

Italian queens

Franco Pratesi

Several months ago, Egbert Meissenburg wrote to me asking, “How long in Italy the name of regina has been applied to chess queens?” I answered at once that this question needed some reflection and that my answer would arrive with my next letter. Now – after several letters! – I have a tentative answer ready.

My answer is limited to Italy, as required by the question, even though this may not be a fair limit for the chess culture of the time. Moreover, I apologise not yet to have studied with due attention the recent literature on the topic, written by such known experts as van der Stoep, Meissenburg, Calvo, and so on. I even heard that a full workshop has been devoted to the transition “*Vom Wesir zur Dame*”, but I am not yet acquainted with most of its results.

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A – The Italian name of Regina

In this kind of research there is a first approach, which is both common and easy, to check in Battaglia’s *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*. Unfortunately, this useful source is not so useful in our case: it has indeed an item precisely devoted to regina as the chess queen, but the quoted references are by Giacosa, D’Annunzio, and Calvino, much too late to be taken into account by any chess historian. Such being the case, it also seems not promising to search in earlier dictionaries.

I concluded that a professional contribution was unavoidable and thus asked my friend Berardinelli Cigliana to carry out a research in the electronic archive of Opera del Vocabolario, an institution which derives from the renowned Accademia della Crusca. After a few weeks, she has provided me with the following result: in their archive, no less than 3423 records can be found for *regina*, *reina*, and similar words. No easy way exists for extracting from them the items actually connected with chess. She had thus painstakingly checked each of those references

– may I express here our thanks – with the conclusion that only two records are useful for us.

1) The oldest dated reference is from Antonio Pucci, known as a popular Florentine poet born about 1310 and dead in 1388. A score of pages are devoted to him in Sapegno's *Trecento* volume of the classical treatise of Italian literature, printed by Vallardi. Our reference is however from a prose work, dated 1362, *Il libro di varie storie* (Edizione critica per cura di Alberto Varvaro. Palermo 1957, p.113).

This text clearly derives from Jacopo da Cessole – whom Pucci even quotes as a useful reference – including the “meaning” of the single pawns. However in this page there may be something of interest for the chess historian, to begin with the names of the chessmen (*re, reina, alfino, cavaliere, rocco, pedone*) and the legendary origin of chess: in Babylon, either invented by philosopher Filaneter in order to amend the bad character of king Vilmorandage, or taking the shape and dimension of the town into account.

2) Even older is the second reference, taken from a manuscript of Tristram stories, kept in the Riccardiana library in Florence and to be dated in the end of the 13th century (*Il Tristano Riccardiano*, a cura di E.G.Parodi, Bologna 1896, p. 121). This text reports what occurs during the chess game between Tristram and Yseult.

E a quel punto dimenticarono lo giuoco degli scacchi; ché quando Tristano pensava giocare dello dalfino, ed e' giucava assai volte della reina; e tal facea Isotta: quando credeva giocare dello re, ed ella giucava dello cavaliere....

Here our reflection goes to the chessmen, names included. Yes, the pair was confused by the love philtre and thus they were mistaking a chessman for another – however, we know that in general chessmen were by then much more difficult to distinguish than nowadays.

So far as for the professional answer. I suppose that other manuscripts of similar age can be found, but they are probably undated and/or unpublished. Especially in the 14th century, there are several handwritten translations of Latin texts, to begin with Jacopo da Cessole,

where the word might be found; but this topic is strongly connected with the following one, namely the search of a direct use of the Latin name. It may be due to plain chance and not to a significant age difference, which is the older extant witness among the various extant copies of the manuscripts.

B – The Latin name of Regina

Why should we look for an Italian name, since exactly the same name with the same meaning was being used in Latin? If we are looking for any witness of the transformation of *fers* into *regina*, it should not be significant whether *regina*, as the name of the chessman, is written in Italian or in Latin. If the name should be found in an early didactic or similar work, it is by far more probable to expect it in Latin than in Italian!

To my mind, the most important records to be considered are those from Galvano and especially from Jacopo da Cessole. We are in the end of the 13th century, but the association of the queen to the chessman placed close to the king appears to be well established.

Earlier references certainly exist, in Italy and elsewhere. However, I do not have any means to carry out a professional research on the occurrence of the Latin name *regina*, with reference to chess, in earlier works written in Italy. I will thus limit myself to repeat what has often been noted by past historians, the fact that in the oldest collections of partiti, we commonly find *fers* in the diagrams, and *regina* in the solutions.

Here again, selecting the oldest copy left appears to be a hard task, and not very significant, due to the random character of surviving manuscripts.

C – The concept of Queen

In my second letter to Egbert Meissenburg, after receiving the question, I was not yet able to provide him with my promised answer. However, my reflection had bypassed the question itself, offering another answer, as follows. If we are interested in the transformation

from military to court personages, it is not absolutely necessary that the name *regina* explicitly appears.

For instance, the information deriving from Arrighetto da Settimello is already significant enough. In his *Elegia*, probably written in 1193, we have the chessmen mentioned. The queen is still called *ferça* in the original text (or something alike, the actual spelling differs somewhat among handwritten copies). Nevertheless, this cannot be a minister or any military personage: it is indeed explicitly associated with the Emperor's queen, Constance, who had been taken prisoner. Thus, independent of the name, here we have a proof that in Italy the *ferça* was already considered the wife of the king in the 12th century.

From here, down to earlier times the way is open, even if information is lacking. As far as we go back in time, not only we lack chess witness, but also any literary reference from Italy becomes a rarity, so that it is rather meaningless to continue our search.

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It may be considered strange that a female personage appears among so many masculine ones, but this can be understood with its closeness to the king – both being single personages, the only ones on the board! I share Murray's opinion, p. 423 (something that usually does not require a great effort of will).

The name "Queen" is a characteristically European innovation, suggested probably by the position of the piece upon the board and by the general symmetry of the arrangement of the pieces, which pointed to the pairing of the two central pieces.

This appears not to be directly linked with power, as it would have occurred for a (female) personage whose power increases until she eventually becomes a queen. In principle, something of this kind could have occurred later on, with *dama rabiosa*, but passing from an already established "queen" to a new "furious lady" may not correspond all the same to a significant increase in power, at least from a nominalistic point of view.

If I am allowed to conclude with my personal opinion, the appearance of the queen on the chessboard is only a part of the

transformation from military to court environment. This might have occurred deliberately, but more plausibly it was the result of providing a sense to chessmen (the future rooks, bishops and queens) for which nobody could understand their original military meaning any longer.

A reasonable estimate for the initial transformation would be in the first half of the 12th century, a few decades after the diffusion of chess in Europe. Apparently, chessmen kept their names of Arab provenance for a while, but first a new meaning was associated to the name and then a new name was introduced, in correspondence with the new meaning. Among other things, the numberless variants of the names associated with the bishop are a proof that this process could not occur in a simple and straightforward way.