

Socius, Civis, et Alii

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The old collections of chess endgames

A specific section on the openings became a standard part of chess didactics only after the introduction of the modern rules, with long moves for bishops and queens. On the other hand, an extended treatment of the middle-game is practically a conquest of the first decades of the 20th century. Therefore, only chess endgames were dealt with in the first works of chess theory.

The first book of chess technique to be printed was a collection of endgames, selected by Vicent; just one hundred of them formed the whole contents of this book of 1495, no specimen of which is known to have survived. The following chess books printed met with a greater success and sometimes, as that of Damiano, were published in many editions. In general, they were not exclusively devoted to chess endgames, but they did usually contain a significant part corresponding to them.

Before the introduction of printing, many handwritten books were devoted to chess endgames. When examining their contents, we have first to reflect on a few essential topics, known to every chess historian; in particular, we must pay attention to some fundamental differences with respect to our times.

Partiti: neither endgames nor problems

Usually, the chess compositions of the old collections of “partiti” were neither our endgames nor our problems. In other words, most of these endings – as I will systematically name them in the following – were neither examples selected for the elementary teaching of theoretical endgames, as is often done now, nor the results of compositional art, as occurs for our problems and studies. Usually they were like puzzles to solve, or situations worth of a wager: who wins, is or is not possible to accomplish the task in the given number of moves and under the stated conditions?

The technical name of “partito” had the meaning of a free choice

offered between the two sides of a chess ending – to be played under given conditions – both of which at first sight were showing some evidence for a possible winning path. Obviously, a player could win simply because the other was not able to find the only way to checkmate him within the available number of moves (or even because no way actually existed). A typical task would be that white mates in 6 moves – mate is certain but if given in 7 moves, or in 5, the wager is lost. Of course, one can then choose black but if the other player checkmates in 6, the wager is lost again.

In many cases, unorthodox conditions, or pieces, appeared. Sometimes the task to be performed was very unusual for the habits of today; for instance, forcing a difficult mate in 3 moves when various checkmates could easily be given in 2.

Original compositions?

An important consequence of the different kind of task involved is the contrary approach to original compositions with respect to modern times. Today, a new chess composition is the more appreciated, the more it is original, containing elements and/or ideas never seen before. Let us consider the same thing from the point of view of the old players and gamblers of chess endings. An original composition, entirely new, would have encountered a suspicious attitude: nobody would wager anything on a fully unknown position or condition!

As a matter of fact, the basic art in the composition of these endings was to introduce very minor changes in known positions. A typical situation is known from previous examples; a player remembers the “correct” sequence of moves and assumes that he will reconstruct the way for winning the stake; on the contrary, the whole position has been displaced by one row, or a single pawn added somewhere, or a piece slightly misplaced; the consequence is that, for instance, the “usual” mate in 3 finds here a countermove and now requires no less than 4 moves – and the bet is lost.

The usual way adopted by the master to teach the technical knowledge accumulated in the course of centuries appears to be the following: in this position you have to select black, since mate cannot be given owing to, for instance, the defence by the new queen jumping to the third square. Should you choose white (or red, as often named), you have to locate, for instance, an additional pawn on the left of the king

in order that mate can be given. This is a current situation among these endings: two endings offered instead of one. They could even be more than two; they could be slightly different from a book to another.

It is not correct to approach these variants with our taste for original versions – we might be tempted to reduce one thousand of endings to a few elementary endgames.

Groups of variants

An organisation according to the various themes involved should be useful for eventually collecting all the old material in a systematic way.

If we consider the whole corpus of old endings, it is however difficult to associate to a given combinational idea the exact number of variants existing in the various collections: a given variant is sometimes shown as a separate item, sometimes as an appendage to another ending, sometimes neglected.

The difficulty is that groups of variants on a given theme were indeed common but at the same time the number of positions to be considered may vary greatly. The reconstruction of the correct dependence of these compositions from each other is an essential point for us when we are willing to evaluate the successive contributions to the whole corpus of chess endings.

Authors of the compositions

In practically no case, until may be Polerio and his times, there was an author willing or meriting to have a chess composition bonded to his name.

Actually, we do find some names recorded, but commonly they correspond to legendary characters, such as for instance princess Dilaram, instead of historical ones.

In several cases it appears that the copy has been made for one's own use and the "author" has added a few specimens, which were not included in the traditional collections. Usually, however, the copyist is anonymous and the date rather uncertain. Due to the collective character of the traditional compilations, the search for the actual authors of the compositions is fruitless. On the contrary, here – more than elsewhere for chess – is a study of the various manuscripts justified.

Studies of the evolution of chess endings

With the electronic means of data acquisition and sorting now available, it should be not too hard to compile a corpus of all these endings, even if some difficulty will derive from the uncertain date of most of them and the unorthodox conditions and/or pieces present in many cases. I wrote a note asking for collaboration, with unsatisfactory results.

When I state that these works need further study I fear to be misunderstood: I know that many chess historians have already studied these endings, providing a useful outline of their evolution. It suffices here to quote the names of Lange, von Lasa, van der Linde, Murray (even in this field the greatest contributor), Benary, Chicco, Meyer. They have described more and more manuscripts and established how these chess endings globally followed some kind of fashion which I can indicate for short as “true” specimens initially prevailing, then “false”, then “artificial”, then “complex”, and so on. Generally, this is however limited to new endings added to a traditional set, which continued to be copied for centuries. For instance, at a given time a kind of fashion induced the composition of many endings with the condition that a first pawn gives check and a second checkmate.

Limits to consider

There are several questions of method to be solved before starting a study on these old chess works. First of all: are we only interested in the history of modern chess? In this case, the known printed references (and what we can speculate about the contents of Vicent) contain most of the information. What can be found in manuscripts is a useful complement, however. For instance, I don't know anything earlier than the endings of Florentine manuscript Cl.XIX.51, which are not present in the printed works known.

Or are we interested in the history of chess in general, old variants included? In the latter hypothesis, the study of manuscripts becomes essential and the part of the subject matter which appeared in the early printed books is much poorer in shape and contents.

If we conclude that a systematic study has to include the old variants, we find soon another discriminating point: must Islamic sources

be taken into account? This is the point where my curiosity stopped (I mean for my present life, I have no doubt that whenever I again become a young student this will not represent an insurmountable obstacle). Different from a few great historians – and here we may find the difference between great and little – I have extended my knowledge to reading old Latin and vulgar codices, but not to Arab ones, which are fundamental for chess in earlier times. If necessary, I must be satisfied to check and compare existing transcriptions of their contents.

Different traditions

After the Arab manuscripts, the traditional collections were compiled in Latin, the usual language in Europe for the books of any subject, with some exceptions, as for instance the correspondence and archive books of merchants. However, collections of endings in vulgar languages did appear early, indicating that the spread of chess extended farther than the limited world of scholars and noblemen.

We have thus two parallel traditions: the Latin manuscripts, the vulgar ones. In principle, more variety can be expected within the latter channel: several different translations, excerpts, additions. And often this is indeed the case. For instance, if the translator from the Latin text is working on his own book, he will likely cut many parts of the text, limiting the translation to a few essential indications near the diagram.

The discrimination between the two traditional channels (let us say, high and low) for the reproduction of these works must not be considered in too strict a way – sometimes a vulgar specimen was a true translation of the “canonical” Latin text, whereas other Latin texts strongly deviated from it.

Obviously, the study of the manuscripts can only be performed on known specimens, or at most on some “new” copy which can be found in the meantime. Several ancient records are kept of manuscripts which have been lost. Only a rough idea (as for myself, I could even admit, no idea at all) can now be obtained on the whole set of the manuscripts which were circulating at a given time and how small is the fraction of the remaining ones.

There is, at least in principle, another channel to consider: the oral tradition. It is for us the least important, since it is now impossible to check, but it certainly existed. The books were studied and copied; the basic items of the written collections were part of the chess knowledge

of most players and gamblers of the time. Zanobi Magnolino, the greatest Florentine master, regretted that he could not obtain from a Spanish colleague a copy of the many endings, which he knew – by heart.

Authors of specific collections

Another important question, enlarging that of the author of a given ending, deals with the author of the whole book. We cannot expect that any individual author of one of these books provided a big contribution, in addition to the choice and ordering of traditional specimens. He could change their order, eliminate unsuitable examples, add a few new endings. It would be very anachronistic to think of an author compiling a new collection consisting of original endings.

We are apparently in front of the evolution of THE book of chess endings, a single encyclopaedic collection preserved and modified both by oral and written transmission in the course of time. We may meet with the establishment of rather fixed contents, but this “traditional” text was the result of several amendments and additions – and in its turn it was to be further modified.

In this long tradition, we find nevertheless the names of several “authors” quoted: at least king Alfonso X and two pseudonyms, well known to all chess historians, Bonus Socius and Civis Bononiae; they must be further commented on.

Early European tradition

Apart from Arab texts, what existed before the works due to Alfonso X or Bonus Socius? Probably the Archinto manuscript, now in the Cleveland Library, may provide useful indication. Different from most early sources, with about two hundred endings, it contains just a score of them, following in large part Islamic patterns.

The famous collection of 1283 due to King Alfonso X was founded on Islamic basis, both for chess endings and for other boardgames – the location itself, in Sevilla, strongly suggests an Islamic influence. Even the collection ordered by the King could not be an original work, with nothing of the same kind previously existing. On the other hand, this collection – kept in the treasury of Spanish kings and bishops – could hardly serve as a source for following selections.

It is not certain whether the Bonus Socius collection was earlier

than Alfonso X. In particular, it is hard to distinguish which differences may be connected to place and which to time.

There is however something certain which connects Alfonso X and early Bonus Socius codices, the care in the compilation and making of the manuscripts. The codex of Alfonso X is apparently a royal specimen; everybody is touched by the beauty of its images. A step lower are the most ancient manuscripts of Bonus Socius; however, several of them (for instance, the two Paris manuscripts of Flemish provenance) are much above usual standards and only comparable to the best productions in the church or court domain.

Since this “gold-age” period, which can roughly be fixed in the beginning of the 14th century, no comparable work will appear for chess editions, certainly not among the printed works, which did not usually have the character of works of great value – independent of the value attributed to them by modern collectors, but this is another question.

Bonus Socius – author

An open discussion concerns the provenance of the author known as Bonus Socius – the most plausible suggestions are linked with Lombardy: either a Flame living in Lombardy or a Lombard himself, thus his provenance and/or stay could be near to Bologna, the town of Civis, the “second” author. As for time, one would expect, at least on first sight, Socius to belong to the last quarter of the 13th century (and Civis to be one to one-and-a-half century more recent).

Different from Sevilla of Alfonso X, in the country of Bonus Socius the Arab influence could be less: were he a Flame or a Lombard, time and place were far enough for an original European contribution to chess. From a cultural point of view, both regions were highly developed at the time – among several candidates, it is unavoidable to address our minds to the two greatest universities of the world, for centuries, Paris and Bologna. –

Due to some parochialism, I would be glad to confirm for Bonus Socius a Florentine provenance (sometimes suggested in the past), but I am finding here no hint, apart from the general fact of the relatively narrow relations with the Islam world. Some suggested attribution, for instance to Buoncompagno da Signa, has probably more points against than favourable. Moreover, the earliest Florentine codex seems to be

less ancient and less Florentine than previously considered.

Bonus Socius writes an introduction where his compilation is considered as a personal work, but there was already an established basic tradition onto which Bonus Socius probably added some “new” specimens. We can thus assume that he based his work on traditional knowledge, common among the best chess players.

Bonus Socius – collection

Most of the following chess collections had in part Bonus Socius as the written origin. We have however to distinguish between the collection first ordered by Bonus Socius (which could also be more limited in extension than usually considered) and the many different copies which have been named after him. The various specimens of the Bonus Socius collection are more different than could be expected. No couple of reasonably identical copies is preserved. It is even rather hard to select a common subset, present everywhere with different additions.

There are several manuscripts which follow a different order, that established by Civis Bononiae, and there are evident reasons to consider all of these last works as belonging to the same family. On the other hand, almost all of the remaining manuscripts are traditionally ascribed to the Bonus Socius family, which thus appears to consist of more scattered items. Also the dates of Bonus Socius manuscripts have a larger range, from the beginning of the 14th century to the 16th.

Civis Bononiae – author and collection

It is for us a fortunate circumstance that this “author” gives a definite indication of his provenance in the pen name selected (even if sadly adding his family name nobody-knows-where in his introductory poem). Bologna appears to be the only fixed point in the whole discussion about the two alleged authors: the identification of this personage (as that of Bonus Socius) appears to be an impossible task with the evidence available today.

The collections of Civis Bononiae are more homogeneous. Not so much in their specific contents, being in part derived from Bonus Socius, in part from elsewhere; a first section mainly ordered according to increasing number of moves required by the solution, a second section

with other, or none, ordering criteria. The greater homogeneity mentioned is among the different copies – there are several of them, kept (or at least originally made) in Italy. In some cases, the nature of a plain copy ready for the market or the specific customer is evident, especially among the Latin manuscripts. Together with them, a few manuscripts are known to contain excerpts, often in Italian, apparently made for one's own use.

This tradition of copying a collection of the *Civis Bononiae* kind lasted in Italy more than we could have expected. People were so accustomed to these traditional endings that they went on to be copied for decades after the introduction of the new rules of modern chess.

The new rules in the collections

On the time and place marking the introduction of the new rules, there is at present much research and more discussion in course. Although some experts are now suggesting that they originated in Spain, this cannot be considered an ascertained fact, in my opinion. Certain is that, as everybody knows, Spanish were the first chess books to be printed and that Spanish masters were often involved in copying and amending chess manuscripts, even far from their country. For the few specimens of mixed character, containing both old and new endings, we can see it in the comprehensive Cesena manuscript and we can deduce the same for the Perugia manuscript.

If we accept the plausible suggestion by Averbakh that the hundred endings of Vicent book were all composed according to the new rules, this was the first item of that kind. The manuscript tradition appears however to be different, with old endings written together with new ones for some time in the beginning of the 16th century.

It is rather curious for us to see together in the same page an “old” and a “new” ending. Actually, only a few of the old endings continued to be valid, being based on pieces with unchanged moves, such as knights and rooks. Usually, however, the selection of old examples was not limited to specimens which kept their validity under the new rules.

Thus the manuscript tradition did not show a clear-cut discrimination between old and new chess. The same holds for the lack of original character both in the endings and in the collections, even if the insertion of specific names in the printed copies has forwarded to future generations the names of several “authors”, such as Vicent, Lucena,

Damiano, and so on.

Acknowledgements

It is for me a pleasure to have somehow answered the invitation by Egbert Meissenburg to indicate to chess historians a significant part of my recent research work. It seems to me, however, that this is some kind of an upside-down procedure. Usually, there are several progresses in the research performed by chess historians of the various nations, which then one of them summarises in a national journal for the local audience. Here, the Italian chess journals listed below have already published the results of my studies and subsequently I have been invited to summarise them for chess historians abroad.

Thus, I have some reason to be grateful to the Italian chess journals, which provided me with a couple of pages, even though most of them are much more interested in technical than in historical matters. Here their addresses are given with, in square brackets, the abbreviations used in the following references.

- Eteroscacco, [ET] C. da Potenza 11, I-62010 Villa Potenza (MC).
- Informazione Scacchi, [IN] Via Baracca 4, I-24123 Bergamo.
- L'Italia Scacchistica, [IT] Via Lamarmora 40, I-20122 Milano.
- Scacchi e Scienze Applicate, [SA] Castello 5449, I-30122 Venezia.
- Scacco, [SC] Via Monferrato 2, I-10131 Torino.
- Torre & Cavallo, [TC] Via Sabrata 16, I-00198 Roma.

A consequence of the procedure indicated is that in this contribution I was not willing to duplicate the description of individual studies – available space was not enough too. I have thus preferred to provide a framework into which my single studies can be inserted. Anyone wishing to know the results, for instance, of a specific investigation on a given manuscript should read the corresponding contribution, listed below.

References

A) Of introductory character:

- “La lettera del Magnolino” SC, 24 n. 3 (1993) 123-124.
- “Annerisci chi vuoi” ET, 18 n.3 (1995) 39-40.
- “Medioevo chiama computer” SC, 26 n. 5 (1995) 224-225.
- “Una soluzione da controllare” Il Labirinto, 48 n.5 (1995) 92.

- “Ma che razza di socio era?” TC, 12 n.1 (1996) 25-26.
- “Bolognese sì, ma di quando?” TC, 12 n.2 (1996) 44-45.

B) Devoted to single manuscripts

(with numbers from Chicco-Sanvito, *Lineamenti*, 1987).

- 929: “Passatempi, ma impegnativi” IN, 5 n.5 (1995) 215-218.
- 930: “Prezioso e antico, ma non troppo” IT, 86 n.1089 (1996) 188-191.
- 931: “Nuovi con vecchi, ma precocissimi” TC, 12 n.3 (1996) 46-47.
- 933: “Mutilo, ma volgare e figurato” IT, 86 n.1095 (1996) 374-375.
- 956: “Un manoscritto autografato” SC, 28 n. 10 (1997) 34-35.
- 958: “Misterioso, ma oggi un po’ meno” IN, 6 n.4 (1996) 163-166.
- 959: “Edizioni amanuensi” SC, 28 n.7 (1997) 38-40.
- 979: “Tascabile, ma funzionale” TC, 12 n.4 (1996) 36-37.
- 984: “Membranaceo, ma a sezioni” SC, 29 n.11 (1998) 32-33.
- New York Public Library. De Ricci 158: “Ignoto, ma incompleto” IN, 6 (1996) 63-67.
- Cesena, Biblioteca Malatestiana. Comunitativa n. 166.74: “The Last Encyclopedic Manuscript” SA, 15 (1995) 18-19; “Il manoscritto scacchistico di Cesena” SA, 15 Sup. 2 (1996) 1-18.

Attention, please! These quotations are limited to my recent contributions and cannot replace the general references.