

## Chess Description from 16<sup>th</sup> Century Spain

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In the long history of chess the mid of the 16<sup>th</sup> century does not represent a particularly significant time period: printed books specifically devoted to the game were already spread, not to mention the literary works dealing with it (as the many editions of the poem by Vida).

Nevertheless, I am reporting an unknown text will be reported in the following because it shows some interesting features. First of all, the description of chess is included in a work which is entirely devoted to games (mainly indoor ones): *Ioannis Maldonati Ludus Chartarum Tridunus, & alii quidam generis eiusdem atque diversi*. Burgis. Excudebat Ioannes Hiunta. Anno 1549.

The work is written as a dialogue among several fellows. In particular, some students are gathering in the environs of the town and debate as which game is the most adequate to occupy their leisure time. Before an agreement is reached about it, some candidate games are discussed, such as *triumphus hispanicus*, by then the most celebrated card game of Spain. Finally they choose *tridunus*, a card game which is here described for the first time in some detail. (Further information about these games and the book itself can be found in *The Playing-Card* London, XVI, 1988, pp. 117-125.)

Chess could hardly be absent in such a discussion and it is indeed commented on. Without trying exactly to translate the whole Latin text (which will be fully reported later on), its substance is as follows.

Lucianus at first considers that chess is a peculiar game; it requires the whole attention of the player and does not allow to change mind from a deep speculation. It will thus be of little help as an entertainment for relieving the exhaustion induced by the heavy studies.

Maldonado replies that on the contrary chess has many advantages: it absorbs the players and relieves them from their apprehensions so that they become alert and careful in order to win the game. Only who does not understand it can consider chess as something insignificant and without pleasure. It is indeed agreeable to see two kings fighting in a clear field with equal forces. Then a literary description follows of chess pieces and their actions on the

board. Queens rapidly jump here and there exerting their terrible power against any enemy piece. Bishops coming aslant are dangerous. Knights upset everything with their quick jumping as when they fork the king and another piece. Rooks even if induced to slow movements by an obstructed path can nevertheless finally reach the enemy king. Pawns are to be mentioned too, since sometimes they solve the battle. But the greatest admiration is deserved by the achievements of the new queens: as soon as a pawn forcibly reaches the border, it can wear the royal armour and brings force to the battle.

Lucianus is horrified just by hearing Maldonado's description.

Sedanus considers that even if a chess battle is very appreciable and brings pleasure to the players and to those who understand it, nevertheless only few of the fellows can enjoy it.

Maldonado finally agrees and suggests chess to be played in another occasion and a different game to be tried now.

There are several interesting things mentioned. From a technical point of view the relatively new moves of bishops and queens are effectively described; particularly so for the big change occurring when a simple pawn can be promoted to queen. The forking capability of knights is not left unaccounted. Rather subtle is the description of the rooks (here related to their name-symbols) initially, their movements can be strongly hampered by obstacles, even if at last they actually reach their objective.

The names themselves are worth noting. Rex-king, regina-queen, eques-knight, pedes-pawn are fully equivalent. Sagittarius-archer is a known name, even if not very common, for bishop. For the queen, the text may be interpreted as distinguishing between common queens *amazonae reginae* and new queens obtained by promotion: *pedisecarum reginae*. If so, the writer preserves an ancient tradition, dating from a time when also the corresponding moves could be somewhat different.

Elephants-elephant instead of rook is also an already known denomination; however, it represents a less traditional case. Chess pieces carved as elephants are known which were used as rooks in the past. The meaning has probably passed by the "tower" as a whole to the smaller one which the elephant carries on its back. In other cases, and particularly in Indian iconography, kings themselves were pictured as being carried in the little tower on the elephant-back. Apart from a possible connection with the king, generally limited to Indian chess and ancient times, a remarkable ambiguity occurred for chess elephant between later meanings of either bishops or rooks. This ambiguity is not

limited to Europe and to new chess: as known, in Indian variants of the game the elephant was sometimes placed on a1 and sometimes on c1; also its moves there have been various (see Murray's *History*, p. 59).

Finally, chess fans may appreciate that Maldonado's fellows discard chess as a game to be played only because it could not be enjoyed by the whole party.

The original unabridged Latin text:

Ren. Constemus proposito. Scachos ego duxerim ingenio deditos magis sub umbra decere.

Luci. Scachia peregrinus, & paucis compertus est ludus: totumque hominem exigit, neque sinit a profunda cogitatione divertere: parum iuvabit nos ad reficiendos animos lectione gravatos.

Mal. Non omnino convinces ea ratione. Detinet Scachia plurimum homines, curisque liberat: & ad pugnae successum alacres reddit, maximeque attentos. Qui non intelligunt, levissimam rem putant, nulliusque voluptatis: at vero delectatione quem non afficiat, duos videre Reges iustis, paribusque copiis libero campo pugnantes? Cum praesertim ardeant inter magnanimos Duces Amazonae Reginae iam in dextrum, iam in sinistrum cornu, ultro citroque ruentes, suos sublevantes, hostes prosternentes: & in turratos elephantes prorumpentes, equites, & Sagittarios deturbantes, pedites unguibus equorum illidentes? Sagittarii quinque tiam prorumpant audaces: & transversim adorti, graviter feriant, stragemataque passim edant? Equites vero ita celeri saltu perturbent omnia, ut aliquando Regi tendentes insidias, aut capiant, aut viduitatem inducant? Iam elephantes si viam expeditam praeoccupaverint, quamvis tardo, rectoque pede ferantur, ita Regem quandoque perturbent, rebusque diffidere cogant, ut ipsam Panthesileam suppetias ferentem, eius ad pedes nonnunquam conficiant. Quid dicam de peditibus? Qui etiam quandoque pugnam restaurant? Sed peditum Reginae sunt magis admiranda facinora: quae viam vi, ferroque iter aperientes tabernaculum irrumpunt, seque Reginas confestim asserunt, & regalibus sumptis insignibus, & armis, late caedes, & incendia miscent.

Luc. Horresco quidem audiens.

Seda. Quamvis Scachorum pugna sit maxime spectabilis, voluptatemque afferat ludentibus, ac intelligentibus, pauci tamen ex nostris ea fruentur.

Mald. Fateamur ingenue Renalde, ludum esse paucis accommodum. Alias nos Scachiam opportunius ludemus. Nunc quod alii censuerint ludi genus probemus.