

Tractatus de Ludo Scacorum



This is a most valuable treatise on the game of chess, representative, in many respects, of the society and spirit of medieval man.

It is decorated with delightful, brightly coloured miniatures.

The manuscript begins with the origin of the game of chess and discusses the significance of the chess figures as an allegory of two opposing kingdoms, and even how the movement of the figures symbolises righteous and praiseworthy deeds.

The treatise by the Dominican monk Jacobus of Cesolis on which it is based, the *Liber de Moribus*, was one of the most widely copied and circulated documents of the Middle Ages.

Among treasures of the most varied subject matter and provenance, the National Library of Spain has this small and delightful manuscript of Bohemian origin from the early 15th century which, judging by its title, purports to be a short chess treatise.

We say “purports” because when we delve into it and scrutinise its contents, what we actually discover is an abridged version of the famous sermon by the Dominican monk Jacobus of Cesolis –*Brother Jacobus*, in its more colloquial form– which was to be extraordinarily successful and disseminated.

Thus, for a better understanding of this delightful manuscript, we should go back to the times of the good friar Jacob, to that final stretch of the 13th century in which, curiously, in the wake of a new and fantastic game recently discovered in Europe and which was becoming quite a trend, there was a considerable proliferation of writers and orators who produced extensive and fiery sermons in which a clear parallelism was established between society, morality and chess.

Among all these texts and sermons, the *Liber de Moribus* by Friar Jacob stands out as by far the most successful of them all. The full title is *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium ac popularium sive super ludum scacchorum*, and although we unfortunately do not have the original manuscript, **no less than 300 manuscript copies still survive today**, either in Latin or in some other language. And that is not to mention the practically countless printed editions in a multitude of languages, which bear witness, as we have already mentioned, to the extraordinary diffusion that the original manuscript experienced.

Friar Jacobo's sermon is a mixture of historical erudition, Christian morality and chess and, as Leonard E. Boyle asserted in 1990, it is the most original and witty sermon of all those written by the Dominicans, which already provides us with a possible clue as to predict its considerable repercussion. But the key to better understand its success is perhaps to be found in its rapid penetration in the various clerical circles as well as –albeit to a lesser extent– in the favourable reception it received at court and among the nobility, which, in the end, **made it one of the most copied documents of the whole of the Middle Ages**.

As is often the case with various medieval or ancient authors, we do not have much information about the life and activities of Friar Jacobus in this case either, although the date of his birth is usually fixed at around 1250, and that of his entry into the Dominican convent of Santa Magdalena, in Genoa, is around 1266. It seems that he lived a quiet and pious monastic life there until death knocked at the door of his cell around 1322.

The first draft of the sermon could date from 1281, although the definitive one should be placed in the twilight of the monk's life, the date of 1310 generally being accepted. As has been said, this is neither a technical treatise on the game of chess nor did Friar Jacobus intend it to be one. Instead, he tried to design a great social symbolic picture with moral overtones so that both the clerics who were often trained by learning this game and the nobles who played it with a certain assiduity would more easily understand this sermon and benevolently accept the clear moral intentionality that is behind it. Logically, the historical and social context in which the author moves, as well as the development of the game of chess in Christian circles at the time and the enthusiasm with which it was practised, will have had a powerful influence on the allegorical wording of the codex and its rapid propagation.





We have already indicated that this manuscript in the National Library of Spain does not reproduce the *Liber de Moribus* in its entirety; on the other hand, it is a copy of a very abridged version. Specifically, it is the version of the sermon by Friar Paolino of Venice around 1315-1320 for inclusion in his *Chronicum Magnum*. With the passage of time, another series of copies of this abridged version was to appear, constituting a sort of textual sub-family. All of them adopt the more forceful and striking title of *Tractatus De Ludo Scacorum* –literally *Treatise on the Game of Chess*–, which could well be misleading as it does not clearly reveal the didactic-moral intentionality of the original *Liber de Moribus*. Today we know of 7 manuscripts of the *Ludo Scacorum*, of which the copy we are dealing with here would be the most beautiful of all.

The reader of the study we present here will find many and varied things to enjoy, but we would like to stress in particular the interesting and detailed analysis that Joaquín Pérez de Arriaga makes of one of the most striking and debated aspects of this extraordinary game of chess: that of its origin.

It is interesting to note that, although with little success with the public, for over a century people have been talking about the possible Egyptian origin of chess and how for some five thousand years various board games with chessmen have been played in Egypt for some five thousand years, which would undoubtedly constitute the most remote origin of chess. According to this theory, which is increasingly shared and accepted, the general historical outline of chess would be very simple: what we might call the Egyptian “pre-chess” would be its origin, Islamic chess would have served as a transmission belt and, finally, Western Christian chess would be its ultimate recipient and the one that would introduce its most recent changes, modify its rules and provide the definitive form of the game as we know it today. It is worth noting that, in all this simple but very long history, the Iberian Peninsula is revealed as a key strategic point of interconnection and as a fundamental driving force in its development.

The impressive culture that developed in Egypt throughout its three empires –ancient, middle and new– is well known. We also know how, in its lower period, Egypt was successively invaded by Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans and Muslims. But only this latter invasion, and from its beginning in 640, has left traces of the incorporation of board games with raised pieces, the practice of which spread rapidly from the Mediterranean to the Indus, thus revealing the origin of these games even if their origin is not expressly indicated. Regarding this period of Egyptian “pre-chess” to which we alluded, we invite the reader to take a closer look at everything that the book of complementary studies says about the first and most important of its pieces: the chamois that covered the coffin of Queen Isetemkheb B, since it is the only archaeological remains that offers us a zenithal view of a checker board, with coloured squares and with the drawing of the pieces on the edge, ready to start the game.

The other important piece for reconstructing this story is one of the oldest tombs in Thebes, which we could date to between 1550 and 1185 BC, which has a fragment of the funeral procession of the burial of a royal scribe in which slaves can be seen carrying a chessboard to the tomb. The coffin was also draped with a sheared cloth that betrayed the deceased’s hobby. From this and other archaeological pieces that are also of great significance and interest, we are able to reconstruct the long and exciting history of the spread of a game that today is present in every corner of the planet.

We have heard so often about the possible Indian origin of this game that we will have to refer again to how much and how well this theory is analysed and refuted in the aforementioned book of complementary studies of the facsimile, but for the moment suffice it to say that al-Biruni stated that, in India, he had found “no trace of chess” and that “no one knew how to give him an





account of such a game”. Al-Biruni was a great mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, historian, poet, biologist, physician and many other things. He was to be the first Muslim to study India and its traditions in depth, to the point that, through his *Chronicles of India* of 1030, he is usually considered as the father of “Indology”. It is in that context that he researched on the possible Indian origin of the game like no one else has. Given his encyclopaedic knowledge and insatiable curiosity, this testimony of al-Biruni is fundamental.

From the moment the Muslims invaded Egypt, around 640-644 AD, and adopted their board games, chess among others, the most varied and sometimes crazy legends about its origin began to emerge automatically. Thus, in the biblical sphere, there are those that claim that King Solomon and even Adam himself already played chess. Or those which, in the Hellenistic sphere, have Ulysses himself playing chess. In this sense, it is not surprising that Friar Jacobus, who had not quite found the right legend for his moral purposes, should subscribe to the theory of the Babylonian origin of chess, and take out of his sleeve the name of the wise man and philosopher Xerxes as the inventor of the game and, drawing on the Bible and reconstructing the story of the Babylonian exile in his own manner, he offers us his own version.



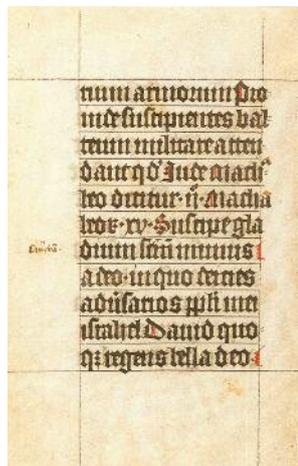
Indeed, the moralising impulse that animates him and leads him to take up the biblical story in Babylon, makes him rewrite it to his advantage. Thus, instead of conveying the image offered by the Bible of King Evil-Merodak as a fair and kind man, liberator of the Jewish people, he twists the narrative to describe him as a wicked and perverse king whom he finally blames for the acts of his wicked father Nebuchadnezzar so as to turn him into a murderous king and thus provide a greater exemplary merit to the game of chess that would have operated the apparent miracle of the conversion of such an evil king.

According to our manuscript, Xerxes would have invented the game of chess at the request of the nobles of the court of Evil-Merodak who, moved by the apparent charm of the game, would have begun to play it assiduously, thus inciting the king himself to enjoy it in his moments of recreation. The king then called upon the direct presence of its inventor who, while teaching him how to play, instilled in him the necessary moral precepts, respect for the laws and the principles of just governance, which would end up leading to his unexpected conversion thanks to the edifying power of the game. And although the historical data strongly refute this version, it is certain that the sermon by Friar Jacobus would have unparalleled success and his proposals would have a profound impact on the Christian society of the time.

In this chapter on legends about chess, and even though it is possible that everyone has heard it told at some time, we cannot fail to mention the most famous and curious of them all, which tells us of the king of a remote country, generally located in India, who commissioned a wise man to invent a game that would distract him and give him solace in his moments of leisure. When the sage presents him with the game of chess, the king is so enthusiastic that he promises to give him whatever he asks for. To which the wise man responds with a seemingly humble request: a quantity of cereal grains equal to the sum of 1 grain for the first square of the chessboard, 2 grains for the second square of the chessboard, 4 for the 3rd, 8 for the 4th and so on. The king, smiling and solicitous, immediately accepted the request. But when his advisors calculated the final amount of grain to be delivered, the king almost fainted when he realised that it was impossible for him to keep his promise, as there was not enough grain in the whole kingdom to fulfil it. In fact, for the last box alone, over 18 trillion grains would have to be delivered.

As has been said, the historical trajectory of chess leads us, after the aforementioned and somewhat obscure stage of its origin, to the next, rather more documented stage of its transmission, in which it reaches the Iberian peninsula, where we know that it was already being practised before 848 AD among the Muslims and, in the Christian camp, from before 1008. At this point, we have to refer to the first Muslim chess treatise, that of *al-Adli*, which we can date back to Baghdad at around 847, making it the oldest treatise in the world on this marvellous game. In addition to the many interesting facts he provided, we cannot fail to mention his curious mansuba, which we would denominate today as a study –a positional study in which a problem is usually posed to be solved with a few pieces–, collected in 1141 by the no less famous *Kitab ash-shatranj*. The curious thing about the problem with only three pieces that was posed there is that it has taken over a thousand years to solve.





In the reception stage, we cannot fail to mention *The Book of Chess* by Alfonso X the Wise completed in Seville in 1283, preserved today in the Monastery of El Escorial, which stands as the first chess treatise in the West and in which the rules that were to govern the game in Western culture until the end of the 15th century are established. More specifically until the autumn of 1497, when the student Lucena, in Salamanca, published *El arte de ajedrez con CL juegos de partido* (The Art of Chess with CL match games), establishing the new system of the queen, as it would be known from then on, as opposed to the previous one, known from that time onwards as the old system. This historical moment is important because it is the new rules introduced by Lucena that will bring about the change of model and put a date on the death of medieval chess. **Chess will come to be seen as a battlefield rather than as that symbolic feudal city or that great allegorical stage for the preaching of Friar Jacobus.** This new approach would contribute to the decadence of the traditional ideas of social organisation defended by the Dominican and would finally accelerate their expiry.



This new vision of chess as a battlefield game was also defended by Ruy López, the distinguished clergyman from Zafra, another of the key figures in the future development of the game, who immortalised the beginning with the study of his famous openings. And although we would like to keep this historical overview particularly brief, we must also refer here to his superb treatise of 1561, *El libro de la invención liberal y arte del juego del ajedrez* (The book of the liberal invention and art of the game of chess), which would go through multiple editions, including several in Italian, French, German, Portuguese, etc., and which would also remain in force for almost two centuries. Ruy Lopez, who is already a chess classic, is also an undisputed ecclesiastical and humanist authority. His treatise burst onto the scene at a time when the concept of leisure was emerging in society, moving definitively away from the moralistic view of chess of Fray Jacobus.

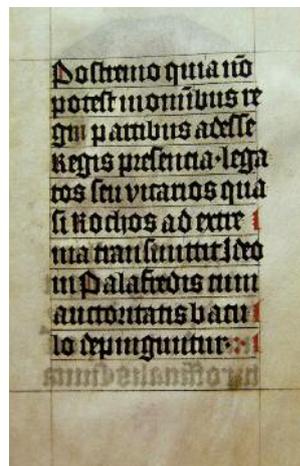
Finally, the printing press caused an unprecedented cultural and social upheaval that accelerated the decline of the culture of manuscripts and oral teaching, which, together with the discovery of America and the expulsion of the Muslims from Spain, led to a real social upheaval

of gigantic proportions. In other words, the feudal society that Friar Jacobus knew well, the breeding ground of his ingenious and allegorical sermon, had changed drastically by the end of the 15th century and, in spite of the multiple printed editions that it also initially merited, this new context would ultimately mean the end of the successful cycle of dissemination of his preaching. This should not prevent us from concluding that, with these treatises, the tandem Jacobus of Cesolis-Paulinus of Venice leaves us a priceless portrait of the society of their times.

From these initial pages we cannot fail to encourage you to read at leisure, in the aforementioned volume of complementary studies to the facsimile, the extensive and substantial historical-artistic study by Professor Miguel Hermoso, **which confirms that this manuscript we present is a small jewel of illuminated Gothic**, produced in Bohemia in the early 15th century, probably during the reign of Sigismund III, in an environment in which medieval miniatures had reached such a high level. Let us not forget that the arts in general and painting in particular underwent an exceptional development there. It us also in Bohemia where, for example, as many specialists assure us, the panels by the early Bohemian masters reached the pinnacle of 14th century European art.

In terms of miniatures, the development is as spectacular or even superior to that of these other arts.

To take just one example, we may recall the voluminous and splendid King Wenceslas Bible, a hymn to artistic excellence. Well, in our manuscript, there are at least two accomplished miniature artists who endow this *Tractatus de Ludo Scacorum* with a vibrant colouring, of which the ultramarine





blue colours stemming from lapis lazuli are particularly noteworthy. In other words, this is a truly luxurious project, undoubtedly produced for an anonymous but important figure at the Bohemian court. The date currently proposed by experts for its execution is between 1430 and 1440.

This particular copy comes from the private library of Cardinal Zelada. Francesco Saverio de Zelada was born in Rome in 1717 into a Spanish family. His ecclesiastical career, full of high-level posts and responsibilities –among others, he was the director of the Vatican Library and the Vatican Observatory– kept him closely linked to the Iberian Peninsula. This would explain why, perhaps to protect them from the pillaging to which the Napoleonic troops were subjecting Rome, the Cardinal finally bequeathed to the Library of the Cabildo of Toledo all the manuscripts from the great library he had assembled, including this *Tractatus*. From there they would later pass on to the National Library in Madrid.

A final note to conclude: as soon as chess penetrates Christian societies in the West, a curious image appears and spreads rapidly, that of the bag containing the chess pieces as an allegory of death. Many authors echo this allegory, which hides a serene reflection on society, on the game, on life and death, which has merited so many and such beautiful pages in the vast human literary production. However, around this very concrete theme of death and chess, perhaps no one has expressed himself with the freshness and plasticity with which Sancho Panza does in *Don Quixote*.

And so, to close this editorial touch to such a beautiful and curious treatise, it seemed to us that, because of its eloquence, nothing better than to reproduce the passage here, and that the last words should be his own: *A brave comparison, quoth Sancho; but not so strange to me, that have heard it often, as that of the chess-play, that while the game lasts every piece hath its particular motion; and, the game ended, all are mingled and shuffled together, and cast into a bag, which is a kind of burial.*

