

On the Earliest Literary Evidence About Italian Draughts A Temporary Reassessment

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It is well known that Italian draughts is played according to its own rules; a man cannot capture a king; the short jump; and the need to capture “il più col più”; not only the most possible value and number of pieces, but also with the most powerful among possible capturing pieces. How old is this remarkable mode of play, which seems not to have suffered any major changes during the past few centuries? Unfortunately, we have little documentary evidence for the early history of draughts, and the Italian form is even less known than others. Of the specific documents providing information on the first centuries of Italian draughts and its technique, very few have been preserved. The first known relevant printed books belong to the 19th century, by far too late to provide valuable information on the early diffusion of the game.

We are therefore left, not with specific bibliography, but on general literary texts, in which passages on draughts are quoted as a pastime. Existing records of that kind have been reviewed by Dr. Chicco (see *Arci-Dama-Scacchi*, no. 12 (1977) 238; No. 1 (1978) 10-11; No. 2 (1978) 32, following the example of Fiske who, at the beginning of this century, had found some interesting documents, later inserted in the histories of Murray and Kruijswijk. The results by Dr. Chicco were then reported by such historians of Italian draughts as Maccagni. and Ghelardini, and they have not escaped the attention of van der Stoep, who briefly reports every essential point in his comprehensive *History of Draughts*, recently published. One's impression of that evidence, and on later possible developments, is rather different if either specific treatises or literary compositions are taken into account. In the first case, we have only the hope that in some of the libraries' old stocks (still not completely catalogued) some manuscript may be found after centuries of oblivion. An event, in any case, not to be expected to occur with any frequency. On the contrary, the examination of general literary texts

may still provide hints and witnesses which will extend back to earlier times the known dates. Even by the latter procedure, however, dates earlier than the 16th century have not yet been reached. Let us briefly review the main references from that time.

The first reported reference in every relevant previous history is that taken from the *Capitolo sul gioco della primiera*, ascribed to Berni and printed in 1526, even if van der Stoep wisely puts a question mark after it. It indeed appears to be cited wrongly: the sentence is actually rather complex, but the "donne" there mentioned are simply the women, who would be the most expert players of the card games cited (Flush and Thirty-One). That interpretation of the text can be confidently put forth simply by carefully reading the prose, but it is also supported by such external evidence as a similar description of card games, considered likewise to be only suitable or women, in Aretino's *Le Carte Parlanti*. Thus, after regretting that the literary evidence for Italian draughts was not as early as we wanted, we are now left with even later dates! In fact, the manuscript by Aldovrandi, containing a full description of the game and, although written in Latin, several Italian names peculiar to it, is of the end of the century, being, in many places, based on Garzoni's *La Piazza Universale*, first published in 1585. The codex has been accurately studied and first introduced into the history of the game by Dr. Chicco.

The research of quotations in literary texts is severely hampered by the frequent occurrence of the words 'dama' and 'dame' with the usual meaning of lady/ies. So, even for the editors of the most comprehensive Italian dictionaries, it has evidently been a difficult task to select adequate ancient references for the same names used for our game. Particularly so, as Italian literature scholars have until now devoted little attention to preserved evidence of boardgames, except for several discussions of those played by ancient Greeks and Romans. Therefore it is difficult now to ascertain which are the earliest records in Italian books of 'dame' and 'dama' when referring to our game.

And 'dame' seems to have preceded the singular 'dama' for indicating the game. The *History* of Murray (1952) has 1611 on page 72 and 1580 on page 74 for its first appearance, with no source. For 'dama' too, Mur-

ray reports a year, 1588, without indicating the source. See also the *History* by van der Stoep, page 84, where most of these data are quoted, together with a reference to Florio's dictionary (1598). A relevant research in progress has not yet detected Murray's sources.

After Aldovrandi's manuscript, the first known printed work which has the game referred to as 'dama' has been found, again under the guidance of Dr. Chicco. It is Roero's *Lo Scolare*, Pavia, 1604. Among much advice given to students for behaving during their studies, can be found (page 203), not to play gambling games, and also not to lose time in playing 'dama' and chess. More profit may indeed be gotten, according to the author, by studying the classical authors.

In conclusion, the progress with respect to the usually reported data may instead seem to be a regression, as we are consistently brought towards the very end of the 16th century for the first literary proofs on Italian draughts. It is to be expected, however, that the presently acknowledged dates may perhaps reach earlier times if further analyses of literary texts are carried out to find new quotations of 'dama/e' as referring to the game of draughts.