

## The History and Characteristics of Traditional Sports in Central Asia: Tajikistan

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### Abstract

Tajik people have a rich and old traditions of sports. The traditional sports and games of Tajik people, which from ancient times survived till our modern times, are: archery, jogging, jumping, wrestling, horse race, *chavgon* (equestrian polo), *buzkashi*, chess, *nard* (backgammon), etc. The article begins with an introduction observing the Tajik people, their history, origin and hardships to keep their culture, due to several foreign invasions. The article consists of sections Running, Jumping, Lance Throwing, Archery, Wrestling, Buzkashi, Chavgon, Chess, Nard (Backgammon) and Conclusion. In each section, the author tries to analyze the origin, history and characteristics of each game referring to ancient and old Persian literature.

Traditional sports of Tajik people contribute as the symbol and identity of Persian culture at one hand, and at another, as the combination and synthesis of the Persian and Central Asian cultures. Central Asia has a rich history of the traditional sports and games, and significantly contributed to the sports world as the birthplace of many modern sports and games, such as polo, wrestling, chess etc. Unfortunately, this theme has not been yet studied academically and internationally in modern times. Few sources and materials are available in Russian, English and Central Asian languages, including Tajiki. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the history and feature of the traditional sports and games in Tajikistan as the legacy of the ancient Sogdian, Bactrian and Persian cultures from the Tajikistan point of view. The paper tries to fill the gaps within the body of existing literature and understanding concerning the theme. To achieve this goal the author tried to use available modern and historical materials in Tajiki, Persian, English and Russian languages. According to findings, there are several works in the old and classical Persian literature, which have stories on the ancient traditional sports, games and mastery. Although they are valuable historical materials, but they are not a specific literature focusing only on sport and games. Therefore, a separate research is necessary on the traditional sport, games and mastery of the Tajik (Persian) people in each of those historical materials.

**Key words:** Central Asia, Persia, Tajikistan, Tajik people, traditional sports and games.

### Introduction

Tajiks are the only national group of Persian (Iranian) and Aryan descendants in a predominantly Turko-Mongol environment in Central Asia. Tajiks are characterized by different scholars and sources as following: 'Tajiks, an Aryan people were the first to settle in Central Asia'<sup>13)</sup>(p.395), 'the earliest known inhabitants of Central Asia'<sup>31)</sup>(p.57), 'the oldest settled population of Central Asia'<sup>49)</sup>(p.15), 'the oldest inhabitants of this region'<sup>2)</sup>(p.1), 'indigenous inhabitants'<sup>26)</sup>(p.44) and the 'original Iranian population of Central Asia'<sup>13)</sup>(p.404) 'sedentary Persian-speakers of the Iranian plateau and Transoxania'<sup>19)</sup>(p.710) etc. The word 'Tajik' means 'Royal', 'Persian/Iranian' and 'non-Turk'. Tajiks of

Tajikistan and Central Asia share a common language, culture and traditions with Tajiks of Afghanistan and Persian-speaking people of Iran. The ancestors of modern Tajiks are Bactrians and Sogdians, who were known historically by their high mastery, skills and patriotism during the invasion of Alexander the Great. Central Asia throughout the history was attacked and invaded by many powerful foreigners, such as Greeks (Alexander the Great), Arabs, Mongols and Russians. Despite the heroic struggle against those invaders, Central Asia was invaded several times by the above-mentioned invaders. Many Tajiks had to leave their homeland and move to other places and regions. But, everywhere they went, they kept own culture and traditions, especially the traditional

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sports. Tajik wrestlers, archers, fencers, chess players, swimmers, horse riders and representatives of other sports didn't lose their high mastery during those movements and migration. They developed and kept the Tajik traditional sports and games till our time. Ancient Tajiks paid a special attention to teach courage, bravery and mastery to their children. Education and training of the youth were implemented under the fresh air. The youth learned wrestling, horsemanship, shooting, archery, lance throwing, jumping, hunting, equestrian polo, etc. They were supposed and must get used to heat and cold and also less eating. Modern Tajiks didn't forget all these ancient and traditional sports.

There are many works in the classical Persian literature, which have stories on the ancient traditional sports, games and mastery of the Tajik (Persian) people, including the world-famous *Shahnama* (The Book of Kings) of Abulqasim Firdawsi, *Hamzanama* (The Book of Hamza), *Abumuslimnama* (The Book of Abumuslim), *Qabusnama* of Unsurul-ma'ali Kaikavus, *Samak-e ayyar*, *Siyasatnama* (The Book on Politics) of Nizamulmulk, *Garshaspnama* (The Book of Garshasp), *Darabnama* (The Book of Darab), *Char darvesh*, *Hatam-e tay*, etc from the era of Kayanian (Kayanids), Achaemenid Empire, Sasanian (The Sasanid Empire) and Samanian (The Samanid Empire)<sup>52</sup>(p.35). Among these works *Qabusnama* (Mirror for Princes) of Unsurul-ma'ali Kaikavus (11<sup>th</sup> century) and *Siyasatnama* of Nizamulmulk (11<sup>th</sup> century) are peculiar sources of study and teaching of the Tajik (Persian) national games<sup>52</sup>(p.43). Both are valuable historical materials, but they are not a specific literature focusing only on sport and games. However, in both of them there are recommendations and advices on effective ways for education, training and mastery. A separate research is necessary on the traditional sport, games and mastery of the Tajik (Persian) people in each of these valuable historical works. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the history and feature of the traditional sports and games in Tajikistan as the legacy of the ancient Sogdian, Bactrian and Persian cultures from the Tajikistan point of view.

### Some kinds of the traditional sports and games of the Tajik people

#### Running

Running is *dauidan* in Tajiki (Persian) language. Preparing talented and skillfull runners and fast walkers had an educational and practical importance in Persia and

Central Asia. Runners and fast walkers had groups and a leader. They played a very important role to bring the news from the long distance in a very short time. A great Persian scholar and politician of 11<sup>th</sup> century Nizamulmulk in his book *Siyasatnama* (The Book on Politics) has viewed about the importance of fast walkers and runners<sup>59</sup>(p.5). An eminent Persian poet and scholar of the 16<sup>th</sup> century from Central Asia Zaynaddin Mahmud Wasifi was famous for his mastery in arm wrestling, swimming and walking<sup>59</sup>(p.6). Marco Polo, a world-known European traveler, whose travel record book introduced Central Asia and China to the West, has mentioned about the runners and fast walkers of the Orient. According to him, professional runners were placed at the distance of approximately 5km. In this way they took a letter from one place to another<sup>59</sup>(p.5-6). Tajikistan's mountainous location always required people to walk fast, run and jump.

#### Jumping

The Tajiki (Persian) words for jumping are *jahidan*, *jahish*, *paridan*, etc. The geographical location of their lands required Tajiks and other Central Asian people to learn not only fast walking and running, but also jumping over obstacles, ditches, rivulets, rocks, ravines and etc. For this purpose, people from childhood practice different types of jumps, such as jump from the roof on the hillock, on the snow, jumping with crutch to the length, jumping with both feet to the front, etc.

#### Lance Throwing

Lance throwing is an ancient sport of Tajik people and people practiced it for physical and military training. The word for lance in Tajiki (Persian) language is *naiza* and word for lance throwing is *naizaandozi*. The great and highly revered Persian historian and poet of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Abulqasim Firdawsi in his world-known epic *Shahnama* (The Book of Kings) has mentioned about lance and lance throwing. Firdawsi uses a term *zhupin/zhubin* for lance<sup>59</sup>(p.8-9).

Lance itself is one of the ancient tools used for hunting and fighting. The length of the lance was about 1-2 meters and made from the tree's branch. Both infantry and horseman used the lance. The most significant indication of the lancer's talent was to bring down an animal or enemy with one strike. Some talented lancers threw it to the target successfully from about 60 meters. The ancient Tajik lancers always had two lances. From

the era of Ardasher – the first king of Sasanian Empire (A.D. 226–637) of Persia, a lance, sword and dagger were the main weapons of a horseman<sup>59)</sup>(p.9). A lance was used to fight from a long distance. But, they fought with the sword and dagger from the near distance. Let me bring one example of the Tajiks' ancient game with a lance. A horseman rode his horse fast and pierced his lance into the egg on the ground and lifted up.

### Archery

Archery is also one of the ancient sports of Tajik nation. The word for archery in Tajiki (Persian) language is *kamonvari*, *kamongari*, *kamonkashi*, *tirandozi*, etc. And the word for bow is *kamon* and for arrow is *tir* and *paikon*. Bow and arrow are considered as the sacred weapon in the Persian culture. The great and highly revered Persian historian and poet of 10<sup>th</sup> century Abulqasim Firdawsi in his world-known epic *Shahname* (The Book of Kings) has described the mastery of Bahram and others in archery<sup>59)</sup>(p.13).

Tajiks used archery for two purposes, hunting and military training. Talented and skillful archers were especially respected and popular among people. Archery and shooting skills were very necessary for hunters. Because, the youth learned archery as their ancestors profession. Now, in modern Tajikistan there are streets and communities, which have a name “*kamongaron*” (archmakers) or “*kamonkashon*” (archers). Shooting an arrow to the target was a popular sport and was called “*Zarbuzi*”<sup>51,59)</sup>(p.11) in some areas. It has different names in other areas. *Zarbuzi* was performed with a black bow. Usually, the *Zarbuzi* event and competition was organized on the occasion of the birth of a new baby. About 40 or 60 people attended it. The players were called “*kamonvar*” “*kamonkash*” or “*kamonaki*”. *Zarbuzi* competition was organized outside the village in a safe place. The place of *Zarbuzi* was called “*shinakjoy*”. Shooters competed with each other to shoot the arrows at the target from the distance of 150–300 meters. Shooters or archers of one village competed with shooters or archers of another village. *Zarbuzi* competition was opened and started by the best archers. Gifts like cow, sheep, goat, carpet, etc. were given to the winners. For example, the shooters or archers in order show their skill, they tie up the seed of apricot in a thread, hanged it on a tree branch and shot an arrow at it. The person, who shoots the seed of apricot with one try, would be considered as the best archer. During a special

competition the archers shot about 10–12 arrows and tried to reach the target. Some skillful archers shot from the distance of 200 steps to the target, which is equal to cow's eye. And the popular archers from the distance of 70 steps shot a walnut and divided it into two parts. Horse riding and archery were of the main educational and training in ancient Persia. Tajik people practiced two types of archery: archery on foot and horsemen archery. Those, who practiced an archery on foot, they used a bigger and heavier bow. During shooting they leaned their knee against the ground and shot an arrow to the target. Their arrow was longer. The horsemen's bow was smaller and lighter. They had a special bow and arrow case. The horsemen archery has been described in the world-known work “*Masnavi*” of the great Tajik (Persian) scholar, thinker, spiritual master and poet of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Mavlana Jalaluddin Balkhi (Rumi)<sup>59)</sup>(p.14). The horsemen archery competition was organized and held in this way: In the area of 40–50 meters edge and 80–100 meters length they pierced a pillar of 5–6 meters and put a target on the top of that pillar. According to arbitrators assignment one of the archers rode his horse from the specified start point and shot to the target. All players – horsemen compete similarly.

Shooting an arrow at horse run called *Saraspa*<sup>59)</sup>(p.18) was a favorite game of Tajiks. Tajik people played it at weddings, new year and other festivals and ceremonies. It was organized in a large field. A target was put with a distance of 500–600 meters<sup>59)</sup>(p.18). A moving target such as a goat or chicken was also used. The best archers and horsemen participated in *Saraspa*.

Archery was much developed in Tajikistan during the Soviet period. Tajikistan was famous with its great archers in the Soviet Union and the world. For example, a Tajik lady Zebiniso Rustamova in the World Archery Championship in 1975 in Interlaken, Switzerland became the world champion with 2465 points.<sup>44,54)</sup> She made a world record in 30, 60 and 70 meters. In the history of archery by 1975 she was the only person, who returned home with 5 gold medals and 1 bronze from the world championship. Thanks to achievements of Zebiniso Rustamova and other archers, the USSR national women archery team made a world record and got a gold medal with 7252 points. In 2010 after 35 years of becoming a world champion in Interlaken, Switzerland Ms. Zebiniso Rustamova told an interesting story in her interview for the ASIA-Plus of Tajikistan: “*When I won the world championship and even with a world record, President of*

*the International Federation Francesco Ruscone ran up to me with a map and asked to show, where is Tajikistan. I searched for a long time, but there neither Tajikistan nor Dushanbe were not indicated. Seeing the Pamir mountains, I gleefully shouted, "I am from here!" And next day all the newspapers wrote that a girl from Pamir became the world champion."* <sup>46-47)</sup>

In 1976 Zebiniso Rustamova participated in the 21<sup>st</sup> Olympics in Montreal and got a bronze medal. <sup>22,54)</sup> During her career, she was a champion of the USSR for 15 times during 1975~1987 and three times world champion <sup>52)</sup> (p.127). Ms. Zebiniso Rustamova's other achievements:

1. Silver medal (USSR Ladies Team), World Championship 1977, Canberra, Australia. <sup>43)</sup>
2. World champion (USSR Ladies Team), World Championship 1985, Seoul, South Korea. <sup>42)</sup>
3. World champion (USSR Ladies Team), World Championship 1987, Adelaide, Australia. <sup>41)</sup>
4. Gold Medal (USSR Ladies Team) in European Archery Championships in 1976, 1984 and 1986.
5. Gold Medal (Indoor) three times in a row – 1983, 1985, 1987 and many others.

Ms. Zebiniso Rustamova was the Deputy Chairman of the Sports Committee of Tajikistan during 1986–1992 and Chairman of this committee during 1992–1995 and also Vice-Chairman of the NOC Tajikistan during 1992–2000. Thanks to the above mentioned high achievements of Zebiniso Rustamova many women in Tajikistan became interested in archery. Only within 10 years from 1971 till 1981 more than 75 archers of Tajikistan got the title of the USSR Master of Sports. Apart from Zebiniso Rustamova other great and top archers and archery coaches of the former Soviet Union from Tajikistan are Alexander Kirillov, Lola Valikhojaeva (world champion), Gavhar Pulatova (European champion) <sup>49)</sup>, A. Panzhin, Zubaidullo Salimov (USSR champion, USSR archery team's coach) and others.

The development of archery declined in Tajikistan after the collapse of USSR and obtaining an independence. Tajikistan was the only country in Central Asia, which faced a bloody and long civil war soon after independence during 1992–1997. Due to civil war, instability and hard transition period, many great and talented sportsmen and coaches left Tajikistan and now they live and work abroad. Alexander Kirillov - the highly respected coach of the USSR National Archery Team was a citizen of Tajikistan. Kirillov has started

practicing archery in Dushanbe, the capital city of Tajikistan, when he was 14 years old. From 1992 till now he lives in the USA and trains the top archers, including the Olympians. Alexander Kirillov so far three times became the USA Archery Coach of the Year <sup>27)</sup>. Kirillov also has coached the Korean National Archery Team, Venezuela Archery Team and USA Olympic Archery Team. Another Tajikistan's best archer and coach of the Soviet era is Zubaidullo Salimov. Now Zubaidullo Salimov lives and works in Iran and is a coach of Iran national archery team <sup>56)</sup>. Other top Tajikistani archers of the Soviet era also left Tajikistan and work abroad. Lola Valikhojaeva and Gavhar Pulatova live and work in Russia as a coach and Marhabo Sharifova lives and works in Austria.

## Wrestling

Wrestling is one of the most ancient sports in the history of humanity. Wrestlers competed in the ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Persia and other ancient civilizations. Wrestling is one of the oldest and the most popular sport of the Tajik people. The terms for wrestling in Tajiki (Persian) language are *kushti*, *kushtigiri*, *gushti*, *gushtigiri*, *gushtin*, *gushtingiri*, etc. <sup>51,59)</sup> (pp.18–23). <sup>52)</sup> (pp.163–182)

In the epic *Shahnama* (The Book of Kings) written by a great Persian historian and poet Abulqasim Firdawsi of the 10<sup>th</sup> century there are many places, where the author mentions about the wrestling <sup>17)</sup> (p.72) and describes the mastery of heroes Rustam, Suhrab, Barzu, Siyavush, Eraj, Isfandiyar and others <sup>52)</sup> (pp.170–174). <sup>59)</sup> (p.18). Another great and world-known Persian scientist, doctor and poet of 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries – a Tajik from Bukhara city Abu Ali Ibn Sina (famous and known in the West as Avicenna) has written a book *Al-Qanun* (The Canon of Medicine). Abu Ali Ibn Sina's *The Canon of Medicine* was a standard medical textbook in many medieval universities. In this book the author while mentioning about the benefit of traditional martial arts, he describes two types of local wrestling <sup>59)</sup> (p.18):

1. Two men grab each other's belt and pulled another. And each man tries to free himself from the opponent's grab.
2. Two men shake hands with two hands with each other, pass through the right hand under the opponent's left hand and pull to oneself and try to turn down an opponent.

The eleventh-century epic *Garshaspnama* of Asadi



Tusi, the thirteenth-century war treatise *Adab al-Harb va al-Shoja* of Fakhre Modabbar, the thirteenth-century *Gulistan* (The Garden of Flowers) of Sa'di Sherazi and many other Persian historical sources mention about the importance of wrestling. The *Masnavi Gol-e Koshti* of Mir Nejat from the Safavid era mentions and describes 109 wrestling techniques<sup>17</sup>(pp.72–75).

Another great Persian scholar and poet Sa'di Sherazi in his book *Gulistan* (The Garden of Flowers) has a story, where he has mentioned about 360 techniques of wrestling<sup>17</sup>(p.74).<sup>58</sup>(p.18). The archaeologists have proven that wrestling was very popular among the Sogdians and Bactrians - ancestors of Tajiks. Today in the modern period, Tajik people still cherish and love wrestling. Sport is one of the main pillars of the Tajik (Persian) New Year Navruz. In Tajikistan, during the national New Year Navruz, every village, community, town and city organize a new year open wrestling competition. Men of any profession (not only wrestlers) try and join the competition. According to traditions, children begin the competition, then youngsters continue and after them, the notable wrestlers compete with each other. If somebody is defeated in a village Navruzi wrestling competition, his brother competes with the same opponent to save the family's pride. Wrestling is an important part of the culture of Tajik people. For example, when a family visit their relative's or friend's house and if there is a boy in the host family, who is almost the same age with their son, they ask their son "Please wrestle with their son. Let's check, who is stronger". If you paid attention, father doesn't say 'fight with their son', he says 'wrestle with him'.

Tajiki national wrestling is very similar to free style wrestling, belt wrestling, Iranian wrestling, Afghan wrestling, other Central Asian wrestlings and Japanese Judo. In Tajiki wrestling, the *pahlavons*<sup>52</sup>(p.93) (wrestlers) should wear the national coat and short pants and fasten a light belt around their waists<sup>2</sup>(p.154). A *pahlavon* (wrestler) may grab and hold his opponent's belt, sleeve or collar of jacket or coat. Clench below the waist is not allowed. However, the sprints through legs are allowed. The winner is the one, who throws an opponent back down first<sup>52</sup>(p.163). Tajik and Iranian people throughout the history had many eminent and famous heroes and wrestlers, such as Faridun, Eraj, Manuchehr, Sam-e Nariman, Zal-e Zar, Rustam (Rustam-e dastan), Suhrab, Siyavush, Isfandiyar Ruintan and many others.

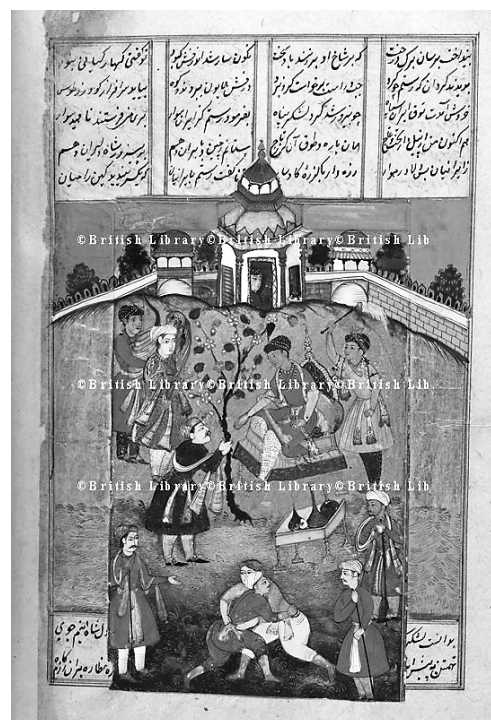


Figure 1: A miniature from Shahnama of Firdawsi dated 1590-1600: A wrestling match before prince.  
Source: British Library: Images Online, I.O. ISLAMIC 3254, f.138v, <http://imagesonline.bl.uk>  
©The British Library Board



Figure 2: A miniature from Shahnama of Firdawsi dated 1590-1600: Rustam wrestling with Puladwand.  
Source: British Library: Images Online, I.O. ISLAMIC 3254, f.145v, <http://imagesonline.bl.uk>  
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Figure 3: A miniature from the manuscript copied 1565: A boy and girl wrestling in an outdoor setting.  
Source: University of Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Exhibitions Online, Persian poetry, <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/whats-on/online/love-and-devotion/setting-the-scene>  
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Figure 4: Open Navruzi wrestling in Tajikistan  
Source: Bethom D (2012): Wrestling and Buzkashi during Navruz in Dushanbe. <https://derekbethom.wordpress.com/2012/03/29/wrestling-and-buzkashi-during-navruz-in-dushanbe-2/>  
©Bethom D



Figure 5: Open Navruzi wrestling in Tajikistan  
Source: <https://derekbethom.wordpress.com/photos/>  
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Wrestling in the Persian manuscripts:

### Buzkashi (Goat dragging)

*Buzkashi*<sup>10,52)</sup>(pp.219–224).<sup>59)</sup>(pp.24–25) is the Central Asian sport played among Afghans, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmens, Uighurs and Uzbeks. It is considered as a national game for all of these nations.<sup>51)</sup> *Buzkashi* is the national sport of *Afghanistan*.<sup>5,23)</sup> The name of this sport is *Buzkashi* in Persian-speaking countries Afghanistan and Tajikistan, where *buz* is goat and *kashi* derived from the verb *kashidan* is dragging. But, among the Turco-Mongol nations of Central Asia - Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs, Turkmens, Uyghurs and Uzbeks this game known as *Kokbura*, *Kokpar*, *Kokboru*, *Kukpari*, *Kukbure*, *Ulak Tartish*, *Oghlak Tartish* etc.<sup>48)</sup> This game is also played among many Turco-Mongol and other Asian people in Ural, Siberia and other regions of the Russian Federation, especially among Altai, Tatar, Bashkir, Buryat, Khakas, Tuva and others. For example, this game was revived in Altai Republic of Russia since collapse of the Soviet Union, as a socio-cultural symbol of self-identification of the Altai people.<sup>55)</sup>

*Buzkashi*, a “game for real men”<sup>47)</sup> is a sport in which teams or individuals on horseback compete to gain possession of a headless goat carcass and bring it to a scoring area. *Buzkashi* is generally compared to polo. Because, polo and *buzkashi* both are played between men on horseback and both games require and involve moving an object toward a goal and both games are particularly rough. There is a significant difference between them, that polo is played with a ball, but *buzkashi* is played with a headless goat carcass. However, horse is not the only animal used for *buzkashi*. For



example, the Tajiks of Xinjiang-Uyghur Province of China use yak for *buzkashi* game. In Tajikistan, the game is specially popular in the spring season during Navruz – a Persian New Year.<sup>45,54)</sup> A *buzkashi* player is called *Chapandaz/Chapandoz/Chovandoz*<sup>52)</sup>(p.220)<sup>59)</sup>(p.24) in Tajikistan and Afghanistan and called *Shabandoz* in Kazakhstan.

In classical *buzkashi* there are no teams. Each player plays for himself. The goal of each rider - to grab the goat carcass and keep it as long as possible to win the sympathy of the audience and take it to the goal. This classical *buzkashi* is popular and played in Tajikistan. *Buzkashi* horses are specially trained. They must be prepared for games not less than five years. Sometimes this fierce game can last for several days. According to tradition, the game must begin with the oath of participants to play fair. Anyone who has not taken such

oath is not allowed to play.

Authors are in different opinion about the origins of *Buzkashi*. Many historians and scholars believe that this game began with the nomad Turko-Mongol people since Chengiz-Khan times<sup>52)</sup>(pp.220, 222). Some even believe that the Mongol emperor Chengiz-Khan is the author of this game. Russian scholars consider it as a horse entertainment of the descendants of Chengiz-Khan. And, there are scholars, who believe that the origin of this game dates back to the times of Alexander the Great.<sup>16)</sup> Tajiks are the only people in Central Asia, who are not of Turko-Mongol origin. The ancestors of Tajiks are Sogdians, Bactrians and Persians. But, Tajiks have lived in the same region with the nomad Turko-Mongol nations for centuries. Therefore, the game *buzkashi* became popular among Tajiks too. There is a Federation of Buzkashi and Horse Race in Tajikistan.

## ブズカシ

アフガニスタンの国技はブズカシだ。ブズカシの試合は時間がかかり、雑然としている。ブズカシとは「ヤギをつかむ」という意味である。馬にのった選手がチーム対抗または1対1で、頭を切りおとしたヤギか子牛をつかみとるのを競う。うまくヤギをつかんだら、競技場の端にあるチョークで書いた輪のなかへ落とすのだ。輪へと突進する選手（すべて男性）からヤギをうばおうと、敵がいども。戦いたいへん荒々しいものになることもある。敵をおいはうためにむちをつかうことが許されている。馬も敏捷で足が速いだけでなく、タフでなければならない。ブズカシに適したよい馬は、数千ドルの値段がつく。この競技は、馬がはじめて飼いなされた場所、北方のステップとよばれる草原地帯で生まれたものだ。おそらく馬のつておこなう球技、ポロの原型と考えられる。

▼カーブル州対パルワン州のブズカシの試合で、ヤギをはげしくうばいあう選手。



Figure 6: Buzkashi in Afghanistan

Source: National Geographic Society. Countries of the world: Afghanistan. Japanese language edition. Tokyo: HOLP SHUPPAN Publishers, 2009.

## Chavgon (Horse Polo)

*Chavgon*<sup>Note1)</sup>/*Chavgonbozi*<sup>52)</sup>(pp.226–231)<sup>59)</sup>(pp.25–33) is another ancient sport of the Tajik (Persian) people. Polo is the world's oldest team sport<sup>52)</sup>(p.229) and its origin is Central Asia<sup>31)</sup>(p.215), a region known with its excellent horses in the world. According to Britannica, polo is a game of Central Asian origin, which was first played in Persia (Iran) at dates given from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.<sup>12)</sup> Polo – the national game of Central Asians and Persians was borrowed by many other countries<sup>53)</sup> and starting from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC it was spread from Persia to Arabia, Tibet, China and Japan<sup>33)</sup>(p.215)<sup>59)</sup>(p.27). The first recorded match of polo game happened in about 600 BC between Turkomans and Persians, where Turkomans won the game<sup>52)</sup>(pp.227, 229). Polo was a favorite game of royalty and noblemen in Persia. It enjoyed a royal patronage. Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan region of Iran is in fact a polo field built by shah (king) Abbas I in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which has the oldest existing goal posts<sup>18)</sup>(p.7). There are opinions that polo was brought from Central Asia to Greece in 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BC. Alexander the Great became familiar with polo in Central Asia during his invasions. Starting from that period, polo was introduced and spread to Greece<sup>59)</sup>(p.26). Laffaye is of opinion that polo “began as a simple folk game played by the nomadic tribes in Central Asia”<sup>18)</sup>(p.5). As per the same author, polo from Central Asia initially spread westward to Byzantium and Constantinople, where the game was played in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and eastward to China through the famous Silk

Road<sup>18)</sup>(p.5-6). Moreover, many historians and scholars have analyzed and viewed that polo developed or derived from equestrian games and sports played by the mounted nomadic Iranian and Turkic peoples of Central Asia<sup>9)</sup>(p.309)<sup>24)</sup>(p.62). Brownell opines that China borrowed a game of polo 'from the equestrian nomads of northwest and central Asia' and it was a popular game at court and reached its zenith during the Tang dynasty (618-906 A.D.)<sup>7)</sup>(p.35). Andrea and Overfield have stated that polo game came into China from Central Asia during the Tang era. According to these authors, the Tang China had an 'absolute love' with the superior horses of the Farghana valley of Central Asia and Chinese called them 'heavenly horses'<sup>3)</sup>(p.265). Crowther claims that a version of polo called *jiju* came to China along the Silk Road from Persia<sup>10)</sup>(p.5).

There is a huge influence of Central Asian languages, cultures, traditions, art, music, dance, sport, food, dress, religion, etc to the Indian Subcontinent. Polo was introduced to the Indian Subcontinent by the Central Asian Muslim conquerors, who ruled India for almost ten centuries (11<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup>). Qutbuddin (Qutb-al-din) Aybak, a Turkic slave from Central Asia, who became the first Sultan of the Delhi Sultanate in India, died accidentally in 1210 playing *chavgon* (horse polo)<sup>28)</sup>(p.149). During the British colonization of India, *chavgon* (horse polo) was introduced from India to Britain, then to Canada, USA, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Egypt and other countries.<sup>52)</sup>(pp.227,230)<sup>59)</sup>(p.27)

Persian ancient and classical literature and art provide us with richest materials and accounts on polo during ancient times. First of all, the word and game of *Chavgon* is used in the works of the great son of Tajik nation and humanity Abu Abdullah Rudaki Samarqandi of 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>53)</sup>, who is recognized in the world as the father of Persian classical literature. Moreover, Abulqasim Firdawsi the world-famous Persian poet and historian of the 10<sup>th</sup> century in his epic *Shahnama* (The Book of Kings) in several places mentions about *chavgon*<sup>52)</sup>(p.228)<sup>56)</sup> and describes the polo tournaments between the royalties of different periods. For instance, he describes that in the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Persia's emperor Shapur II the Great, who was the longest reigning monarch of the Sasanian Empire, learned to play polo when he was only seven years old. Also, Firdawsi in his epic tells us, how the Iranian (Persian) and Turanian (Central Asian) kings and royalties, like Siyavush, Afrasiyab, Gushtasp and others played *chavgon*.<sup>57,59)</sup>

(p.25)

The great Tajik (Persian) scientist, doctor and poet of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Abu Ali Ibn Sina (known as Avicenna in the West) recommended *chavgon* as a medical treatment for some diseases. An eminent Persian ruler and author of 11<sup>th</sup> century Kaikavus dedicated one chapter of his book *Qabusnama* for *chavgon*.<sup>59)</sup>(p.27)

*Chovgan/Chovqan* is considered as the national sport in Azerbaijan as well.<sup>52)</sup>(p.229) Since independence of Azerbaijan from the former Soviet Union, several national games of the President Cup were conducted by now.<sup>14,52)</sup>(p.231) In December 2013 at the eighth session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee, which was held in Baku, capital city of Azerbaijan, a version of this ancient game with the name *Chovqan* was inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, as a traditional Karabakh horse-riding game in the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>4,36,57)</sup> This decision of UNESCO faced a huge opposition and criticism from the government, people, including historians and other intellectuals of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>15,57)</sup> Iran announced a campaign against including the game *chovgan* in the UNESCO list as an "Azerbaijani game".<sup>1,57)</sup> Later, Tajikistan, the only Persian-speaking nation in Central Asia, which shares a common Persian language and culture with Iran and Afghanistan, also joined Iran in the objections. Historians and other intellectuals of Tajikistan strongly opposed and criticized this decision by UNESCO and sent an objection letter to the headquarters of UNESCO and proposed that this ancient game *chavgon* must be registered and recognized as the joint heritage of the people of Iran, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan.<sup>57,58,60)</sup> In that letter they explained the origin and history of *chavgon* game, brought historical facts from the ancient Persian sources and also explained the origin and meaning of the Persian word '*chavgon*'. With scientific and historical evidences the Tajik intellectuals mentioned that "Chavgon game was widely developed in II-III centuries BC among the Indo-Aryan nations, including Tajiks and Iranians, and the word "chavgon" is Persian and doesn't have any relation with Turkish and Azeri Turkish language".<sup>58,60)</sup> The official newspaper of the Government of Tajikistan 'Jumhuriyat' published an article criticizing the decision of UNESCO on this game.<sup>57)</sup>

I think, this good policy of UNESCO for safeguarding and preserving the cultural heritage of the world, also



brings serious negative results. People and nations of Eurasia throughout the history have lived together in bigger states, kingdoms or countries, than now. Many nations in Eurasia share a common history, language and culture. Persian language, culture and traditions were dominant and influential in Iran, Central Asia, Caucasus, Indian Subcontinent and other regions. This policy of

UNESCO by recognizing and registering such ancient cultural heritage as a heritage of only one ethnicity or nation is wrong and it brings disunity and serious conflict between different nations. Sport and culture must be a messenger of peace, unity and international cooperation. Sport and culture should not become a tool for conflicts between people of the world, especially between people



Figure 7: Source: National Geographic Society. Countries of the world: Iran. Japanese language edition. Tokyo: HOLP SHUPPAN Publishers, 2009.

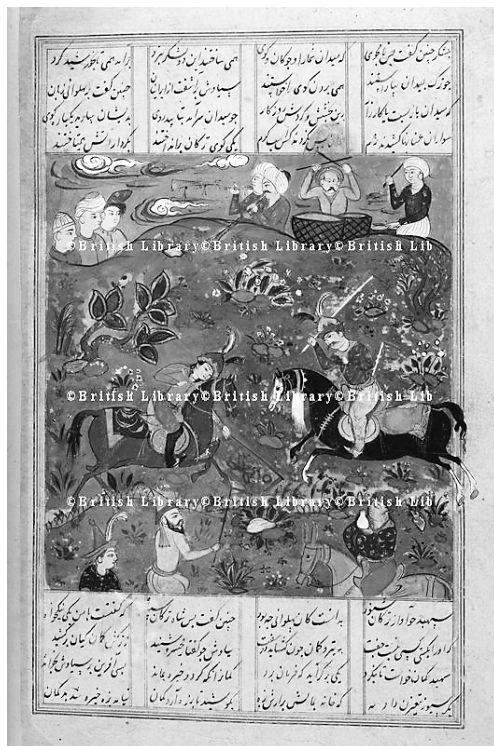


Figure 8: A miniature from Shahnama of Firdawsi dated 1590-1600:

Siyawush playing polo. Source: British Library: Images Online, I.O. ISLAMIC 3254, f.75v, <http://imagesonline.bl.uk>  
©The British Library Board

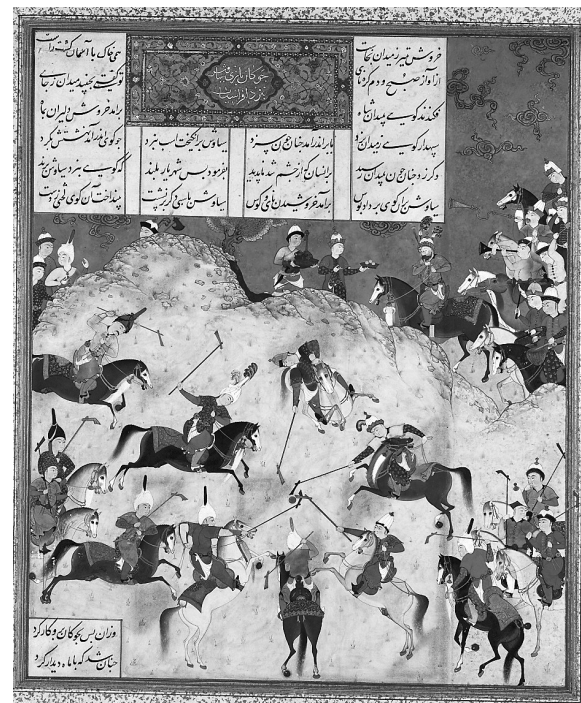


Figure 9: "Siyavush Plays Polo before Afrasiyab", Folio 180v from the Shahnama (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp. Date: ca. 1525-30.

Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Collection Online: Iran, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/452135>  
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

of the regions and lands, who share a common history and culture.

The game of *Chavgon* (horse polo) has been immortalized in various Persian miniature paintings.

### Chess

Chess is also an ancient game for Tajik people. The words for chess in Tajiki (Persian) language are *chatrang*, *shatrang*, *shatranj* and *shohmot*. The word *shohmot* is in use in modern Tajikistan for chess.<sup>59)</sup>

The history and origin of chess is not an easy matter to discuss. There are many research works, studies and different ideas on the history and origin of the chess game. It is broadly and generally viewed and proven that the chess game's origin is India, known as *Chaturanga*<sup>40)</sup>(pp.271-273)<sup>51)</sup>(p.232)<sup>54,59)</sup>. It was brought and introduced to Persia from India during the Sasanian Empire (A.D. 226-637)<sup>39)</sup>(p.x),<sup>40)</sup>(p.271). The Indian word for chess *chaturanga* became *chatrang* in Persia<sup>39)</sup>(p.x). The earliest evidence of chess is found in Sasanian Persia about 600. There are two references to chess in Persian literature of the Sasanian era.<sup>39)</sup>(p.x) The first is *Karnamak-e Ardasher-e Papakan* (Babakan), where the skills of Ardasher (A.D. 226-241) – the first king of Sasanian Empire of Persia, have been described. The second reference is *Chatrang-namak* (The Book of Chess), where the author brought a story in which the Indian raja Dewsarm or Dewarsam sends the game of

*chaturanga* (chess) together with valuables to the king Khusraw Anushervan (Nushervan) of Sasanian Persia to find out and solve the game. The condition of the Indian king was that if the Persian king Khusraw Anushervan cannot find out and solve the game, he would have to pay the tribute instead of receiving. Buzurgmehr<sup>Note2)</sup> - an eminent scholar of Persia and grand vizier of the king within a few days<sup>Note3)</sup> finds out and solves the game.<sup>39)</sup>(p.x)

On the basis of archaeological findings in Afrasiyab of Samarqand in present-day Uzbekistan, Hulbuk in present-day Tajikistan, Jungari mountain of Taldy-Qurghan in present-day Kazakhstan, Dilvarzintepa of Surkhondaryo in present-day Uzbekistan and others, there are claims, that some chess variants were originated in Mawaraunnahr (Central Asia)<sup>59)</sup>(p.41). When Tajikistan was a Soviet republic, in its northern town of Panjakent a wall painting of the 7<sup>th</sup> century was discovered, where a chessboard is shown. Since then till now this unique and ancient heritage of the Tajik people is kept in the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg city of Russia<sup>39)</sup>(p.xii). The Russians took many other precious ancient heritage of the Tajik and other Central Asian people from Central Asia to Russia before and during the Soviet rule.

Arab Muslim troops conquered Persian empire and Central Asia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In a short period of time, the Arab conquerors assimilated the culture of Persia, their enemy. Islam became the main religion in Persia and Central Asia. Persia and Central Asia were very important contributors to the bright Islamic civilization and learning. One good example of such contribution is chess. During the Arab conquest of Persia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the chess game was taken from Persia and introduced to the Arab and Islamic world, and then to Europe<sup>29)</sup>(p.19)<sup>40)</sup>(p.271). The Indo-Persian word for chess *chatrang* (derived from Indian *chaturanga*) became *shatranj* in Arabic, due to the phonetic difference of the Arabic language.

There were many best and famous chess players of their time in the Muslim world during 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Al-Adli, Abu Hafiz, Ar-Razi, As-Suli, Al-Lajlaj, Abdullah Khwarazmi, Mawardi and others. The following famous historians and intellectuals of 9<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, like Al-Ya'qubi, At-Tabari, Al-Mas'udi, Daqiqi, Abulqasim Firdawsi, Al-Beruni, Mahmud al-Amuli wrote about the chess game in their works. The following are the earliest works on chess: Al-Adli's *Kitab-ash*



Buzurgmehr demonstrating the moves of chess to the Hindu envoy in the presence of Shah Nushirvan

Figure 10: A miniature from the 14<sup>th</sup> century Persian manuscript: Buzurgmehr - grand vizier of the shah (king) Khusraw Anushervan (6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) of Sasanian Empire in Persia demonstrates that he found the way and logic of chess game sent by Indian raja. Source: Wilkinson and Dennis (1968), p.xii; Wilkinson (1943), p.272, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



*Shatranj* (The Book of Chess), Ar-Razi's *Latif fi'sh Shatranj* (Elegance in chess), As-Suli's *Kitab-ash Shatranj* (The Book of Chess), two volumes, Al-Lajlaj's *Kitab mansubat ash-shatranj* (The Book of chess positions or problems).

There were many handbooks written in Pahlavi (Middle Persian) 'dealing with institutions, court manners and ceremonies, the duties of the various social classes, the rules of battle, the arts of warfare (horsemanship and shooting), and games and entertainments (such as polo, chess and backgammon)'<sup>32)</sup>(p.82). The book of Fakhr-al in al-Razi (1148–1209) *Jami-al-ulum* (Comprehensive work on sciences) is considered and known as the first Persian encyclopedia. In the enlarged version of this book titled *Kitab-al-Sittini* (The Book of Sixty Sciences) the author Al-Razi mentioned and described the chess game<sup>38)</sup>(pp.366–367).

An important matter should be noted that after the Arabs invasion during the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries the dominant language and lingua franca of Persia and Central Asia was Arabic. Scientists, scholars and other intellectuals wrote their works mainly in Arabic. Therefore, many works on chess were written in Arabic by Persians and Central Asians. But, it doesn't mean and prove that the chess game is created by the Arabs.<sup>59)</sup>(p.47) Most of the above-mentioned authors, who wrote on chess were Persian or Central Asian.

A great Persian historian and poet Abulqasim Firdawsī of the 10<sup>th</sup> century in his world-known epic *Shahnama* (The Book of Kings) has stories about the chess.<sup>39)</sup>(pp.xi-xiii)<sup>59)</sup>(pp.41–43). In the story of "Gev and Talhand" he described how the chess game was created after the war between the armies of the Indian king Gev (or Gav) and his brother Talhand, who dies in this war. According to this story, the chess game was invented to show the king Gev's mother, who lost her other son Talhand in this war, how the tragedy happened<sup>39)</sup>(p.xi)<sup>40)</sup>(pp.271–272)<sup>59)</sup>(p.43). This type of chess game 10x10 has been described by the famous historian of 12<sup>th</sup> century Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Sulaiman ar-Rawandi in his work *Rahat-al sudur va ayat al-surur*.<sup>59)</sup>(pp.43–44).

Firdawsī in another story of his epic *Shahnama* in the story of "About sending the chess by Ray of India to Nushervan" has written that, Indian king Ray sent the chess-board and pieces to the famous king of Sasanian Persia Khusraw Anushervan (Nushervan). The Indian king in his letter asked the Persian king to find out the way and rules of playing this game. Within a week (three

days, in some sources) a great thinker and scholar Buzurgmehr, who was king Nushervan's grand vizier, found out how to play the chess game.<sup>39)</sup>(pp.xi-xii)<sup>59)</sup>(p.44). In return, Buzurgmehr created a new game *nard* (backgammon) and the Persian king Khusraw Anushervan sent this new game to the Indian king, where nobody finds it out.<sup>39)</sup>(pp.xi-xii) As already mentioned above, this story is available in the *Chatrang-namak* (The Book of Chess) of the Sasanian era of Persia (A.D. 226–637).

The famous chess player Abulfath Ahmad Sijzi of 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries also has written a book on chess known in the world as the Encyclopaedia of Chess. Abulfath's manuscript on chess was found first time in 1949 in the ancient manuscripts section of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Academy of Sciences of Uzbek SSR.<sup>59)</sup>(pp.47–48).

A new chess game "Great Chess" was developed in Central Asia during the reign of emperor Timur<sup>38)</sup>(p.xi), known in the West as Tamerlane (1336–1405). The "Great Chess" (also known as Timur's chess) is a larger version of the original Indian chess *Chaturanga*. This new game is also called as *Shatranj-e kamil* (perfect chess) and *Shatranj al-kabir* (large chess). The famous Tajik chess player of the Timur (Tamerlane) era Ali Shatranji Samarqandi wrote a book on chess<sup>59)</sup>(p.48) and made a valuable contribution to the development of the chess game. The chess game further developed in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Central Asia. Samarqand, Bukhara and Hirat were not only important centers of Islamic civilization and learning, but also were significant centers of chess.

### Nard (Backgammon)

*Nard* is another ancient traditional game of the Tajik people. *Nard* game was one of the games of the court of Sogdians' king Devashtich.<sup>59)</sup>(p.51) Historians believe that the origin of modern backgammon is the Persian ancient game *nard*. The earliest example of a board for backgammon in the world was found at the site of Shahr-e Sukhteh <sup>Note4)</sup> (The Burnt City) in Sistan region of Iran.<sup>29)</sup> According to the report by Iranian Cultural Heritage News Agency in 2004, the oldest backgammon in the world along with 60 pieces was unearthed beneath the rubbles of the legendary Shahr-e Sukhteh in Sistan-Baluchistan province, southeastern Iran. As per Iranian archaeologists, this backgammon is much older than the one already discovered in Mesopotamia.<sup>25)</sup> Archaeological excavations at Shahr-e Sukhteh in Iran





Buzurgmihir showing the Hindu rajah how to play the game of backgammon

Figure 11: A miniature from the 14<sup>th</sup> century Persian manuscript: Buzurgmihir - grand vizier of the shah (king) Khusraw Anushervan (6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) of the Sasanian Empire of Persia shows the Indian Raja how to play the game of *nard*.

Source: Wilkinson and Dennis (1968), p.xiii; Wilkinson (1943), p.273.



Figure 12: "Buzurjmihir Explains the Game of Backgammon (Nard) to the Raja of Hind", Folio from a Shahnama (Book of Kings) of Abulqasim Firdawsi. Date: ca. 1300–30.

Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Collection Online: Iran. Accession Number: 34.24.2, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/449001>

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

have proven that the backgammon game existed in Persia around 3000 BC.

The popular and exciting game of *nard* has been



Figure 13: President Putin plays *nard* game with a soldier of the 201<sup>st</sup> Russian Motor Rifle Division in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

Source: Official website of the President of Russia, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/28547>

Photo: Press-Service of the President of Russia

widely spread in Central Asia during the Sasanian Empire of Persia (A.D. 226–637).<sup>39)</sup>(p.xii). Luminaries of the Persian classical literature such as the great historian and poet Abulqasim Firdawsi, Sa'di Sherazi, Alisher Navoi and others have mentioned the game of *nard* in their works. There is a plot of game *nard* in paintings of ancient Panjakent in northern Tajikistan<sup>53)</sup> (p.216). As already mentioned above, the origin of game *nard* dates back to the era of Sasanian Empire of Persia, when Buzurgmehr, a legendary Persian scholar and grand vizier of the Sasanian king Khusraw Anushervan after solving the game of chess sent by the Indian raja, in return created the game *nard* and took it to Indian raja, where Indians failed to solve it.<sup>39)</sup>(pp.xii-xiii)<sup>59)</sup>(p.50).

Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries were occupied by the Russian Empire and Soviet Union for a long period of about 130 years. So, the game of *nard*, which is popular in Central Asia and Caucasus, was played by Russians and other former Soviet nations. This game is called *nardy* (нард) in Russian. President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin during his visit to Tajikistan on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2003 played a game of *nard* with a soldier of the 201<sup>st</sup> Russian Motor Rifle Division located in Dushanbe, the capital city of Tajikistan.<sup>50)</sup> The ancient game of *nard* is still very popular in Tajikistan.

## Conclusion

Tajiks are the only national group of Sogdian, Bactrian and Persian (Iranian) descendants in a predominantly Turko-Mongol environment in Central Asia. Persia and Central Asia are the birthplace of many modern sports and games, such as polo, wrestling, chess, backgammon,

etc. The games of *chavgon* (equestrian polo), chess and *nard* (backgammon) were favorite pastimes in the courts of Central Asian and Persian rulers.

Tajiks of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and other parts of Central Asia share a common language and culture with Iran. The ancestors of modern Tajiks are Bactrians and Sogdians, who were known historically by their high mastery, skills and patriotism during the invasion of Alexander the Great.

The traditional sports and games of Tajik people, which from ancient times survived till our modern times, are: archery, jogging, jumping, wrestling, horse race, *chavgon* (equestrian polo), field hockey, *buzkashi*, chess, *nard* (backgammon), etc. At one hand, the traditional sports of Tajik people contribute as the identity and legacy of Persian culture, and at another, as the combination and synthesis of the Persian and Central Asian cultures. Tajiks have lived in the same region Central Asia with the Turko-Mongol nations for centuries in various empires, kingdoms and states. Persian culture was a pillar of the culture of Central Asia and South Asia for centuries. Throughout the history, Persian culture had a significant impact to the cultures of the different parts of the world, such as Arab world and Middle East, Europe and of course Asia. Therefore, there is a strong and deep intercultural and international influence between the people of Central Asia, Caucasus, Persia and Eurasia as a whole. People and nations of these regions and lands enriched each other's history, culture and traditions. International cooperation and friendship through sports can bring more development and peace in the above-mentioned regions and the world.

Central Asia has a rich history of the traditional sports and games. Unfortunately, this theme has not been yet studied academically and internationally in modern times. Few sources and materials are available in Russian, English and Central Asian languages, including Tajiki. In this paper the author tried to analyze the history and features of the traditional sports and games in Tajikistan as the legacy of the ancient Sogdian, Bactrian and Persian cultures from the Tajikistan point of view. The paper tried to fill the gaps within the body of existing literature and understanding concerning the theme. To achieve this goal the author tried to use the available and accessible modern and historical materials in Tajiki, Persian, English and Russian languages.

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## NOTES

- 1) Other derivatives of this word in Roman letters are *Chawgan*, *Chaugan*, *Chovgan*, *Chogan*, *Choqan*, etc.
- 2) Other derivatives in Roman letters are *Wuzurjmihir*, *Buzurjmihir*, *Buzarjmihir*, *Buzurjmehr*, *Bozorgmehr*, etc.
- 3) Within a week or three days, according to different sources.
- 4) Also spelled *Shahr-i Sokhta* & *Shahr-i Sukhta*.