

Chess piece found in Jordan may be world's oldest

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Credit: John Peter Oleson, used with permission

John Oleson with the University of Victoria has reported that a small object found in Jordan made of sandstone might be the oldest chess piece ever found. In his presentation at the American Schools of Oriental Research this past week, he spoke about the object and what it might represent.

Historians believe the game of [chess](#) originated in India approximately

1,500 years ago, though it is also believed that its name, rules and piece names have changed over time. Since its invention, the game has spread around the world. In his abstract for the conference, Oleson notes that references to chess playing in the Islamic world go as far back as the seventh century AD, and it was apparently a very popular pastime.

In his presentation, Oleson described the two-pronged object carved from sandstone that has been dated (using context) to approximately 1,300 years ago. The object, found in 1991, is otherwise rectangular in shape. Oleson claims it looks very much like other early Islamic chess pieces—specifically, a rook (castle). He points out that other objects identified as rooks in Jordan and the Near East, whether wood, stone or ivory, are nearly identical to the sandstone object. In modern chess games, the piece resembles a medieval tower—it moves horizontally or vertically through any number of unoccupied squares. In earlier times, the rook was fashioned to look like a dual-horse chariot, which may account for the two-pronged look of early Islamic figures.

The [sandstone](#) rook was found at a site called Humayma, which Oleson notes was along the busy Via Nova Traiana—a trade route between Asia and the Near and Middle East. It appears likely that the game of chess made its way to the Middle and Near East along the route. Humayma was a trading outpost run by the Abbasid family. Oleson notes that the family kept up with what was going on in Iraq and Syria. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the rook is possibly the earliest evidence of such a chess piece design, and possibly the oldest example of any type of chess piece. More work is required to verify that the stone object is, indeed, a chess piece before it can be designated as such.

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