

In Search of the Crown

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Riassunto

Alla ricerca della corona. È descritto per la prima volta un gioco di tavoliere della famiglia degli scacchi. Ne fu autore il siciliano Francesco Baeli che nel 1676 pubblicò a Venezia un intero libro al riguardo. Non si sono trovate copie di questo libro. Tuttavia, sono state rinvenute alcune informazioni in un manoscritto siciliano della fine del settecento; su questa base sono anche discusse possibili ricostruzioni della posizione iniziale del gioco.

Abstract

An unknown board game of the chess family is first described. Its author was Francesco Baeli, from Sicily, who published in 1676 in Venice a full book about it. No copy of the book has yet been found. Some information has been discovered however in a Sicilian manuscript of the end of the 18th century; on its basis, tentative reconstructions of the initial position are also discussed.

In several countries and in several times “derivative” chess games have been proposed, in which the chess board is enlarged and/or modified whereas the chessmen increase in number and acquire new faculties of move. A large number of proposals appeared near the end of the 18th century, when some variants actually gave rise to present-day war-games. The beginning was however earlier and several variants appeared with either slight or large differences with respect to chess. One of the first variants was suggested in Pietro Carrera *Il gioco degli scacchi...* Militello 1617. This Sicilian author considered an enlarged 10x10 board and two auxiliary pieces Centauro (moves of both rook and

knight) and Campione (bishop and knight). Later, for the second half of the 17th century, a couple of proposals are known, in C.Weickhmann *Neu-erfundenes Königs-spiel...* Ulm 1664 (game among 4 players, each having 30 pieces, on a cross-board with 195 circular “squares”) and in F.Piacenza *I campeggiamenti degli scacchi o sia nuova disciplina di attacchi e difese e partiti del giuoco degli scacchi* Torino 1683 (based on a board of 10x10 squares with two new pieces, Centurione and Decarione).

Now, another Sicilian author, Francesco Baeli, must be considered in the histories and bibliographies of chess. Baeli was an extraordinary man, who studied many topics in several towns (after his youth in Palermo, mainly in Paris and in Madrid) and travelled for two decades through every part of Europe before coming back home. It was a happy coincidence that in 1701, when Mongitore wrote his reference work on Sicilian writers, Baeli was passing his last years in Palermo as an appreciated man of letters, kept to himself. We certainly would now have lost every information about him, if he had not been inserted in this reference work. Let us reproduce the Latin report in full length:

Antonino Mongitore Bibliotheca sicula Palermo 1708: Franciscus Baeli nobilis Mylensis natus 15. Decembris 1639 a teneris annis literis admotus, e gravioribus studiis, praesertim ex Mathematicis disciplinis, Astronomicis, et Geographicis, quibus ingenii felicitatem devovit, haud vulgarem hausit eruditionem. Ex naturali vero propensione, magno animi ardore amoeniores literas adamavit: hinc historica, variaque eruditione locupletatus, tum poesia, tum oratoria claruit, variasque Academias illustravit. Viginti annos extra Siciliam insumpsit; ephesus enim relicta patria anno 1660 ad ipsam regressus est recurrente anno 1680. Septennio moras protraxit Parisiis, ubi majorem studiorum partem confecit; septennio etiam Matrili: reliquam annorum seriem in itineribus, variisque regionibus lustrandis traduxit: Italiam enim Germaniam, Belgium, Bataviam, Hiberniam, Britanniam, Norvegiam, Daniam, Pomeraniam, Poloniam, Pannoniam, aliasque Provincias peragravit: ac harum nonnullas tertium circumspexit. In Regis Catholici aula, ac Caesarea, aestimationem eximiam promeruit; Principibus, Dynastis, ac Magnatibus gratissimus. Cum autem ad patriam remeasset anno 1695. a Francisco Paceco, Duce Uzedaе, Siciliae Prorege, ipso inscio, patriae dux electus est: pluraque promeritis exigentibus, accepisset, ni Prorex regnum aliis gubernandum cessisset. Vivit nunc ab honoribus penitus alienus, et Musarum otitis gaudet.

Now that we are more familiar with the author, we are ready to become acquainted with his works. Again Mongitore greatly helps us, listing his published and unpublished works:

Lo Statista ristretto Venezia, Giovanni Bonfanti 1676 in 12.

La Polisenia. Comedia in verso Venezia, Giov. Pietro Brigonci 1676. in 12.

La Corona, o vero il giuoco degli Asili, nuova inventione Venezia, Milocco 1676. in 12. “hanc opellam, quae novum ludi adinventum complectitur, secundis curis expolitam, et auctam recudere curat.”

Il Siciliano veridico, o vero Risposta, e vera dimostrazione del presente, e susseguente stato della Città di Messina. Frankfurt, Marianus Karlett 1676. in 12, published without author’s name.

In addition to the revised and enlarged edition of *La Corona*, other unpublished works were ready for the press:

Tempe Panajo, o vero la Ninfa linfata, o vero il Talamo Alterato. Tragicomedia pastorale in 4.

Tratti lirici, che comprendono odi, e sonetti.

This information has been repeated later by other Italian writers dealing with Sicilian and Italian literature, such as Mira and Mazzucchelli. Unfortunately, the works by Baeli are very rare. Of the comedy *La Polisenia* I was able to trace only two copies, in Venice and Wolfenbuttel public libraries. In München Bayern Landsbibliothek there is a little work: Francesco Baeli *Ephitalamio nelle nozze di Ces. Leopoldo I. e Margherita d’Austria Infante di Spagna.* sd. Vienna. This booklet, unknown to Mongitore, may be a further proof of his statement: “Principibus, Dynastis, ac Magnatibus gratissimus”. Until now I could not find any other copy, and in particular no copy of the work interesting us, *La Corona*, or The Crown.

Let us limit our attention in the following only to *La Corona*. The second revised edition, which the author was preparing during his last years, can be assumed never to have reached the press. But what about the first one? It is not quoted in the catalogues of the greatest public libraries of the world (London, Paris, Muenchen, Washington), nor is it reported in reference works of bibliography, such as Brunet and Graesse. In the *Primo Catalogo Collettivo delle biblioteche italiane*, vol. 8, Roma 1975, Baeli is represented only by the copy of *La Polisenia* kept in Venice.

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In such marked absence of specific information, how can I consider *La Corona* to be a fundamental work in the history of chess-derivative

games? The fact is that I have found some further information in a manuscript of the end of the 18th century kept in Palermo [*Biblioteca Comunale, Ms. QQ.E.94*]. Among other things, Francesco Maria Emanuele e Gaetani marchese di Villabianca has written in this manuscript a short treatise on Sicilian games where he records typical games as known from the literature and in a small part as directly known to himself. One of the games considered is precisely Baeli's invention. Thus we obtain some very interesting data. Again, the relevant text is reproduced here:

Francesco Baeli Honorevole della città di Milazzo, [...] non poco reso riguardevole per li viaggi da lui menati per le più cospicue e primarie provincie e regni dell'Europa, non meno che per la eccelsa letteratura da lui possessa e data al Pubblico mercè le opere che andarono in istampa fu l'inventore di questo gioco detto degli Asili. Del titolo adunque di sì fatto gioco, e del tutto di che constasse ce ne diede egli distinta relazione in un suo libretto stampato in Venezia col titolo La Corona, o vero il Gioco degli Asili per il Milocco nel 1678 in 12. Egli è simile al gioco delli Scacchi, però maggiore, poichè essendo di 17. case in quadro, comprende il numero di 289. case distinte in bianche, e nere; delle quali le quattro negli angoli sono le più privilegiate e chiamansi asili. Si distribuiscono 100. pezzi a quattro giocatori, cioè 25. per uno; i lor nomi sono Re, Tenente, o Vicario; Paladino; Cavallo; Amazone, e Pantesilea, Ariete, Centauro, Signifero, Dragone, e Pedoni; oltre un'altro detto la Corona, che compisce il numero di 101. Tutta l'industria del gioco è fondata nel vincere i nemici per acquistare la Corona collocata nel mezzo del Tavoliero: e chi se n'impodessa allora si dice haver vinto quando si riduce in sicuro con la Corona già presa in uno degli Asili; veggasi il detto Baeli, che mostra le regole del collocare i pezzi, discorre de' lor movimenti regolati, e straordinarij e del lor valore, ed efficacia con lodevole distinzione.

The quotation of the book is in fairly good agreement with that by Mongitore, except for the year, being here 1678 instead of 1676. It is now impossible for us to define the right date; in any case, it seems very unlikely that two editions were published by the same Venetian printer.

As in Weickhmann's case, the distance between standard chess and this derivative game is rather great. At the beginning four arrays of 25 pieces are placed on the four edges of the 17x17 board while the 101st piece, a Crown, is located in the mid square of the board. In particular the aim itself of the game is changed, no more checkmating the king but conquering the crown and bringing it safely to one of the four corner squares.



Figura 1 – Francesco Maria Emanuele e Gaetani
marchese di Villabianca

Unfortunately, the information provided is not enough for a satisfactory understanding of the rules of the game – among other things, no mention is provided of the actual moves of the different pieces. Some speculations can be suggested only for the number of pieces and their initial position on the board; these topics will be dealt with in the following.

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Let us try to derive the possible numbers of pieces. 25 is the total number but we don't know the number of pawns included. Besides pawns, we find 11 different names of pieces, which are (by using their initial two letters) RE, TE, VI, PA, CA, AM, PA, AR, CE, SI, DR. In principle, they could correspond to 11 different pieces accompanied by

14 pawns. However, looking the game as a chess variant, most pieces are expected to be present in pairs. Not all of them, however: if any analogy with chess has to be maintained, kings at least must be single pieces. The following two names Tenente o Vicario clearly appear as two different synonyms for a single piece, due both to the meaning and to the writing of Lieutenant “or” Substitute. Let us again assume it as a single piece because it actually represents the substitute for the king. All the other pieces mentioned are assumed to be present as pairs, except for AM and PA: in this case it is supposed that two names (a common and a proper one) are present for the same piece. The alternative that the two pieces would have slightly different moves is possible but it does not change the final result. In the following, two AMs will be considered.) Thus, the number of major pieces is interpreted as $1+1+2 \times 7$ or 16, leaving us with 9 pawns.

Two kinds of initial positions are possible – dense or loose. Here only the first case will be taken into account; the alternative choice of considering arrays with voids inside can originate a number of different configurations more difficult to be exhaustively analysed.

Before advancing any actual proposal we must consider the implications of an odd number of squares. A common requirement of similar board games is that the pieces have to show a symmetrical formation. Here this immediately suggests a row where the king is surrounded by two identical wings, as it occurs on the first row in Japanese chess: the king has pairs of same personages each one being placed on either side at the same distance. If the symmetry as well as the odd number of pieces in each row have to be maintained, pair numbers of rows are impossible since they would provide on the whole a pair number of pieces. Thus we have to consider an array based on 5, 3 or 1 rows, the last case being however clearly impossible. Let us therefore examine the five-row case and then the three-row one.

If a rectangular array of pieces has to be chosen, as the typical 2×8 array of chess, the only possible result is a square array of 5×5 pieces. This may appear satisfactory at first glance but then it occurs to be almost impossible. In fact, pieces so densely packed imply a difficult development and the pawns would be either too few (if occupying only the front five squares), or they would be located one after another on the same column thereby obstructing their own movements.

There is a different dense packing of pieces which looks somewhat better: a wedge-shaped triangle with 9,7,5,3,1 pieces, where the successive numbers indicate the number of pieces in any successive row starting from the board edge. However, what has been said before for the 5,5,5,5,5 configuration still maintains most of its validity. Such triangle is not suitable to be put into movement and to be formed by pawns in the external rows.

The situation does not remarkably improve if mixed systems are considered. One of the best that can be devised is the 1,3,9,7,5 one, having in itself the form of a crown. The king would lye alone on the edge; the largest row, the third one, would contain 9 pieces, the front one would be formed by 5 pawns. Other pawns could be placed in rows below the first, particularly in the four wing positions having no forward piece. On the other hand, obtaining a single row of pawns is not easy: if placed in the front row, 7 pawns would already be in contact with the neighbouring ones.

Seemingly, our formation of pieces has better to be distributed on three rows. The maximum number of pieces on the first row cannot be 17, being the players four instead of two. It appears that also 15 is a difficult number to suggest, as the pieces of neighbouring players would be located too near (and configurations as 15,5,5; 15,7,3 or 15,9,1 don't look very plausible).

We thus arrive to such arrays as 13,9,3 or 11,9,5. The main difficulty in accepting such configurations is due to the low number of typical forward positions for the pawns. On the other hand, reversing such triangles (for obtaining an extended row of pawns) is not possible since the pieces of neighbouring players would become in contact or in superposition. As before, pawns one after another on same column are not accepted; however, they can be distributed in the two external rows occupying uncovered positions. For instance in the 13,9,3 we would obtain the 3 pawns on the third row and another 6 pawns, 3 in each external part of the second row. The same total result would derive for the 11,9,5 structure, with four pawns in the second row and five in the front one. The presence of no more than 9 pawns among the 25 pieces looks rather plausible.

There is, however, another possibility for same ratio: a mixed structure 9,7,9. It has the remarkable advantage that the same nine pawns can be located all on a single row. With different formations, it would be difficult to place the pawns so that the conditions are satisfied that

they are located in a dense straight row, in a symmetric way, in a rather advanced position, without touching the neighbouring ones. Considering this array in more detail, and trying to locate the other pieces too, the following formation is arrived at:

front or 3rd row: PE PE PE PE PE PE PE PE PE

mid or 2nd row: DR SI CE VI CE SI DR

rear or 1st row: AR AM CA PA RE PA CA AM AR

This is what I am finally suggesting as the most plausible initial position. Obviously, other solutions can be selected, and particularly so if voids are taken into account. Hopefully, THE true solution, namely that once invented by Baeli, will soon be found by discovering a copy of his book.

My only additional comment on the whole question concerns board games of the ancient civilizations, such as for instance the ludus latrunculorum. For them, I do now understand the existence of so many different reconstructions based on the few data available, as it is already difficult to reconstruct a game of “only” three centuries ago.

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In conclusion, after the mention by Mongitore, the short description by Villabianca already allows us to consider the game invented by Baeli as an early milestone in a whole series of chess variants more complex than usual. As in Weickhmann’s game, the difference with common chess is not limited to a slight increase of board dimensions and piece number. It cannot be excluded that Baeli could derive some hints for his invention during his long travels through most European countries. However, his game appears to be an original one and well distinguished even from Weickhmann’s Koenigsspiel.

In the bibliography of chess, other important printed books have still to be found out, to begin with the very first one by Vincent. Here we are faced by another specimen for which from now on – the chase is open. Thus, it only remains to wish good luck to everybody engaged in the search of The Crown!