

## Giovanni Villani

### Short biography

Born in Florence c.1275-Died in Florence 1348.

Giovanni, the son of an humble family, is known to have been in Rome for the Jubilee in 1300.

From 1302 to 1308, he travelled for business reasons to France and Flanders. In 1316 as a member of the Guelph, he started his political career in Florence and went on to hold important public office.

In 1335 Villani was declared bankrupt along with the eminent Florentine banking family of Bardi. Sometimes later Villani was imprisoned only regaining his freedom in 1346.

Villani died in 1348 during the terrible plague [The Black Death, described by Boccaccio in his *Decamerone*].

Giovanni's *Nuova Cronica* covers the history of Florence from its origin up to 1346.

Matteo Villani, his brother, continued the chronicling of events up to 1363, the son of Matteo, Filippo Villani, concluded them in 1364.

**We shall take into consideration the following reference to chess.**

*Nuova Cronica (New Chronicle)* Book VIII, Chapter XII (33-40) .

free translation

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***(33) During these times there came to Florence a Saracen, named Buzzecca (1), who was the foremost master of the game of chess. At the Palace of the People in the presence of Count Guido Novello, he played the three finest chess masters in Florence, simultaneously, for over an hour. Of these three games, he played two blindfolds and one over the board, winning two and drawing one of the matches. The result was considered an outstanding achievement.***

One may draw several interesting conclusions from this passage.

Firstly it seems clear that the game of chess was held in high esteem in Florence during the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, given both the venue of the game and its esteemed audience. Count Guido Novello 's attendance of Buzzecca's exhibition of chess would suggest that the Ghibeline Count had more than a passing interest in the game. It is, moreover, probable that the Count invited the Saracen Buzzecca to play chess in Florence.

It would have been difficult to justify an open exhibition of chess in Florence at the Palace of the People (which now houses the Bargello Museum) without an official invitation from the Podestà (2) who at that time was Count Guido Novello.

According to Giovanni Villani the match took place '*at the time in which king Charles was crowned in Rome*'. In Chapter V of *Nuova Cronica*, Villani clearly stated that the Count Charles of Anjou and Provence was crowned king of the Two Sicilies (Apulia and Sicily) on the day of Epiphany January the 6<sup>th</sup> 1265.

However Villani was following the Florentine Calendar which took the day of the Immaculate Conception March the 25<sup>th</sup>, as the first day of the year.

Today historians recognise that Charles was crowned in Rome on January 6<sup>th</sup> 1266, so the chess match could not be played before January 1266. It is also known that Count Novello was Vicar in Tuscany to king Manfred, the bastard son of king Frederick II, who was killed by king Charles I at Benevento on February 16<sup>th</sup> 1266 (1265 by Florentine Calendar). The final possible date at which the match could conceivably have taken place would have been before July 1<sup>st</sup> 1266 for then Count Guido Novello was no longer Podestà of Florence.

**It seems more probable that the chess match took place in January or beginning of February 1266.**

As Captain of the Ghibeline troops, Count Novello would probably have had more pressing matters on his mind than attending a chess competition once the king Manfred was killed

at Benevento. Also had Buzzecca's chess match taken place after the death of Manfred, Villani would have written '*In the times in which king Charles defeated Manfred in Benevento ...*'.

In regard to the nature of the game of chess at the time, this passage also reveals two interesting historical details.

The first is that blindfold chess must have been practised by at least some of the Muslim players of the time. Buzzecca is such an example. The second revelation is that masters of chess could play a game and obtain a result in around one hour. In the present day, this would be thought of as quick play. It is even more of a feat when we consider the fact that they played with rules that limited the moves of the Queen and Bishops.

## Notes

(1) Regarding the name of the Saracen chess player, Giovanni Villani in the first version of his manuscript, writes it as 'BUZZECCA', while in the second version he drops the second C and spells 'BUZZECA'.

Saba Malaspina (13<sup>th</sup> century) in his '*Rerum Sicularum Historia*' named the Saracen as 'BOOZECCHA'. At this time there was no standard way to spell words, writers would write them phonetically, so the correct spelling remains controversial.

(2) Podestà, the Italian name given to the Mayor and Chief Justice of a town.

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