

(N.B. Questa nota è stata in realtà pubblicata in lingua tedesca!)

Old European variants of chess and wargames

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This note derives from Egbert Meissenburg proposal to summarise my four best contributions to chess history of the last couple of years. I have continued my research in several directions and a useful part has been, for instance, my contribution to dating Venafro chessmen. However, my most significant contributions of this period have probably been in the field of early European variants of chess and wargames. Together with reviews of kriegspiel (*Scacchi e Scienze Applicate*, 12 Sup. 4, 1993, 1-3) and of the old game described by Weickhmann (*Eterosacco*, 15 Nr.1, 1992, 28-29) I would mention the following four contributions – they have been published in Italian, except item Nr. 3, written in English.

1 – F.Pratesi, “Il gioco dei filosofi fiorentini”.

L'Italia Scacchistica. Vol. 85, Nr. 7 (1995) 171-173.

Dr Chicco described the Florentine variant of rithmomachy played on a reduced board of 8x10 squares (*Bonus Socius*, L'Aia 1977, pp. 81-101; *Il gioco di Pitagora*, Genova 1979, 36p.), using as source two unpublished treatises written by Benedetto Varchi in 1539. I have found out in Florentine libraries other copies of these works, indicating that they were rather familiar. In one case, a handwritten note can be read as an authorisation for printing. Probably, a suitable patron or dedicatee for this planned edition could not be found.

2 – F.Pratesi, “Alla ricerca delle origini – Ritorno a Londra”.

Informazione Scacchi. Vol. 5, Nr. 3 (1995) 107-114.

William Fulke (1538-1589) was a renowned Cambridge professor, who took part in the political and theological debates of his time. He published a few works on peculiar boardgames, such as rithmomachy and his own inventions of astronomical or geometrical character. I have

studied: *Metromachia sive ludus geometricus. Auctore Guilielmo Fulcone Anglo*. Londini. Excudebat Thomas Vautrollerius Typographus. 51 p. The dating should be 1566; a reprint of 1578 is also quoted.

The board is unusually large – 33 by 52 squares – even if the battle field is initially the central zone of “only” 33x14 squares. Each side is provided with a moat, further 5 rows, and a fortress with three orders of walls around it. The emperor, a sphere, heads both infantry (two-dimensional geometric figures) and cavalry pieces (three-dimensional ones). War machines are also available to each side, such as 8 bombards, one bridge, several stairs. In order to win, the tower of the fortress must be occupied by enemy forces. The aim is to teach geometry through the game; however, many characters of a modern war-boardgame are already present – about two centuries will be needed before something alike will be introduced again.

3 – F.Pratesi, “In Search of the Crown”.

Scacchi e Scienze Applicate. Vol. 11 (1993) 21-23.

A Sicilian author, Francesco Baeli (1639-c1705), must be added to the histories and bibliographies of chess, even if the difference between standard chess and his game is remarkable. He studied many subjects (during his youth in Palermo, then mainly in Paris and Madrid). For two decades he travelled through all European countries before coming back home. Among his published works, I could find no copy of: *La Corona, o vero il giuoco degli Asili, nuova inventione*. Venezia: Milocco, 1676, recorded by Mongitore and other scholars. I found some information about it in a manuscript of the 18th century, kept in Biblioteca Comunale of Palermo.

The game begins by placing four arrays of 25 men on the four edges of a 17x17 board; the 101st piece, a crown, is located in the mid square of the board. The aim of the game is taking this crown and bringing it safely to one of the four corner squares. I tried to reconstruct the initial position on the basis of a closed array of pieces. More recently, I reached the conclusion that the initial position might instead have been a loose one, see “Una corona da portare all’asilo”. *Eteroscacco*, Vol. 17 Nr. 3 (1994) 40.

4 – F.Pratesi, “Le piacevoli battaglie di Gerolamo Calvi”.

Informazione Scacchi. Vol. 4 Nr.3 (1994) 4-10.

In several chess bibliographies is quoted: *La guerra, giuoco di Napoleone Buonaparte*. Milano: Giuseppe Chiusi, 1844, 192p. A description of this boardgame can be found in *Panoplia*, Nr. 4 (1990) 44-46: the war simulation is actually reduced to the essential features, without dice, with cubic pieces, using large square-latticed boards. For this kind of games, the source work is mostly considered: Wells, *Little Wars*, London, 1913. He is said to have simplified the Prussian wargames and provided literary dignity to the civil game. However, a similar atmosphere can already be found in the Italian book, describing in a literary style a war-boardgame intended just as a family pastime.

I could add some information on the author of the book, Gerolamo Calvi, who died in 1848. He was known in his town, Bergamo, as a man of letters, a musician, a journalist, and a patriot.