

Calcagnini – ludus or draughts?

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Celio Calcagnini (1479-1541) wrote a short treatise in Latin on the board games of the ancients. *De Talorum, Tesserarum et Calculorum Ludis*. This work is often quoted as one of the first descriptions clearly distinguishing between chess and ‘ludus latrunculorum’. Another merit may be the quotation of the game which we know as tangram: it came to Europe from China about two centuries ago, but evidently it was already known to classical civilisations. Calcagnini’s language has lost the grace of classical Latin; moreover the text it is affected by several printing errors. Thus the treatise has yet to be fully understood, at least in some parts. With reference to the article published by Rob Jansen in *Hoofdlijn* in september 1991, this note aims to contribute to the discussion with a new version and a few comments.

1 Quae omnia in calculis diversa sunt, nam et lineae quinque XVI quadriis, seu regiones vel urbes malis appellare, implentur.

(With respect to chess) all that is different and five lines form 16 squares, namely regions or cities, as you prefer to name them.

The distinction between the boards for alquerque and for chess is clear. It appears, however, not so evident that the following description is related to alquerque and its board. In fact, several details would be easier to relate to a common chess board. For the sake of completeness, some alternative interpretations based on a chess board will be inserted in the following, between square brackets, even though an alquerque-type description must be considered more likely.

2 At in ludo calculario XII ad summum manipulones, in duas decurias et praes-
tites duos laterales centuriati, totam militiam exercent, in quibus tamen disciplinam explicandae aciei possis agnoscere. Siquidem in fronte iugati sunt ordines per quinarium numerum: altitudo autem triplici acie instructa est, ut cubitos occupet XII.

But in the board game of pebbles 12 soldiers to the top, ordered in two groups often and two lateral chiefs, exert all the army, and you can realise in them the art of deploying the military array. Indeed, in the front the orders are

connected by number V: on the other hand the thickness is established by a triple array, so that it occupies 12 squares.

The reference is to a board game, in which 12 corresponds to the game pieces and may directly represent the proper name of the game. Contrary to any other evidence, the dozen pieces are considered here as 10 men and 2 kings, from the very beginning; this is surprising, as old games with kings and arrays of identical men on each side are actually not known with certainty. They represent the whole army and exhibit the formation of the array. They would be placed 5 on the rear edge, 5 on the second row and the two chiefs on the third row. (Another hypothesis is that the pieces are simply placed as in draughts on the 32 squares of a common chessboard: twelve pieces connected in quincunx, namely by V, in three successive rows on the top of the board.)

3 *Expedito enim et ordinato militi cubita IV tribuuntur. Quom vero farissa cubita XIII portendatur, ita ut extremi ordinis vel (si lubet sic dixisse) triarij farissa non sit inutilis, quae cubitis duobus infesta hostem exporrigatur.*

In fact, to a quick and ordered man 4 squares are assigned. Since however the *ferse* extends its action on 14 squares, so that the *ferse* of the outermost order or (if we may so say) the triple in one will not be useless, it must be given to the enemy if attacked by two squares.

Four squares are available to any man which is not blocked nor confined to the edge. Really speaking, in *alquerque* the squares controlled can be either 4 or 8 depending on the starting position. More difficult is to explain 14. The text may refer to the 14th square, that is the first in the enemy field, after the 12th (i.e., the last to be occupied by its own army) and the empty central 13th one. (Another possible interpretation is that the king moves on a chess board with the diagonal move of a chess queen and thus the greatest number of controlled squares would be 14.) In any case, the power of the *ferse* (also its name *farissa* is worth noting being the same as *fercia* or the chess queen) must be balanced with respect to that of men ordered in three rows. Therefore, it may only be captured by two men attacking together. This peculiar kind of capture was already known to us from a variant of Italian draughts, as described by Aldovrandi at the end of the 16th century.

4 *Haec est imago illa militiae quam calculis expressam volvere. Alioqui ei qui suo loco excessisset, praesto fuit poena, ut circumventus in manus hostium*

perveniret: quod quom facile fiat, si latera agminis enudentur, ob id constitutum accepimus, ne quis de sacra linea, id est media decedat, cui laterales praestites praefecti sunt. Ea enim prodita tum caetera acies incursionibus hostium facile patet.

This is that image of the army which is represented by moving with pebbles. Otherwise to that which went out from its own place, abruptly a punishment occurred, as it arrived surrounded in the hands of the enemies – a thing that easily would occur, if the flanks of the array had to be voided. Therefore, we consider ascertained that nobody should go out of the holy line, namely the middle one, to whom lateral officials are commanding. In fact, if it is abandoned then the remaining part of the array easily suffers the attacks of the enemy.

Attention must be paid when moving; in particular, men should not be surrounded by enemies, nor should they leave the holy or middle line (sometimes recorded for board games of classical ages). Own pieces captured have to be replaced by new forces coming from the back rows, without leaving the central fields. (For the holy line, an alternative interpretation would be the most distant row, which actually must be kept covered as long as possible in draughts. The four squares of this back row would be occupied by two central men and two lateral kings.)

5 Ab eadem ratione military deductum est, ut miles qui castra hostium penetrant, et in arces evaserit, quasi murali corona donatus, virtutis ergo late impune pervagetur: nec nisi ter circumventus succubuisse iudicetur.

From the same military reason is derived that as a man enters the enemy camp and has access to the fortress, being awarded as if with a stone crown, it may wander about with impunity and may be considered to have been captured only if three times surrounded.

The analogy with war – and with draughts – goes deeper: a man entering the last line is promoted to a king having obtained for that another stone as a crown. Thereafter it can go here and there with impunity. The king obtained by promotion probably moves like the *ferse*, but is even stronger as it can be captured only by a triple attack; this is really an unheard-of capture, more difficult to imagine as the already unusual double attack.

6 Illud praeterea hostimentum in utroque agmine servabant: ut quasi collatis signis vir viro implexus confligeret: et quorum altera parte cornu pelleretur, altera hostem urgeret: ut ita in tota concertatione commutato victoriae ordine paria fieret.

Moreover, in both arrays they followed this reciprocation: that with the signs brought together one fights man to man; and of them one is driven to the corner while the other will push the enemy; so that in the whole struggle by changing the order of the victory it becomes equal.

It is apparently a man to man battle, in which attacks and counterattacks are balanced.

In conclusion, the main problem with this description is whether it only represents a fanciful reconstruction of a forgotten ancient game, or it instead contains some elements from a real game, certainly of the draughts kind, in use at the time of writing. Obviously, it is in view of the latter case – which would be the first quotation of an Italian variant of draughts – that it appears worthwhile to improve our understanding of Calcagnini's text.

Bovenstaand artikel werd ons toegezonden door Arie van der Stoep. Rob Jansen tekent hierbij aan: Ook de humanisten Freigius, Raderus en Sen ftebius dachten dat Calcagninus 't alquerque-spel beschreef.

F. de Ficoroni: *I tali ed altri strumenti lusori degli antichi Romani*, Roma 1734, geeft een ingekorte Italiaanse vertaling van 't artikel van Calcagninus, waarin de opstelling 10 schijven + 2 aanvoerders benadrukt wordt.