Review: Jenny Adams, *Power Play: The Literature and Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages*

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The origin of chess most likely leads back to an Indian game which in its structure corresponds to the basic elements of the Old Indian Army: soldiers, cavalry, military carriages and elephants. In mid-seventh-century Persia the knowledge of a Persian version of the game with a king and minister (firzan) was transferred to the Arabs. Along trade routes and sea routes the game of chess found its way to Europe: Spain and Southern Italy were reached by trade routes to North Africa, and archaeological findings along the silk road prove the distribution of the game on trade routes to Russia and Northern Europe.

The earliest written sources for the game of chess in Latin Europe are the poem Versus de Scacchis, which most likely was written around 1000 A.D in the monastery of Einsiedeln (Switzerland) and a letter written 1061/1062 by Petrus Damiani, bishop of Ostia to Pope Alexander II, where he accuses a Florentine bishop playing chess in an inn during the night. Precious chess pieces made of ivory or crystal become part of the treasures of churches, nobles and regents. Ordinary pieces ware made of wood or bone, more valuable ones of walrus teeth in Northern Europe.

Decisive for the success of game of chess in Western Europe was the transformation of the Indian/Persian war game into a representation of the court. Then, in the thirteenth century, it was transformed into a conceptual model of medieval society as a whole. The transformation of the minister (arab./pers. firzan) into the European queen is only the most remarkable example of a complete set of changes in designations and significances of chess pieces in medieval Europe: thus the military carriage becomes a fortress, the Arab chess piece of the elephant (alfil) is interpreted as a bishop in England and Northern Europe, as a fool in France, while in Italy and Germany the designation of the piece signifies "judges" or "wise men" in literary texts.

In contrast to designations and representations of the pieces which changed fundamentally according to European models of thought, the basic rules of the game remained stable for a very long time in the history of the game. As in the Persian and Arab game the medieval alfil (bishop) moves by jumping diagonally two squares and the medieval fers (queen) being the weakest piece on the chessboard, moving just one square diagonally. In comparison to modern chess, medieval chess has a static character until the endgame is reached and the dynamic power of the knights and towers can be exploited.

Due to this inherent character of the game it is not at all astonishing that medieval chess sources do not contain complete games but rather problems (of extraordinary quality in some cases) with

concrete tasks to solve and that Arabic sources refer to prefixed middle game positions on which the players agree to play on. Entertaining chess problems, which had to be solved in a gambling atmosphere where bets could be made, and artificial accelerations of the game through prefixed positions (tabyas) certainly stimulated the social permeability and made the medieval game of chess a pastime not only for nobles but for different social classes and environments and for different cultures: Arabs, Jews and Christians, men and women.

Although we have little evidence of chess praxis in Latin Europe before the twelfth century, after 1100 the sources multiply and towards the end of the thirteenth century chess as conceptual model was so deeply anchored in the public consciousness that moralists and clergymen started to make use of this symbolic system of rules for their means. The distribution of the game of chess all over Europe was mirrored (and transformed) in literary discourses and iconography referring to and making use of the game as a metaphor and allegoric representation of medieval society. It is exactly this appearance of chess as a metaphor in late medieval discourses which Jenny Adams analyses in her new book Power Play.

Adams argues that chess games and chess allegories in medieval literary texts "encoded anxieties about political organizations, civic community, economic exchange, and individual autonomy" (2). Jenny Adams refers to three basic texts from three different European countries and times. The first reference is Jacobus de Cessolis's late thirteenth-century, Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobelium ac popularium super ludo scachorum. The Liber narrates the story of a ruler who, through his knowledge of chess, ceases his tyrannical attitudes and becomes a benevolent leader. The Liber however does not use the game of chess to address itself to the king (or a prince) alone but "seeks to absorb all people in its symbolic domain" (4). In her most original interpretation Adams argues that the way the chess allegory is used in the Liber demonstrates a fundamental shift in the ways medieval peoples had begun to conceive of themselves and their relationships to their civic community. No longer the "natural" concept of the "state as body" metaphor but a socially constructed model based on rules rather than biology governs the imagination. By replacing the older allegory of the state-as-body and by addressing his text to all men (citizens), according to Adams the Lombardian Jacobus reflects a cultural shift in the ways people imagined their relationship to civil order. Adams proves her arguments with an extensive analysis of the text with a strong focus on the exempla given by Jacobus--and surprisingly not on the descriptions of the chess figures and their moves--and with excursions on the history of the state-as-body metaphor and on social conflicts in late thirteenth-century Lombardy, where Jacobus most likely originates from, where he learned the game of chess according to Lombard chess rules and composed his treatise. "Just as Jacobus's treatment of tradesmen as an integral part of a civic order reflects the political situation of late thirteenth-century Genoa, his decision to minimize the clergy's role on the board--the pieces commonly known as bishops are portrayed in the Liber as community's judges--reflects the Church's decreased power over secular affairs." (25) Adams confines her analysis to the "core" text of the Liber and does not refer to the numerous versions, translations and localisations (text and illustration) of Jacobus all over Europe, although the author is aware that "such variations surely reflect different understandings of the game" (8). And indeed, the interpretation of the alfil as bishop is only one (English) localisation, while

Jacobus' interpretation of the piece as "judges" has been taken over by most central European versions of the Liber. In Spain and Russia the piece remained the old alfil ("elephant"), thus referring to the origin of the game and its transfer to Europe.

Adams does not intend however to rewrite the history of the game of chess--her basic reference remains Murray's 1914 published History of chess--but instead she aims at a general examination of chess as a metaphor in late medieval literature.

The second part of Power Play is dedicated to the late fourteenth century French poem Les Echecs amoureux and a prose Commentary on the poem roughly 50 years later most likely composed by Evrart de Conty. By using chess as an allegory for romantic love and as an allegory for an idealized community which follows cosmic rules, the poem and Commentary combine romantic love, political order and the cosmos. Adams reads Les Echecs and the Commentary basically as a return of the state-as-body metaphor and refers to the historic background of late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century France, where the crisis power led to a desire for a unified country and in political and literary discourse to configurations of the state as body and the king as its head.

The last part of Power Play is dedicated to Chess in mid-to-late fifteenth century England. First Adams takes a look at Hoccleve's Regiment of Princes, a Speculum Regis written for Prince Henry of Wales. Hoccleve not only uses the Liber as his primary source, primarily focusing on the king and the qualities of a ruler, but also integrating a new concept in punning on the game's economic implications: "the Exchequer is not only a checkered board that dominates Hoccleve's primary source, it is also the office that owes him his paychek." (14)

Even more on economic and social exchange Adams reflects in her reading of the Game and Playe of the Chesse by William Caxton published in 1474 and 1483. While the first edition is dedicated to a nobleman, the second with a new preface and additions of woodcuts that do not appear in the first addition is directed to the people of England.

The first woodcut illustrates Jacobus' exemplum of the bad emperor at the beginning of the Liber and shows Nebuchadnezzar's decapitated body lying in pieces on the ground. By showing the destruction and in the next following woodcuts the "subsequent rebuilding of the king's body" (149) until he appears as a figure on the chessboard, Caxton, according to Adams, offers a graphic reminder of a larger shift in fifteenth-century ideas of political authority and civic organization. Not only is the strong position of the king in question but the individual (author) finds its self-confidence in a society and civic organisation which is governed no longer by the absolute power of a king but by the rules of economic exchange. Like the previous parts of the book, the author's argument is based on a thoughtful reading and interpretation of sources, which allows for the historical and discursive contextualisation of Caxton's Chess book.

Linking back the game of chess or to be more precise the concept of the game of chess and its changes in literary discourses in Italy, France and England from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century to a historical context (and discourse) is the basic value of Jenny Adams' Power Play.

Adams' reflections on discourses and metaphors and their embedding in a historical context go far beyond what "chess historians" have worked out so far. For this reason, studies such as this one are of great importance.

Much however has happened in chess history (and archaeology) since Murray published his fundamental work, although a comprehensive study integrating new research results is still missing. Towards the end of the fifteenth century the static character of the medieval game of chess changed dramatically, when new rules for the moves of the bishop and the queen were defined and accepted within a few decades all over Europe. From now on both pieces could exploit their full potential power on the chessboard in moving along the complete diagonal (the bishop) and in a straight line in all directions, horizontal, vertical and diagonal (the queen). Only at that point did the game of chess become a dynamic game and the system of rules which is composed by the interrelations of the pieces and their harmony on the chessboard was transformed from a static and topological system into a dynamic system where space and time become the most important parameters. From the sixteenth century onwards chess manuals refer to this transformation, which caused great discussion and in many cases wild speculation among historians of the game. Only recently a serious study has been published by Jose A. Garzon which gives a plausible historical context for the origin of modern chess in late fifteenth-century Spain, while general implications on changing the rules of a game and changing a system of thought are still to be discussed in future discourses and their interpretations.

NOTE

Garzón, José Antonio. *The Return of Francesch Vicent. The History of the Birth and Expansion of Modern Chess*. Valencia, 2006. (Spanish original: 2005).