

# *Nardshir*

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*The game of fate, and predecessor to Backgammon*

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Several theories speculate on the geographical origins of Nardshir. Some believe it to be Persia, others think it India. However, the one fact that is known about Nardshir (also simply called “Nard”) is that it was especially popular throughout the Middle and Near East from the 3rd through 11th centuries.

# Nardshir

## Origin of the Game

Several theories speculate on the geographical origins of Nardshir. Some believe it to be Persia, others think it India. However, the one fact that is known about Nardshir (*also simply called "Nard"*) is that it was especially popular throughout the Middle and Near East from the 3<sup>rd</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.

References to Nardshir are found in the Babylonian Talmud which was compiled in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. Popular etymology ascribes the invention of the game to Ardeshir, the founder of the Sāssānian dynasty in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Another early reference is to be found in the Middle Persian romance of Chatrang-namak (*written between the 7th and 9th centuries*) which attributes the invention of the game to Bozorgmeh (*also refer to as Wuzurgmihir*), a 7<sup>th</sup> century Persian vizier and sage. According to the Persian texts, the Indian king sent the game of chess to the Sāssānian court to figure out the logic of the game. Bozorgmeh, as a counter-challenge designed and sent the Nardshir board and its pieces to India. The Indian sages could not find the logic of the game and as a result the Persian King of Kings, Xusrō I, asked the sage to explain the game. Borzorgmeh's answer is central to Zoroastrian beliefs. The passage clearly demonstrates the cosmological significance of the game. Borzorgmeh makes fate the primary reason for what happens to mankind, and the roll of the dice in the game performs the function of fate. The playing pieces represent humans living on earth, and their function in the universe is governed by seven planets and the twelve zodiac signs.

The game became known as "*Nardshir*" throughout the Middle East. The word "*Nard*" was a generic Persian name for wood or wooden products, while the word "*shir*" means lion. One interpretation of the suffix "*shir*" notes that the playing pieces of Nardshir were often carved in the shape of lion heads, though an alternative interpretation is that the suffix acquired common usage through the association with the name of Ardeshir.

Within twenty years, Ardeshir created a vast empire that stretched as far as the Indus, which may account for a reference by Al-Ya Qubi (*a ninth century Muslim Historian*) that professes Nardshir to be an Indian invention. Like Borzorgmeh, Al-Ya Qubi also attributes cosmological symbolism to the design of the game board:

*"The board represents a year; each side contains 12 points for the months of the year; the twenty-four points represent the hours in a day; the 30 playing pieces represent days of the month; the sum of opposing sides of the die represent the 7 days of the week; the contrasting colors of each set of playing pieces represent day and night."*

*It may also be noted at this point that, that the Islamic Calendar (or Hijri Calendar) adopted in the 4<sup>th</sup> century is a lunar calendar consisting of 12 months which begin with the sighting of crescent moons, not new moons. This may explain the appearance of crescent moons on later Nardshir game-boards.*

Ardeshir's son, Shapur I, continued the expansion of the Sassanian Empire, which led to several military campaigns against Rome in the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The contact between the two cultures may have provided an opportunity for the introduction of the rules of Nardshir into the Roman game of Alea. However, the tangled web of inter-cultural relations set in the distant past precludes an accurate assignment of credit for the original invention of Backgammon's immediate ancestor.

Even after the Sāsānian Empire, we know that during the early Islamic period, the Arabs were familiar with Nardshir. There is in fact evidence that during the time of the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia, the game of Nardshir was popular. There is a story which Tha'ālibī, a 10<sup>th</sup> century Arabian philologist, relates that when the Arab Muslims conquered the Sāsānian capital of Ctesiphon, they found a set of Nardshir pieces belonging to Xusrō II, pieces of which were made of coral and turquoise. The companions of the prophet, such as Abu Hurayra refused to meet Muslims who had played Nardshir. He is also to have said *“One who plays Nard with stakes is like one who eats pork; one who plays without stakes is like one who puts his hand in pig's blood; and one who watches the game is like one who looks at pork meat.”* By the eighth century, the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence considered the game of Nardshir to be harām (*forbidden*). However, there are many textual references to the game being played at court in many regions of the Islamic Near East, which means that the game may have been played by the masses as well, and in fact its popularity confirms this suggestion.

During the early Abbāsīd period (CE 750-900) the game of Nardshir was popular both at the court of Hārūn al-Rašīd and that of his son, al-Ma'mūn. It is said that Ma'mūn liked to play Nardshir since, if he lost, he could place the blame on the dice, meaning fate. The Qābūs-nāme, an 11<sup>th</sup> century text, dedicates a chapter to the games of Chess and Nardshir, where the proper etiquette of playing, and when and to whom one should lose or win from is discussed. It is strictly stated that one should not make bets on the games and only then playing the game becomes a proper activity. During the Seljuk period of the 11 century, it is reported that Sultan Alp Arslan was also fond of Nardshir. But according to a Persian text, Alp Arslan became quite angry when he threw two ones instead of two sixes.

Whether Nardshir is of Indian or Persian origin, it is the Persian form of the game that spread to the rest of the Near East and Anatolia. Even today, when playing the game in Turkey and in the Arab countries, the game is called *nard* or *nardi* or (Arabic) *tāwula*. In Georgia the game is called *nardi*, in Central Asia it is called *narr*; in the Deccan the game is called *tukhta-e-nard* from Persian *taxt-e nard*. Finally in Persian poetry there are many references to Nardshir and its cosmological aspects of the game. The Persian poet, Manūčehrī gives the following couplet in regard to human fate and the cosmos:

*“The firmament is like the victorious looking Nardshir (the game),  
Its pieces from coral, the quality of pearl.”*

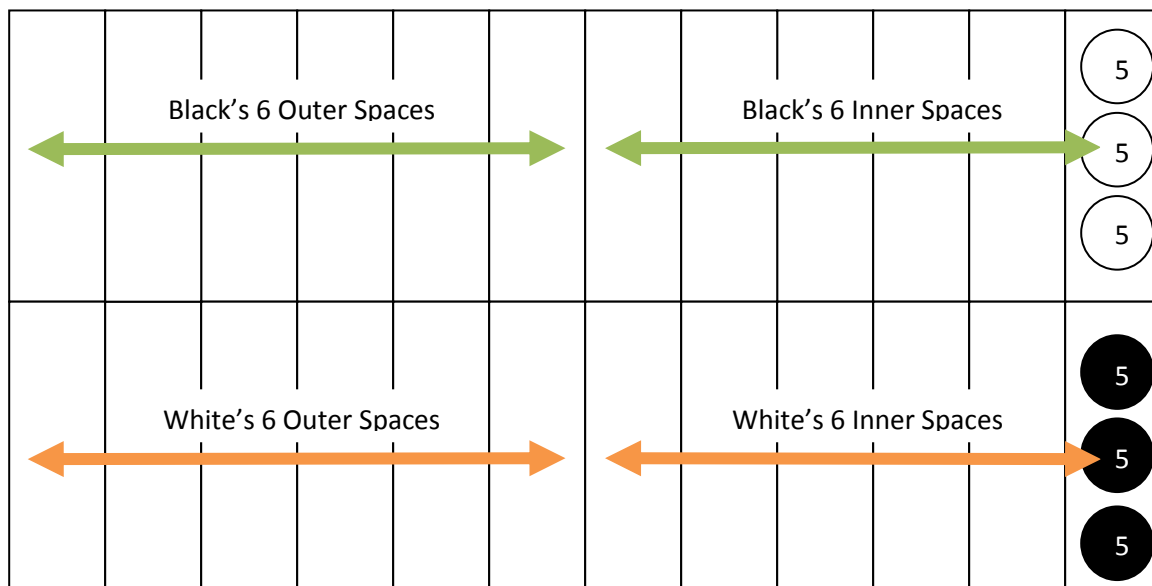
# The Rules of Nardshir

Most sources agree that the game of Nardshir was played on a board of similar design to Alea, another name for the Roman game more commonly known as Tabula or “Table”; the significant difference being the use of two, instead of three dice, to govern the movement of the playing pieces.

Many scholars reference Alfonso X’s Book of Games, written in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, for an explanation of how Nardshir was originally played. However, this book was written ten centuries after Nardshir appeared in Persia, and never references Nardshir directly, but rather describes several other variants of “Table” games, and seemingly by mere association it is assumed that Nardshir is identical to the “Table” game of Backgammon which had gained popularity in the Middle East by the 12<sup>th</sup> century; with play commencing from a fixed arrangement of the playing pieces on the board, rather than entering the board from one position. However, a more recent book “The Book of Games” edited by Jack Botermans, and translated by Edgar Loy Fankbonner, attributes a somewhat different set of rules to Nardshir based on how the game is currently played in the Near East, and is possibly a closer interpretation of how the original game of Nardshir was played, despite being even further removed in time.

## Game Set-up

The Nardshir game-board as illustrated in the following diagram is divided into two halves. Each half has 12 spaces, which are further divided into 6 outer and 6 inner spaces for each player. **At the start of the game, each player’s 15 pieces are placed on the board in three stacks of 5 in the first space.** If the pieces are not stackable, just simply place three single pieces, and leave the remaining pieces off the board to be brought on the board in turn. Next, players take turns rolling a die to decide who will begin; higher number moves first. If both players roll the same number, each rolls again.





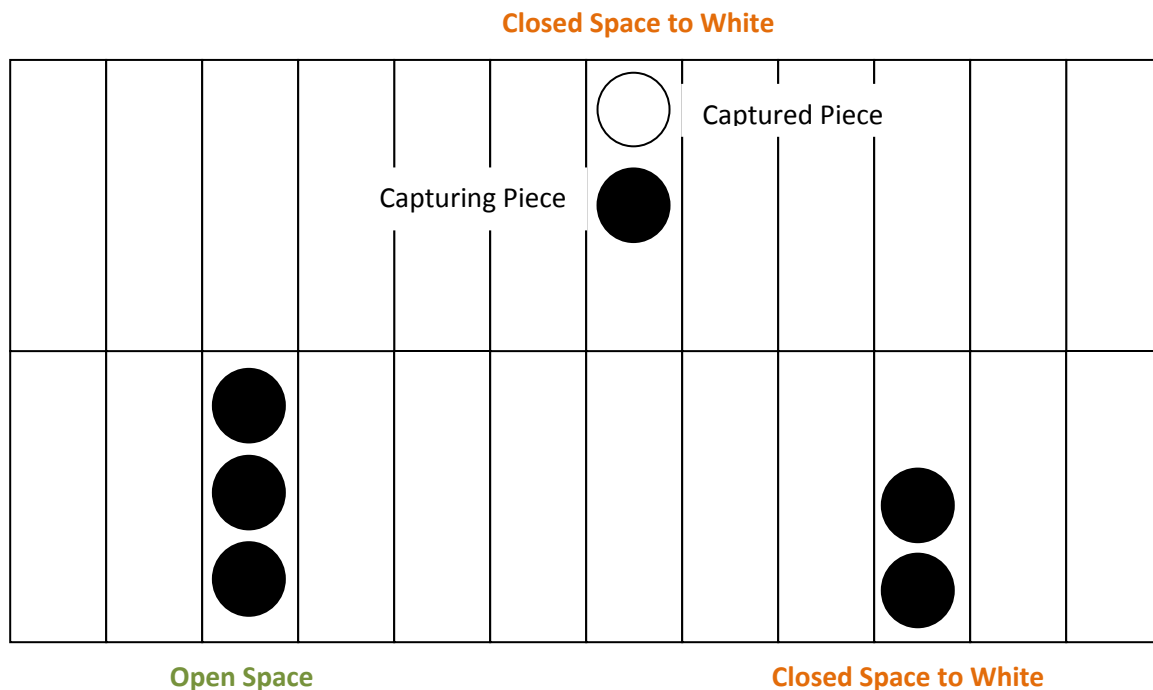
## Capturing Pieces

In Nardshir, pieces are captured in a very unusual fashion which is quite different from western Backgammon. In fact, capturing” is precisely the word for it, because instead of removing the pieces from the board, they are imprisoned in the space where they are captured. **Pieces can only be captured when they sit alone on a space. When a piece ends its move on a space occupied by a single enemy piece, the latter is captured. The capturing player puts his piece on the inner side of the board. As long as capturing piece remains there, the captured piece cannot move.** The corresponding space becomes the property of the capturing player. He can put as many pieces in that space as he likes, and the space is off-limits to his opponent. However, either player can jump over this space.

## Open and Closed Spaces

The method of capturing pieces shows us that any space on the board can be open to one player and closed to the other. However, capturing an enemy piece isn’t the only way to close off a space from your opponent. You can also do this by putting two of your own pieces in a space. **Two pieces of the same color effectively close off that square to the other color. Note that this is a strict rule, and a space is not closed when it is occupied by three or more pieces of the same color.** Closed spaces may be jumped over by either player.

The following diagram illustrates the “closed or open” status of a space occupied by playing pieces.



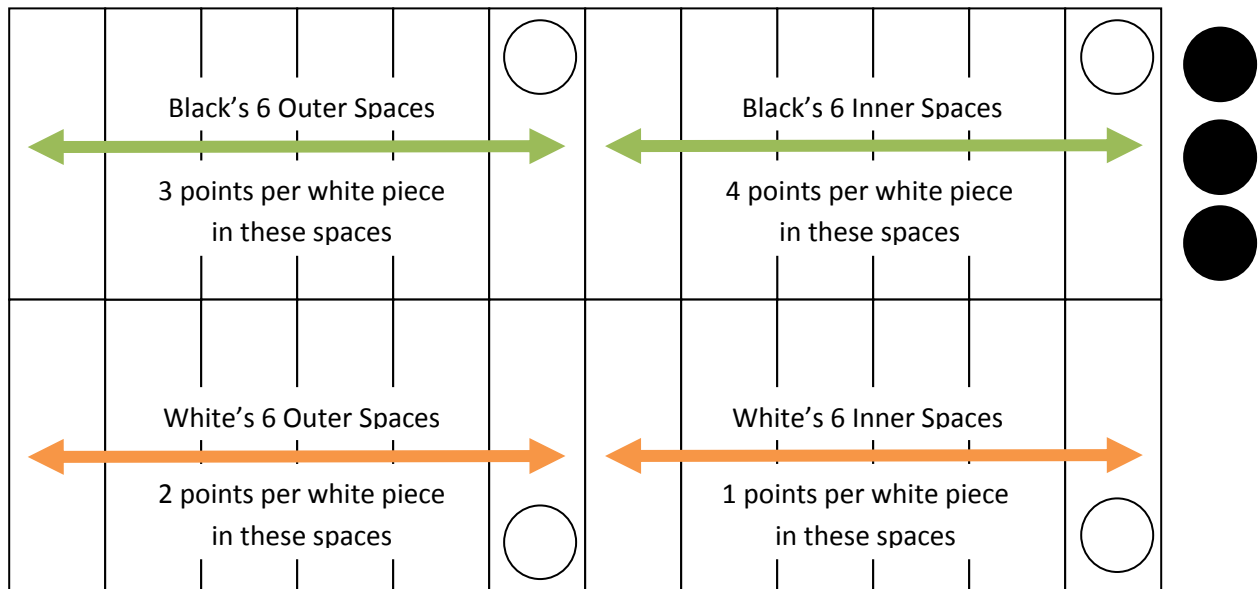
## Bearing off pieces

Players may start bearing off pieces from the board once they have all their pieces in their inner spaces (see page 3). At this stage, players must also use the points they roll in their entirety, and can choose to move on, two, or four pieces. **A player may not bear off a piece from a space whose number does not match the points he rolled.** There is one exception to this rule. When there are no pieces in the space with either the exact number rolled or higher of the two numbers rolled, a piece can be bared off from another space.

## The Winner

**The winner is the first player to complete the course around the board with all his pieces, and to bear them all from the board.** If players agree to a series of games, or if multiple games are being played between multiple players, then a “Tallying Method” can be employed to determine an overall winner. In the “Tallying Method” the winner gets one point for every enemy piece on his opponent’s inner spaces, and two points for every enemy piece on the opponent’s outer spaces. He also gets three points for every enemy piece in his own outer spaces, and four points for every enemy piece in his own inner spaces.

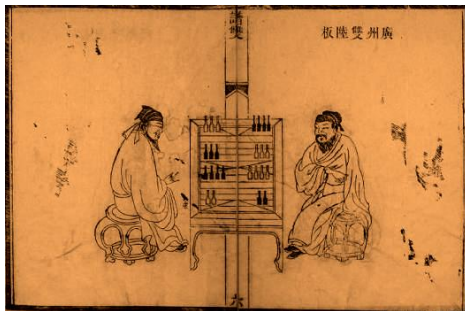
In the following diagram, Black is the winner, and receives points as shown.



# Shuang-lu

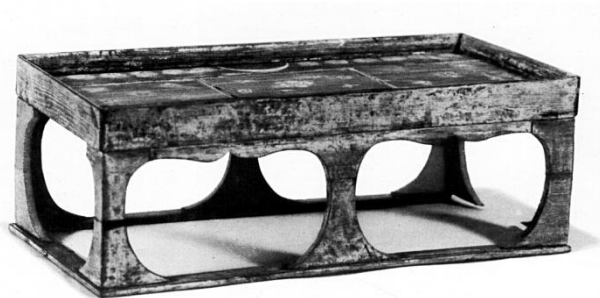
## The Chinese version of Nardshir

The Chinese version of Nardshir, Shuang-lu (*“Double Sixes”*), was referenced as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, when a history of the Southern Dynasty refers to the game played in 548 CE by the future Emperor Yuan with one of his ministers, and continued to be played well into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. A 14<sup>th</sup> Century Woodstock (shown below) shows two players at the traditional wooden table, with raised lips around the edge, whose surface constitutes the play board.



Starting Positions of Playing Pieces

The playing pieces shown arranged in classic Backgammon starting positions are not flat discs, but rather tall bottle-shapes. This same classic starting position is described in a 12<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit text written by a prince of the Calukya (*Indian*) dynasty, along with five other starting position variants. So we can reasonably assume that there is a definite connection between these particular Indian and Chinese versions of the game from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onward. Another distinctive feature of the Chinese game is that the 24 points are literally points, or in some cases elaborate rosettes, rather than the elongated triangles of western Backgammon, or the simple rectangles of ancient precursors. Also, the bar or central separation between the two rows of 6 points is decorated with an elongated crescent. The earliest Chinese board of this type (shown below) was found at Astana in eastern Xinjiang and dates from the 7<sup>th</sup> Century.





In Pushang, a 12<sup>th</sup> century book, Hong Zun wrote that Shuang-lu began in Western India, and arrive in China, during the Wei dynasty of the Cao family around the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century, most likely via merchants travelling along the Silk Road. The game flourished during the Liang, Chen, Sui, and Tang dynasties of the 6<sup>th</sup> thru 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Hong Zun also describes several different variation of the game based on geographical regions. It should be noted at this point, that the tall, bottle-shaped playing pieces that are used in Shuang-lu are not typical of other Chinese games, but are so of other Indian, and Persian games.

Hong Zun also makes another interesting observation about the game.

*“In the region of Yan, teashops often provide game-boards, and each shop will have five, six, or more than ten. Players rent these boards with cash. This is like the inns and shops of Zongzhou do with chess sets. Every Chinese or Khitan household will have a Shuang-lu board. Even when they travel by horse, they have attendants to carry the board. The dice are placed in a small leather pouch.”*

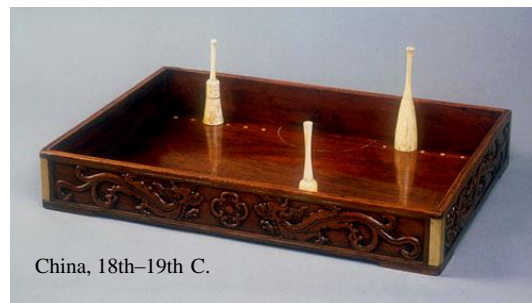
**Shuang-lu** spread from China throughout the orient, becoming **Ssangryork** in Korea, and **Sugoroku** in Japan. All three versions were played extensively through the medieval period, but were eventually replaced in popularity by western Backgammon sometime in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Aside from the starting positions of the playing pieces, Shuang-lu plays much the same as Nardshir, although in some regions of China, *“double rolls”* and *“bearing off”* are not used.

The Shuang-lu style game-boards shown below were crafted during, and after the medieval period.



Japan, 8<sup>th</sup> Century



China, 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> C.

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