

"Chess in Italian secular literature between 1275-1575"

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Edited

Introduction

In Europe, after 900 A.D. the game of chess (*ludus scaccorum*) was played according to rules that imposed strict limitations on the permitted moves of the Queen and Bishop, this was the Islamic game (*ash-shatranj*). Under such rules a great deal of time was required to complete a game of chess. This important technical detail probably served to restrict the game of chess to people of the leisured classes who had a great deal of free time, for instance the aristocracy and the clergy.

According to H.J.R. Murray, '*Chess was, however, in the main a game of the upper classes and this was recognised so generally that it is mentioned again and again in literature as one of the typical chamber recreations of the feudal nobility.*' (Murray, '*A History of Chess*', Oxford University Press, p.429)

It has been estimated that the aristocracy and the clergy together only accounted for 3% of the medieval population (Eales, *Chess, The History of a Game*, B.T. Batsford 1985, p.57). Thus, the game was not accessible to the vast majority of the population. Through the centuries the beauty and complexity of the game attracted many people to chess. Played in the Royal courts of Europe it became considered a mark of good breeding.

The game was often played for money.

So as to overcome the problem of the length of time required to complete a chess game, players and gamblers adopted various techniques in which to speed up the game. One of these techniques was to move the pieces according to the throw of a dice (there is no clear account as to how this system worked). According to H. J. R. Murray chess-dice was '*an evil habit which lasted in Europe into the thirteenth century*' (*A short History of Chess*, Oxford University Press, 1963, p.29). Another way to reduce the tedium of a long chess game was to set up the pieces in a pre arranged position on which players would place wagers regarding the possible/impossible solution (check mate) in a stipulated number of moves.

In Italy this way of playing was called '*partito*', a term derived from '*joc partit*', a poetic contest among the Provençal versifiers. Many such chess problems were very popular and are recorded in old manuscripts. The lost Catalan book of Francesch Vincent, printed in Valencia in 1495, had a clear indication of this derivation in his title '*Jochs partits del scachs en nombre de 100*'.

In the 12th century new local rules for quickening the game were introduced. At that time there was no central authority whose word could be considered final regarding the rules governing the game of chess. This led to the growth of what in medieval time were called *Assizes*, from the Italian word "assise" which referred to a legislative assembly and therefore to a legal compilation of rules.

"The Lombards are the wisest and most skilful at this game" notes Nicholes de Saint Nicolai a French clerk in a 14th century chess problem manuscript, which is now held at the Biblioteque Nationale de Paris and known as Fonds Francais 1173 P.P.(Paris, Picard). The new chess rules allowed the King and Queen for their first move to leap two, three or four squares vertically or laterally or even as a Knight moved, provided the position did not land them in check. The King and the Queen could move at the same time which was considered as one move. Other new rules were devised by the Lombards and adopted in Italy as

'*Lombard assize*'. In medieval times other variety of the chess rules were used in Spain, France, Germany and England.

In Europe from the middle of the 12th to the 14th century, under the name of 'short assize' because '*the initial arrangement of the game brought the pieces more rapidly into contact than was the case in the ordinary chess.*' (*A short History of Chess*, Oxford University Press, 1963, p.47) During which time, the game of chess spread down from the upper classes to every level of society. During the 14th century and up to the mid-late 15th century the game was played with chess pieces which were still very similar in design to those used in the Islamic game.

Following many attempts to speed up the game by various Assizes, an affable and generally well accepted reformation of the rules was eventually agreed upon. The Queen was liberated from her close restriction and allowed to roam virtually free across the board. As long as her way was clear, she could exploit the perpendicular, the parallel and the diagonal. The Bishop's three square limit was removed thus allowed him greater license. For both pieces the liberty of movements gained was paid for at the expense of their previous privilege in future neither Bishop nor Queen would be able to leap. This was a small price to pay, when compared to their new found dynamism.

The new rules made the Queen the most powerful piece on the board, her new role was called '*a la rabiosa*' (the way of rage) because the Queen now moved *furiously* on the board in comparison with her previous plodding movement. The new penetrating move of the Bishop remained without a popular definition in spite of his new surprising active role in the strategy of the game.

The new rules were accepted by all the European players and as a result the game of Chess was transformed. This reformation took place probably in the second half of the 15th century. an event that marked a new era in the history of the game.

It is still not known exactly **when or where** this change took place, or **who** initiated the changes.

Some of the suggestions made by of the most reputable Historians of the game follow:

D. Forbes (1798-1868) placed the origins of the new era in Spain, shortly before the beginning of the 16th century.

Van der Lasa (1818-1899) argued that the reform first arose in Spain around 1475.

Van der Linde (1833-1897) argued that the new rules were first adopted in Southern France a little after 1475.

H. J. R. Murray (1865-1955) thought that the date of the reform was no earlier than 1485 and suggested it had its origins in Italy, which was the main centre of chess activity in Europe at the time.

A. Chicco (1907-1990) supported the idea that the innovation may have taken place in the second half of the 15th century and moreover that it was certainly due to chess players rather than to chess problemists, who were keen to keep their old "partiti" in which the right solutions were sure and proven by history.

R. Eales, clearly stated that 'the question of origins must be left unresolved' and a target date for the innovation could be placed between 1470 and 1490.

R. Calvo (1943-2002) advanced the idea that chess was already being played with the new rules in Valencia between 1470 and 1490 as testified to by the poem "*Scachs d'amor*".

F. Pratesi, on the evidence of the famous manuscript of the Bonus Socius family (CL XIX 51) held at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence, claimed that the period of the reform could be placed even earlier, at 1460. The oldest surviving chess book, '*Repetición de Amores: e Arte de Axedrez con CL juegos de partido*' written by Lucena in 1497, indicated that the games in his book described, 'all the best games he has seen by players in Rome and in all Italy, France and Spain'.

Lucena described 78 of these games as *del viejo* (in the old way) and 72 games as *de la dama* (with the new Queen).

The historians more or less agree on the period, the real

difficulty is to pinpoint the country where this innovation first emerged. The Italian writers taken into consideration in this analysis of secular literature unfortunately rarely mention the **type** of chess game referred to: they simply wrote that chess was played. One exception to this is M. H. Vida who described the game in detail and the game is the new reformed game '*a la rabiosa*'.

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