connotation of lust and delight in fight and battle.

The compound itself may be separated in [*adhika-raṇa*]-*vicāra*, the adjective *adhika* qualifying the word *raṇa* only, to be translated as “discussions on further/future/superfluous battles” or split into *adhika*-[*raṇa-vicāra*], the adjective *adhika* qualifying the compound *raṇa-vicāra*, that is, “further/future/superfluous discussions on battles”. But this means splitting hairs, as both expressions hit the mark: The war theoreticians were unemployed, so no discourses on war anymore, please. Śāṅkara says, commenting on *adhikaraṇa*: *adhikabalo vā raṇaḥ saṃgrāma iti kecit*, “Alternatively, some (say) that (*adhikaraṇa*) means ‘more violence’, for *raṇa* means battle.” *Bala* is “power, strength” and “military force, troops, an army” (MONIER-WILLIAMS), while *saṃgrāma*, “battle, war, fight, combat” (same source) is a synonym for *raṇa*. The fact that Śāṅkara quotes “some” being of the opinion that Bāṇa hints at battle by hiding *adhika-raṇa* in *adhi-karaṇa*, shows that the commentator himself was not convinced of this interpretation. Anyhow, I am.

So, during Harṣa’s regnum further discussions on greater, excellent battles were superfluous, and we translate: “(Further) disputes concerning chapters on the Veda/legal cases in courts/further battles (were to be found) among the experts of sentences (only and no longer among lawyers and judges/war-theoreticians and war-enthusiasts)”.<sup>14</sup>

*Vicāra* is “mode of acting or proceeding, procedure pondering, deliberation, consideration, reflection, reflecting on, examination, investigation”

14 The first member of the compound, *adhikaraṇa*, may be translated as singular or plural, as it is the case with *pārthiva* and *caturaṅga*.



(MONIER-WILLIAMS), and the equivocal word evokes several associations concerning war, encompassing practical and theoretical warfare: reflecting on the arrangement of troops, placement and moving of the army and meditating upon strategy, tactics and manoeuvres.

A glimpse at Śaṅkara's commentary on *aṣṭāpadānām caturaṅgakalpanā* confirms our former translation, as he says: *aṣṭāpadānām caturaṅgaphalakānām*, “*aṣṭāpada* (is) the wooden board for the *caturaṅga*(-game)”, and: *catvāry aṅgāni senāyā hastyaśvarathapattayaḥ* “the four members of the army are elephants, horses, chariots and soldiers”. He adds: *teṣāṃ kalpanā racanā*, “their arrangement, (that is, their) setting up”.

All three descriptions are constructed similarly: there is a genitive plural followed by a compound of two words, while verbs are unnecessary and therefore missing. We have three words, *pustakarmanām*, *aṣṭāpadānām* and *vākyavidām*, bearing a simple and neutral sense. The first words of the three following compounds, *pārthiva*, *caturaṅga* and *adhika-raṇa* are connected with war, while the last words *vigraha*, *kalpanā* and *vicāra* bear the connotation of movement and aggression, concrete as well as intellectual and all connected to army and warfare: The first of the three statements (*pustakarmanām*) points to the “didactic model” on the sand-table, the second (*aṣṭāpadānām*) to the game of chess, while the third (*vākyavidām*) aims at theoretical discussions on battlefare, and all three inform us that not only kings and warriors were put in checkmate, but even war-lovers and sandtable-generals. Only terracotta-chessmen on the chequered board were allowed to move anymore.

Bāṇa's style and use of double meanings was not only praised, but sometimes disapproved, so says Mahāmahopadhyāya KANE, the great editor, commentator and translator of the Harṣacarita: “One of the greatest flaws of Bāṇa's writings is that they abound in puns on words and recondite allusions.” I don't think so. True is, however, that “The reader is often at a loss, amidst the array of double-meaning words, bold and fanciful allusions, to grasp the exact meaning of the author.” (p. xxxiii)

### 3 Fiction, facts and flattery

Harṣavardhana<sup>15</sup> was not at all that peaceful and content as Bāṇa's flatteries want to make us believe. On the contrary, there is not the slightest hint that king Harṣa loosened his harsh grip on the conquered areas or gave up dreams of further expansion. From modern historians we learn, that his campaigns and raids continued at least till the year 642: "Harsha's Orissa campaign, which lasted until A.D. 642, thus must have started around 637".<sup>16</sup> So when Bāṇa encountered him, the king was still a warlord, who bore, after almost three decades of strive and combat, the title *sakalottarapathanātha*, "the lord over the whole of Northern region", as the empire of Harṣa embraced almost the whole of Northern India from the river Brahmaputra in the east to Saurāṣṭra and Kathiavar in the West, stretching from the slopes of the Himālayas to the river Narmadā and the Vindhya ranges. But Harṣa's desire to acquire new territories seems to have been insatiable, and he was nevertheless eager to conquer the South.<sup>17</sup>

Bāṇa's seven statements are made in the following context. Before turning to the main subject of his biography, the emperor, Bāṇa gives some autobiographical accounts. Some day in summer all of a sudden he was summoned to the court of Harṣa, who was reported to have not a very good opinion of the famous poet, but now was willing to grant him an audience. Bāṇa immediately performed the necessary auspicious rites for the journey and the dangerous encounter, set out from his hometown Prītikūṭa ("Mountain of joy"), crossed, on the second day of his journey, the Holy Bhāgīrathī, the river Gaṅgā, spent the night in a village called Yaṣṭhigrahaka and reached the camp of Harṣa the next day.

The camp, *skandhāvāra*, was installed along the banks of the river Ajirāvati ("Running rapidly") near the town Maṇitāra in Avadha. According to the grammarian Pāṇini the Ajirāvati was the river on which the town Śrāvasti was situated (6.3.119); Śrāvasti is some hundred miles west, slightly north, of Kanauj. The *skandhāvāra* of Harṣa was therefore set up at the foot of the Himalaya, which is not surprising, as it was at the height of summer when Bāṇa came to the

15 Born on June 4<sup>th</sup> 590 A.D., Harṣa ascended, after the death of his father, the throne at the tender age of 16 and died, most probably, around 647.

16 DEVAHUTI 1970:112.

17 The king of the Deccan, Pulakeśin, guarded the passes on the river Narmadā so effectually that Harṣa was constrained to retire discomfited, and to accept that river as his southern frontier, see SMITH 1924. For details see SRIVASTAVA 1976 and DEVAHUTI 1970:113.

place, something like a hill resort for king and army. The modern name of the river, by the way, is Rapti, Avadha or “Oudh” being the heart of today’s Uttar Pradesh, the area around Lucknow, Allahabad and Varanasi, and, of course, Kanauj, which is today an unimpressive, dusty little town.

The *skandhāvāra* was a makeshift royal residence. Harṣa was in the habit of constantly travelling his dominions, inspecting administration and conditions in the conquered areas and giving orders. He was accompanied by troops, baggage trains, and surrounded by an equipage consisting of servants, soldiers and scientists, including artists, priests, cooks and astrologers, and, of course, the harem.

Bāṇa entered the *rājabhavana*, “the king’s house”, caught sight of king Harṣa sitting in state, flocks of subdued kings humbly crouching at his feet, waiting foreign ambassadors at hand, and just before the poet stepped close to greet the king, proudly displaying his *upavīta*, the sacred thread and sign of his brahmanical descent (while the king was, after all, “only” a *kṣatriya* or descendant of the warrior caste), he imagined the above mentioned statements, not uttering a word (the text says: *samacintayat*). Bāṇa simply addressed king Harṣa with the greeting, *svasti*, “Hail!” or, “Well being for thee!”

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