Symbolism in Medieval Chess

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In contemporary western society, a game of chess is simply that: a game, a form of leisure fueled by the desire for a diversion from a mundane, everyday life, one filled with continuous hardship and strenuous labor. For some, the game's significance may even run slightly deeper, perhaps reflecting an intense determination to engage in strategic competition and the need to out-perform other players. In medieval society, however, a simple chessboard and the pieces that accompanied it were deliberately infused with certain valuable meanings. The game itself was a significant illustration of medieval society, a symbol that represented social status, moral values, religious meaning, and even cosmic significance. The medieval attitude towards chess, and even other forms of entertainment, was thus highly complex and charged with the potent mixture of metaphor and morality that defined European society in the Middle Ages.

The origins of the popular game that would come to embody the values of medieval Europe remain a topic of scholarly debate even to the present day. As a game involving a chequered board and pieces that are moved only within the guidelines of strict rules, chess probably finds its roots in a four-player game that originated in China, even though the first written records alluding to chess can be found in India. Indeed, the game of chess played by medieval Europeans bears a striking resemblance to *chaturanga*, a board game involving two players that had already been developed in northern India by the late sixth century.[1] From India, *chaturanga* most likely spread through Persia, where its name was changed to *shantranj*, and the game took on a symbolism that was distinctly Arabic. *Shantranj* rapidly became the most popular board game in Arab culture and was continuously celebrated in Arabic art and literature as a symbol of human suffering endured through fate.[2] So popular was this Arabic pastime that it made its way to Spain through the Moorish conquests of the eighth century and had entrenched itself in western European culture by the year 1000.[3]

The progression of chess from Arabic Spain to the Christian kingdoms of Europe can most likely be attributed to Charlemagne's territorial conquests in Iberia, and indeed, chess became a favorite pastime of the aristocratic classes as it filtered into the Frankish empire during the reign of the Carolingian kings. The understanding that chess was introduced during the time of a "golden age" ruled over by a powerful Christian king certainly contributed to its popularity, and the game's potential as a medium for allegory and symbolism, particularly of the Christian variety, were acutely recognized within a century of its induction into European culture. Indeed, given that the earliest references to chess in Europe are derived from manuscripts written in Spanish monastic institutions,[4] the game seems to have taken on an aura of Christianity in the West even before it became a distinguished component of European culture.

The *Jeu d'Echecs de Charlemagne*, a chess set dated to the eleventh century, stands as a

[1] Sally Wilkins, *Sports and Games of Medieval Cultures* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 101.
[2] "Chess Set," *Grove Art Online*, 15 March 2011.
[3] Jenny Adams, *Power Play: The Literature and Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 2.
[4] Ann E. Moyer, *The Philosopher's Game: Rithmonachia in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 23.

testament to the early importance of the game as a symbol infused with various meanings. As the legend goes, this particular chess set was given to Charlemagne as a gift from an Eastern caliph, and was intended as a sign of peace and respect for the power of the French emperor. The pieces are all of Arab design, and in addition to being made of heavy rock crystal, they are also unusually large. This suggests that the game was not intended for actual play, but rather was presented as a symbolic tool of friendly diplomacy. Given the solemnity and monetary value of the *Jeu d'Echecs de Charlemagne*, the board and accompanying pieces were more likely put on display in the royal treasury than made readily available for players at a gaming table.[5] The importance of chess as a symbol for diplomacy remained ingrained in European tradition even as late as the thirteenth century, when the leader of the *Hashshashin*, a powerful Islamic group, presented King Louis IX with a chess set, along with various gold and crystal treasures, as a symbol of their continuing peace and negotiation.[6]

Although the story of the *Jeu d'Echecs de Charlemagne* is probably just a myth, it is nevertheless clear that chess was a game permeated with complex symbolism, one that reflected the values of European society. This was in sharp contrast to the various other base entertainments in which the noble and lower classes alike often indulged. Drinking was recognized a pastime in and of itself, and no matter the game, players were often drunk with wine.[7] The Church, however, saw this as a sinful abuse of the blood of Christ. Gambling, even in the eyes of the profit economy, was considered wrong and immoral, a dishonest means of making money. The Church further condemned gambling by citing the New Testament and the story of Christ's violent reaction against merchants who centered their lives around making money.[8] Furthermore, if a woman took part in such sinful behavior, she was severely punished, and was usually given the death sentence.

In a society that was constantly either at war with another kingdom, suppressing internal threats, or sending pilgrims and knights to the east on crusade, violence was a necessary component of everyday life and usually manifested itself in sport.[9] Fueled by wine and the excitement of the game, violence continuously arose amongst the players. In a smaller town, it was not unusual for entire quarters, or even for the whole town itself to become involved in the fight. Although many were wounded and even killed, the local authorities exercised a certain amount of restraint when suppressing the battling villagers. The *battagliole*, or simulated battles, were seen as a useful form of training for real war, and thus when a fight broke out over the outcome of a game, it was usually allowed to go on until the participants were too exhausted to continue.[10] Of course, the most sophisticated, particularly knightly pastimes included archery, hunting, jousting, and other chivalrous duties in an open preparation for war.

The Church often condemned the diversions chosen as distractions from menial everyday labor, and it was nearly impossible to reconcile many forms of entertainment with the strict standards of Christian morality. Although the Church clearly understood the realities of a warring society, it vehemently used the language of peace and emphasized the importance of rules in order to control societal violence. The Church continued to voice strong opposition to

[5] "Chess Set," *Grove Art Online*, 15 March 2011.
[6] John of Joinville, "The Life of Saint Louis," ca. 1305-1309, John of Joinville and Geoffrey of Villehardouin, *The Chronicles of the Crusades* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008), 258.
[7] John Marshall Carter, *Medieval Games: Sports and Recreations in Feudal Society* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 31.
[8] Paola Chiurulla, "Entertainment in Medieval Culture," (Umbra Institute, Perugia: 15 November 2010), Lecture.
[9] Carter, *Medieval Games*, 31.
[10] Chiurulla, "Entertainment in Medieval Culture," Lecture, 15 November 2010.

sports that resulted in serious injury, such as the tournament, in addition to opposing gambling and drinking. In general, however, the ecclesiastical community seems to have "grudgingly accepted the sports that honed the skills of warriors."[11] Clergymen even occasionally participated in violent sports and acts of war, sanctioning the use of violence for a just cause and personally justifying the necessary role of the *militi Christi*, or soldiers of Christ.[12]

As a unified institution, however, the Church was never able to develop a consistent attitude towards the game of chess. The majority of "what we know about medieval sport is almost entirely from the writings of churchmen and monks,"[13] and these writings display a vast range of opinions. As a game played by the lower classes and nobility alike, chess was frequently connected to dice and gambling, pastimes that, as we have seen, were already condemned as dishonest and blasphemous. Games of dice in particular were associated with "drunkenness, prostitution, and bad outcomes."[14] It is certainly possible that some early versions of chess were indeed played with dice, solidifying its unstable connection to the gambling environment. Chess thus faced Church repudiation right from the beginning, and many clerical (and even some secular) institutions banned chess sets from their halls.[15]

And yet we find that the "very first document that mentions chess pieces in Europe, Ermengaud of Urgel's *schacos*, is that of a count bequeathing them to the treasury of a church in 1008."[16] We learn that chess was even popular amongst the clergy, in defiance of the ban on ecclesiastical participation.[17] Clearly, then, if the playing of chess was forbidden in some institutions, even the Church still recognized the game's potential for symbolism as soon as it was introduced to Europe. Despite its early connections to the despised sports involved in gambling, the majority of the European population still considered it a game to be classed with hunting, riding, hawking, and various other pastimes of the courtly culture.[18] It is therefore hardly surprising that the game of chess became a common medium of expression, a game intended to convey a certain set of messages from the secular and ecclesiastical worlds alike.

Chess was, at first glance, a confirmation of the strict social boundaries of the medieval world. Each piece was clearly attached to a very specific to a social class, with the pawns representing the serfs and the peasantry, and the knights, castles, bishops, queen, and king each mirrored the figures for which they were named. Because of this enforcement of social roles, it is easy to see why chess was a popular courtly entertainment, emphasizing solidarity of the class boundaries and ensuring the dominance of aristocratic power. And yet the meanings that the pieces themselves were meant to convey ran much deeper than the mere representation of social division, for chess "became a way to model political order as well as a way for individuals to imagine their own civic identities."[19]

When Jacob de Cessolis, a Dominican monk in northern Italy, wrote his *Book of Chess* in

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[11] Carter, *Medieval Games*, 54.
[12] Ibid, 33.
[13] Ibid, *Medieval Games*, 50.
[14] Olivia Remie Constable, "Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile: The *Libro de ajedrez* of Alfonso X, el Sabio." *Speculum* 82.1-2 (2007): 317.
[15] Oliver D. Plessow, "What the Artefacts Tell: Medieval Chess Pieces and the Interpretation of the Social Connotations of the Game of Chess," *The Mediation of Symbol in Late Medieval and Early Modern Times*, edited by Rudolf Suntrup, Jan R. Veenstra, and Anne Bollmann (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 121-124.
[16] Ibid, 125.
[17] Moyer, *The Philosopher's Game*, 30.
[18] Plessow, "What the Artefacts Tell," 125-126.
[19] Adams, *Power Play*, 3.

the late thirteenth century, he took special care to emphasize the attributes and importance of each piece on a chessboard. He first separates the pieces into "noble" and "common" categories, and describes their physical characteristics: the king, in addition to bearing a crown, holds an apple in his left hand and a scepter in his right; the queen is a beautiful woman wrapped in an ermine robe; each bishop sits in a chair holding an open book; the knights are riding their horses, bearing all of their armor and weapons; each rook wears a mantle and holds a staff in their hands.[20] The common pieces, or pawns, are then each described in terms of peasant professions, including farmers, carpenters, notaries, merchants, doctors, tavern keepers, toll keepers, and wastrels.

This was therefore a game that was exceedingly related to the common classes, and it is highly significant that de Cessolis uses a series of actual peasant professions to describe the pawns. Before the emergence of this particular allegory, the structure of society was represented as a body in which each limb would necessarily have to follow the orders of those above it. Yet de Cessolis suggests an allegory that "imagines its subjects to possess independent bodies in the form of pieces bound to the state by rules rather than biology."[21] To the lower classes in particular, this accentuates the strong possibility of social mobility, a concept that would have been inconceivable in the preceding centuries. Social mobility was further emphasized by the knowledge that anyone could play chess, especially since it was a game that required no knowledge of Latin, quite unlike *rithmomachia*, an early precursor to chess known as the philosophers' game.[22] Chess further devalued social boundaries because it was a game that Jews could play with Christians, nobility with the peasantry, "a free person could play with a slave, or a lover with a beloved, and either player might win."[23]

Although we know that chess was a game that transcended social divisions, it is predominantly the royals and courtiers who are most often actually depicted playing the game. Alfonso X of Castile deemed chess to be "the most noble" of all games, asserting that it "demands greater skill than the others,"[24] and the distinction between chess and dice games is even physically represented in medieval art, where the chess players could be depicted as any gender, race, or religion, usually within a richly decorated setting. And yet we find that "the dice players are shown in rowdy groups, gambling and drinking in taverns," a pastime that was already looked down upon and fiercely criticized.[25] Chess itself was often associated with courtly culture, and Alfonso X's *Libro de ajedrez* in particular depicts certain court personnel engaged in dramatic rounds of the popular game, from falconers and jesters to courtiers and courtesans. The courtly aura surrounding chess extended from the belief that the game signified a certain nobility: it was a game that required wisdom, strategy, and control. Chess thus represented the ideal society, one in which everyone works for the good of the community, and one that is ruled over by a just and righteous king.[26]

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[20] Jacob de Cessolis, *The Book of Chess*, ca. 1290, translated by H.L. Williams (New York: Italica Press, 2008) 11, 17, 24, 30, 41.
[21] Adams, *Power Play*, 20.
[22] Moyer, *The Philosopher's Game*, 30.
[23] Constable, "Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile," 346.
[24] Alfonso X, *Libros del ajedrez, dados, y tablas*, 2 vols (Madrid, 1987) fol. 1v; 2:240, as quoted by Olivia Remid Constable, "Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile," 316.
[25] Constable, "Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile," 316.
[26] Ibid, 317, 340.

Figure 1: A royal game of chess. *Table of Christian Faith*, fol. 1. ca. 1405.

It is therefore hardly surprising that learning to play chess, and to play effectively, became an essential component of noble and royal education alike. In medieval art, courtly depictions of gaming typically involve kings and queens themselves, usually playing chess and surrounded by their children, perhaps instructing them in the art of strategy (see Figure 1). The game is a clear symbol of war, with the pieces lined up in formation and the players strategizing to protect the king, and it was considered necessary for a king to play in order to enhance his potential for just and effective kingship. As Jacob de Cessolis describes the attributes of the king as an essential chess piece, we are reminded of the ideal virtues that a medieval king should display:

> "A king should radiate with virtues and grace. His will and desires should be so enriched by them that his character stands out above other people's […] It is the king's job to use force when kindness is not effectual […] In his right hand he should have a scepter, representing justice, by which he constrains evil subjects […] Mercy and truth both preserve the king […] Above all, the king should be gentle and compassionate."[27]

Perhaps in response to de Cessolis's comments, advisors and meticulous family members drilled young kings, princes, and nobles in round after brutal round of chess, emphasizing that the shame of losing a game would be magnified tenfold if the player were to lose an actual war.[28] Chess as war was a metaphor readily acknowledged in medieval Europe, and John of Joinville, in his chronicle of King Louis IX's crusade to the East, characteristically describes the soldiers advancing like the pieces in a game of chess.[29]

Perhaps because of the game's general association with entertainment, wisdom, royalty, and war, many of the chessboards described in written records as well as those that have survived the centuries are astoundingly rich in material. The most common materials used in making the pieces and board alike were walrus tusk, bone, cast metal, or simply wood. The Lewis chessmen, discovered in Scotland and dated to the mid-twelfth century, are carved from walrus ivory and whales' teeth.[30] For royals and wealthier nobles, pieces were made of rock crystal and inlaid with gemstones, with some of the pieces formed entirely from precious stones and metals. Although many of these boards were primarily designed as showpieces for a treasury, they probably did see quite a bit of use.[31]

The most prestigious and sought-after chess sets, however, were made from elephant ivory, such as the *Jeu d'Echecs de Charlemagne*. Ivory was desirable primarily for its exotic nature, for it symbolized the East, a foreign land abundant in glamorous curiosities: Muslim scientists and artists, mysterious creatures, and powerful caliphs. Playing with pieces carved from the tusks of an elephant was a novelty few were privileged to boast about. Yet ivory was

[27] Jacob de Cessolis, *The Book of Chess*, 11-12.
[28] Adams, *Power Play*, 34.
[29] Joinville, "The Life of Saint Louis," 212.
[30] "Chess Set," *Grove Art Online*, 15 March 2011.
[31] Plessow, "What the Artefacts Tell," 119.

also intended to evoke a particular image in the players' mind, as well as a sense of honor and chivalry. In various medieval bestiaries, we find that elephants, whose tusks graced the pieces of many a royal chessboard, were renowned for their intelligence, their good memory, and their long lives. Though used in war, the elephant was seen as a naturally gentle animal, intrinsically inclined to be kind and protective. The elephant was also the ideal spouse, for they were believed to be nonadulterous, remaining in a state of chastity with their partner for life. This particular sense of purity was even linked to the original state of humanity before the Fall of Adam and Eve, and the elephant thus became a subtle symbol of innocence and the compassion of Christ.[32] Pieces carved from elephant ivory, then, were possibly intended to evoke this sense of original purity, as well as to encourage the player to emulate the natural qualities of the elephant.

In addition to the chivalrous and subtle meanings derived from ivory chess pieces, medieval chess also took on several deeply significant moral and religious connotations. Even the medieval origin of the game itself was widely constructed as a moral allegory. Before it developed the aura of medieval symbolism, chess was often associated with Palamedes, the Greek hero who saw through Odysseus' ruse of madness and forced him to fulfill his vow to fight in the Trojan War. According to ancient legend, it was Palamedes who invented *pessoi*, an archaic form of what would eventually become known as chess.[33] But with the emergence of the medieval world and its chivalric, Christian values, Palamedes's ancient pagan character gradually transformed to fit that of the ideal Christian hero. He thus became a Saracen knight who had converted to Christianity and imported chess from the orient. In medieval legend, he was most widely known for competing with Tristan for the Irish princess Isolde's hand in marriage and for serving King Arthur as a Knight of the Round Table.[34] The game of chess was practically inseparable from this popular character, and the chessboard pattern served as Palamedes's livery in courtly tournaments, enhancing the game's importance as a form of strategy and protection. In addition, Palamedes's heretical origins as a Saracen knight also ensured that the chessboard served as a representation of his conversion to Christianity and thus became a recognized symbol of the triumph of moral Christian values.

But Jacob de Cessolis proposes a different version of the game's invention and attributes the creation of the medieval game to a Babylonian philosopher named Xerxes. According to de Cessolis, Xerxes, a noble scholar who advocated the morality of justice, strove to create a scenario that would curb King Evilmerodach's evil ways and bring a semblance of justice to the lawless city of Babylon. Despite the knowledge that "the king might have him put to death for the reproof," Xerxes was determined to reform the king's "wicked life,"[35] and the final result of his trial and error was the game of chess. This was "a game filled with unlimited metaphors and parables," and, according to de Cessolis, "[b]ecause of the countless number of ways to play, because of the various meanings and metaphors, and because of the ingeniousness of the battles, the game has become famous."[36] Xerxes' courage and dedication to justice represented an ideal behavior and sense of morality, and from the moment of its medieval creation, the game itself was thus infused with these essential qualities.

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[32] Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 130-135.
[33] Chiurulla, "Entertainment in Medieval Culture," Lecture, 15 November 2010.
[34] Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *A Companion to Arthurian and Celtic Myths and Legends* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2004), 333.
[35] Jacob de Cessolis, *The Book of Chess*, 7.
[36] Ibid, 10.

The *Moralitas de Scaccario*, a treatise on the moralities of chess commonly attributed to Innocent III, opens with, "The entire world is a chessboard, and its one end is white, while the other end is black; and this is because of the twofold condition of life and death, or praise and blame."[37] In order to assure a victory in chess, all of the pieces must work together to defeat the enemy player, and this was an allegory applied to everyday life. Through a moral imperative, individuals, like the chess pieces protecting the king, must assume equal portions of responsibility, enjoyment, and sacrifice to ensure the success of the community. If this was not done, not only would the game of life and morality be lost, but the selfish person who ignored his own moral responsibilities would also be plagued by shame and exposure. For in addition to being an instruction booklet, we see that Jacob de Cessolis' *Book of Chess* also functioned as a behavior guide for the realm, for both the king and the common peasant alike. De Cessolis's chess was equated with social roles and standards, making it an entirely public game. Each move was therefore subject to public judgment and scrutiny, much like the behavior of each individual, for "when their vices spill over […] the fabric of society is threatened."[38]

The moralities of chess extended into the art of the medieval world, where the game was represented in wall frescoes, tapestries, drawings, and illuminations. As opposed to a random set of pieces, chess images in medieval art depicted "an actual, playable chess problem,"[39] perhaps intended to emphasize the need for true morality as well as the relevance of an accompanying piece of writing. The artists of these illustrations even ensure that the players "often point or glance at significant pieces, and they sometimes hold relevant pieces in their hands."[40] But although a variety of players of varying ages, genders, ethnicities, and religions are shown playing chess, the games are nearly always won by the morally and socially dominant player, usually an upper-class Christian man.[41] In literature, chess also became an essential feature of courtly love, and in medieval romances and the various illuminations that accompanied them, the lovers are often depicted playing chess as a ritual of formal courtship. Alfonso X's *Libro de ajedrez* contains several illustrations that portray these scenes of "the lovers' game," one of which shows a game "played by a Christian man and woman, in which the woman loses and is shown handing over a ring to her victorious male opponent."[42] By extension, this woman is also handing over herself, with the chessboard signaling her defeat and the ring representing the consequences of that defeat and, perhaps, her surrender to marriage.

Not surprisingly, chess was also swept up in the demand for works of art that depicted Biblical scenes or Christian allegories. The chessboard itself was seen as a work of art, representing the correlation between Christianity and classical philosophy. The board was a physical manifestation of the invisible connection between space and time: it was a perfect eight-by-eight square, with the number eight signifying the eight celestial spheres mentioned by the Pythagoreans. All in all, these squares corresponded to the sixty-four generations between Adam and Christ, and the board was thus highly indicative of the connection the Christian and classical worlds.[43] Similarly, in the New Testament, Death is constantly personified as an actual, physical being, and in medieval art, chess became his game of choice (Figure 2: note that the

[37] *Moralitas de Scaccorio*, ed. Murray, *A History of Chess* 560-561; as quoted by Plessow, "What the Artefacts Tell," 109.
[38] Adams, *Power Play*, 35.
[39] Constable, "Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile," 302.
[40] Ibid, 311.
[41] Ibid, 341.
[42] Ibid, (fig. 7), 324.
[43] Chiurulla, "Entertainment in Medieval Culture," Lecture, 15 November 2010.

king is in checkmate). A fifteenth century fresco in Täby church, Sweden, depicts a human man playing a game of chess with Death, personified as a skeleton with flesh dripping from his bones.[44] There are two possible interpretations of this image. The first is that Death is yet a further allegory for Satan, and the fresco is intended to portray humanity's continuous struggle against evil and immorality. The second interpretation is that Death is simply death, with the chessboard symbolizing a passage to the afterlife and the eventual triumph of eternity. Either interpretation, however, leads to the same conclusion, that it was possible for chess to transcend temporal powers and to extend into the heavens and the afterlife.

In the medieval world, chess took on a significance that was unprecedented by any medieval pastime: it became an essential component of a noble education; it was simultaneously the ideal symbol of just, strategic war and an icon of diplomacy; it represented the ideal Christian morality; it personified western medieval society; and it was also widely incorporated into medieval art and literature. Unlike the traditional pastimes of hunting, gambling, drinking, and various other amusements of the medieval world, chess was much more than a crude form of entertainment. Not only did the game represent the social structure of medieval Europe, it was also infused with essential moral and religious meaning. From the design of the chessboard itself to the very materials with which the pieces were made, chess was a physical and metaphorical representation of medieval values and beliefs.

Figure 2: Death playing chess with a king. 'Master B R with the Anchor.'
The Illustrated Bartsch. ca. 1480s.

[44] Plessow, "What the Artefacts Tell" (plate 32), 139.

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