

Discovery of a Ferrara to Modena Missing Link

Franco Pratesi

Chess has long flourished in Italy – even before the country acquired national unity. Several towns, particularly among regional chief towns, have represented important points first for the spread of medieval chess and then for the development of the modern game. Among them Milan, Rome, Naples, Florence, Ferrara, Palermo and Modena can be quoted. Their significance often occurred in succession, as if chess leadership was gradually passing from one place to another. Here we are particularly interested in two such locations, Ferrara and Modena, only 60 km apart.

Ferrara was the residence in the early Renaissance of the extraordinary Este court, which saw the birth of masterpieces in every sector of the fine arts. Este Dukes were also fond of chess. Reports are kept of games played among them and the best players of the time – see A. Chicco *Fortuna degli Scacchi nel 1500* Milano 1946. Este Dukes not only supported chess play and chess champions; they were personally involved in the game to the point that Alfonso manufactured chess sets for his own utilization. Several artistic sets were ordered by other members of the family, as we know for instance from detailed instructions of Isabella d'Este to expert craftsmen of the time.

The renown of Modena is instead related to more modern times, about the mid-18th century, when such great chess writers as Del Rio, Lolli and Ponziani appeared. Their theoretical work concerning chess openings is unfortunately outdated owing to the particular Italian rules which admitted free castling, did not accept taking en passant, and so on. Nevertheless their chess works remain bibliographical milestones and their value for endgames and studies has been essentially preserved until now. Also, later Modenese chess activity is known (in particular: A. Chicco “L'Accademia Montecuccoli” in *L'Italia Scacchistica*, 1952, pp. 279-280).

Why are Renaissance Ferrara and 18th century Modena considered here together? The reason is extremely simple if considered on a historical basis. Ferrara was the chief town of Este dukedom only until 1598;

with the death of Alfonso II, the Este house died out and the successor, his illegitimate cousin Cesare, was later recognised by the Empire but not by the Pope, who wanted Ferrara to be joined to his own possessions. As a result, Ferrara was lost and Cesare with the Este court moved in 1598 to Modena which thereby became the chief town of the dukedom until 1860.

It is in Modena that Este archives are now kept, where we can study both the marvellous Ferrarese civilization and the later Modenese developments! Just recently among those documents – namely in *Archivio Storico per Materia* – some new evidence has been found concerning chess. The relevant documents are of two kinds, some letters to the Court by an inlayer and a note on chess. Let us examine them in succession.

The four letters (in *Artigianato e Mestieri*, case 23) were written in 1609 by Francesco Luppi from Reggio Emilia, the second town of the Este dukedom. They explicitly show that Este Dukes even in Modena continued to appreciate chess equipment. A set for playing chess and “sbaraglino”, a variant of the backgammon kind, had been ordered from the craftsman. The set had to be made in order to satisfy the requirements of Duke Cesare. The task was rather hard, and Francesco Luppi had to write several letters in close succession to a member of the court, Signor Nestor Cantù, who could act as a go-between to the Duke. Let us briefly examine the letters.

1 – January 9, the longest one. Luppi communicates that he has already obtained the ivory but he encounters some difficulty in purchasing the ebony, which cannot be found in Reggio. Either the needed amount can be found in Bologna or it has to be ordered in Venice, a reliable way but requiring more time. Another possibility would be to use instead coloured pearwood, so that the work could be undertaken at once. The specific suggestion is thus to manufacture the chessboard using pearwood and in the meantime to seize any opportunity of people going to Venice for purchasing the ebony for the sbaraglino board. He is only waiting for the possibility of working entirely for his Prince and putting aside all other work.

2 – January 16. Luppi notes he has received the letter with the answer from which he has understood the intention of the Prince: he will try to obtain from Venice the ebony necessary for both chess and table boards.

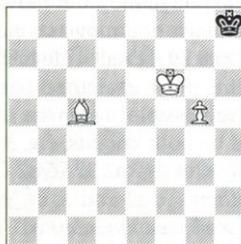
3 – January 24. A drawing of the chessboard is sent in order to be shown to the Prince; Luppi also asks for a check to be made as to whether the dimensions of the squares are compatible with those of the chessmen. He writes that he has already written to Venice for the ebony, which should arrive in 15 or 20 days.

4 – February 17, the last preserved letter. The inlayer writes that he has received the letter from Mr Cantù with the information that the Prince would like to design a sbaraglino board to his own taste. Now, since he has been awaiting for the Prince's drawing without success, he asks for speeding up so that the work may begin. He is sorry to cause trouble but as time is going by he fears the Prince will then complain about being too slowly served.

In conclusion, the Prince appears to be interested in sbaraglino to the point that he wishes to design the corresponding board himself. But also his passion for chess cannot be neglected: he holds a fine set of chessmen, and the size of the squares of the new chessboard depends on their dimensions. Moreover, he firmly refuses the suggestion to use coloured pearwood instead of ebony for his chessboard.

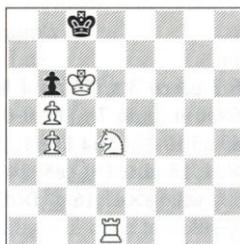
In the only document of the other file (*Giochi di scacchi in case Giuochi*) three endgames are recorded in a handwriting of the 17th century. They occupy two foolscap pages; the shortcomings of descriptive notation, used moreover without abbreviation, are apparent! By a simple transcription into algebraic notation the whole document may be reduced to a few lines:

- 1) Checkmate by pawn to black king in 4 moves:



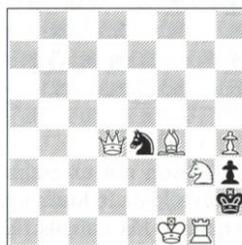
- 1 Kf7 Kh7 2 Bf8 Kh8 3 Bg7+ Kh7 4 g6 mate.

2) To give check to the black king with a pawn and checkmate with another in 5 moves:



1 Nb3 Kb8 2 Rd8+ Ka7 3 Na5 bxa5 4 b6+ Ka6 5 b5 mate.

3) Black king will be checked by a pawn and mated by the same pawn in 5 moves:



The solution of this endgame is lacking.

The endgames are of increasing difficulty. They seem to have been composed as examples in answer to the task posed by the title. In the third position errors may be present which don't allow the problem to be solved, thereby justifying the absence of the solution in the document.

The reported documentary evidence is not extensive. It is certainly not sufficient to let us obtain an insight into chess as played at the time. Nevertheless, it may be enough for providing a missing link useful to connect two steps in the development of chess, represented by the Ferrarese court and the Modenese school, both well known but until now separately considered.