

Chess as a
means of moral
education in
the middle ages

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Opening

Overview:

- I. The Game of Morality
- II. Chess as a Game of Nobility
- III. The Moralitas
- IV. The Gesta Romanorum
- V. Jacob of Cessole
- VI. Chess Literature after Jacob
- VII. A little Advertising at the End

I.

The Game of Morality

CARDINALIS: Non male movemini,
habent enim aliquae scientiae
instrumenta et ludos, arithmetica
rhythmimachiam, musica
monochordum. Nec ludus scacorum
caret mysterio moralium.

(Nicholas of Kues, *De Ludo globi* 2,1-4;
1463)



Your movement of thoughts is not
bad at all, some sciences have their
instruments and games, arithmetic
has rhythmimachy, music has
monochord. Even the game of chess
is not without a secret of moral
teaching.

II.

Chess
as a Game of
Nobility

Probitates vero hae sunt: Equitare,
natate, sagittare, cestibus certare,
aucupare, scaccis ludere, versificari.

The things one must be able to do
are horseback riding, swimming,
archery, boxing, hunting, chess,
writing verse.

Petrus Alfonsi, *Disciplina Clericalis*
(Beginning of the 12th century)

sueziu, merket an den venden,
wie die gent dem kuenge vor;
die ritter nach in witem spor;
dar nach die alten, an den lit sin;
den volget dan div kuenigin;
div roch zeigent gots gewalt.
die stein, die ich han gezalt,
der dienst ist gein dem kuenge balt.
Die stein mit vliz ein ander huetent,
in guetlicher guete si guetent,
wie si den vienden sich entsagen.
fuer lage und vuer valsches iagen
sint si kueng und kuenginne bi.
alsus wirt man dort leides vri.
swer helfe hier an die suezen sinnet,
des minne von ir wirt so geminnet
vnd von im, der si durch minne erkos,
wan si magtuoms pris nie verlos.

(Ulrich von dem Türlin: *Arabel*,
Vs. 113,24–114,10, around 1260)

Beloved, look how the pawns precede the king, then [follow] the knights in a wide arc, then the old men (judges/bishops) who are wise: these are followed by the queen; the rooks symbolise the power of God. The pieces I have listed stand bravely in the service of the king. Full of zeal they protect each other, and in this they express their high goodness as they oppose the enemies. In every position and in every treacherous attack they stand by the king and queen. Thus one becomes free of all worries in the hereafter: for whoever asks this sweetness [Virgin Mary] for help, his loving desire is so loved by her and also by him who chose her out of love, because she never lost her virginity.

III.

*Quaedam
moralitas de
scaccario*

(The Moralitas)

13th century

Rocus est Iusticarius perambulans
totam terram directe in linea in
signum quod omnia iuste corrigat, et
in nullo omnia iusticia muneribus
corruptus obliquari debet.

The Rook is the judge who [drafts]
over the whole area in a straight
line, as a sign that he sets
everything right, and gives justice
without exception, untainted by
gifts.

(The Moralitas 560; 13th century)

Alphini vero [...] sunt episcopi [...]. Isti
alphini oblique currunt et tres punctos
currendo pertranseunt indirecte, quia fere
omnes prelati odio, amore, munere, seu
fauore, peruertuntur ne deliquentes
corrigunt et contra vicia latent, set potius
annuo censu peccata ad firmam tradunt.

(*The Moralitas* 560f.)

But the Alphini [...] are bishops.
These bishops slant and pass three
points in the move straight away,
for all prelates are ruined by hate,
love and bribery (or favor), so that
they correct not sinners and bark
against [their] faults, but rather
encourage them (for yearly
interests) in their sins.

Mundus iste totus quoddam
scaccarium est

(The Moralitas 560)

The whole world is a game of
chess.

Mundus iste totus quoddam
scaccarium est

(The Moralitas 560)

The whole world is a game of
chess.

cuius vnus punctus albus est,
alius vero niger, propter
duplicem statum vite et mortis,
gratie et culpe

(The Moralitas 560)

one field is white, but the other
black, because of the dual nature of
life and death, mercy and guilt

Et sepe contingit quod quando familia scaccarii reponitur in sacculum, rex inferius collocatur et reponitur; sic fere quique maiores in transitu huius seculi inferius collocantur, scilicet in inferno, sepeliuntur, pauperes in sinum Habrahe deportantur.

And it often happens that the chess family is put back in the bag, the king is placed below and replaced, just as nearly all the mighty are placed below, buried in Hell, in the transition of this age, but the poor are placed in Abraham's bosom

(The Moralitas 560)

Ein meister glîchet diese werlt eime schâchzabele: dâ stên ûfe kûnege unde kûneginne unde rîtare unde knappen unde venden. Hie mite spilen si. Wanne si müede gespilet haben, sô werfen si den einen unde den anderen in einen sak. Alsô tuot der tût, der wirfet ez allez in die erden: welich der rîche sî oder der arme sî oder der babes sî oder der kûnec, daz schowet an deme gebeine. Der kneht ist dikke über den hêrren geleget, sô si ligen in deme beinhûse.

A master compares this world to a chessboard: there are kings and queens, judges, squires and pawns. They play with that. When they are tired of playing, they put one and the other in a bag. Death does the same thing: it throws everyone into the ground. So who is the rich or the poor, the pope or the king? Look at the bones. Often the servant is placed over the master as they lie in the ossuary.

(Hermann of Fritzlar, 13th century)

IV.

*The Gesta
Romanorum*

(first half of the 14th century,
contains 240 example-stories)

The fourth class is made up of the pawns, all of whom are only allowed to take a single step forward at a time. They can advance from the square on which they are initially set up to the next but one, because they are still safely within the king's territory, so to speak; but when they have strayed beyond its bounds, they content themselves with a single step, always going straight ahead and never turning back, that they may seek by their march and valor what the officers by virtue of their dignity possess from the first. When, with the help of the runners and other officers, they get to the line of the enemy officers [the higher chess pieces], their bravery wins them the privilege that only the queen has. But it is important to know that although the pawns are marching straight ahead, if they hit an enemy officer or pawn, they can catch and hit them at an angle to the right or left. Otherwise a pawn never advances outside the straight line to the right or left unless he has acquired the dignity of queen.

(Chapter 166, De ludo schacorum)

These pawns denote people of various ranks and sexes, between whom kings, princes, nobles, and other nobles stand to rule and perfect them. However, if these do not carry out their duties according to law and reason, they lose the privilege of the nobility and fall into the position and position of the peasants.

For we are all born and begotten of one father, Adam, and only those distinguished in virtue have rightly been called 'kings' and 'nobles'. But if the peasants, that is, the common people, live according to the advice of their wise confessors, obey the commandments of the Church, and thereby lead a right and upright life, they will justly attain the title of holy kings and noble men in the kingdom of heaven because of their perfect life. So let no one despise the peasants, for we read that they attained dominion and papal dignity when they were full of privileges and graces.

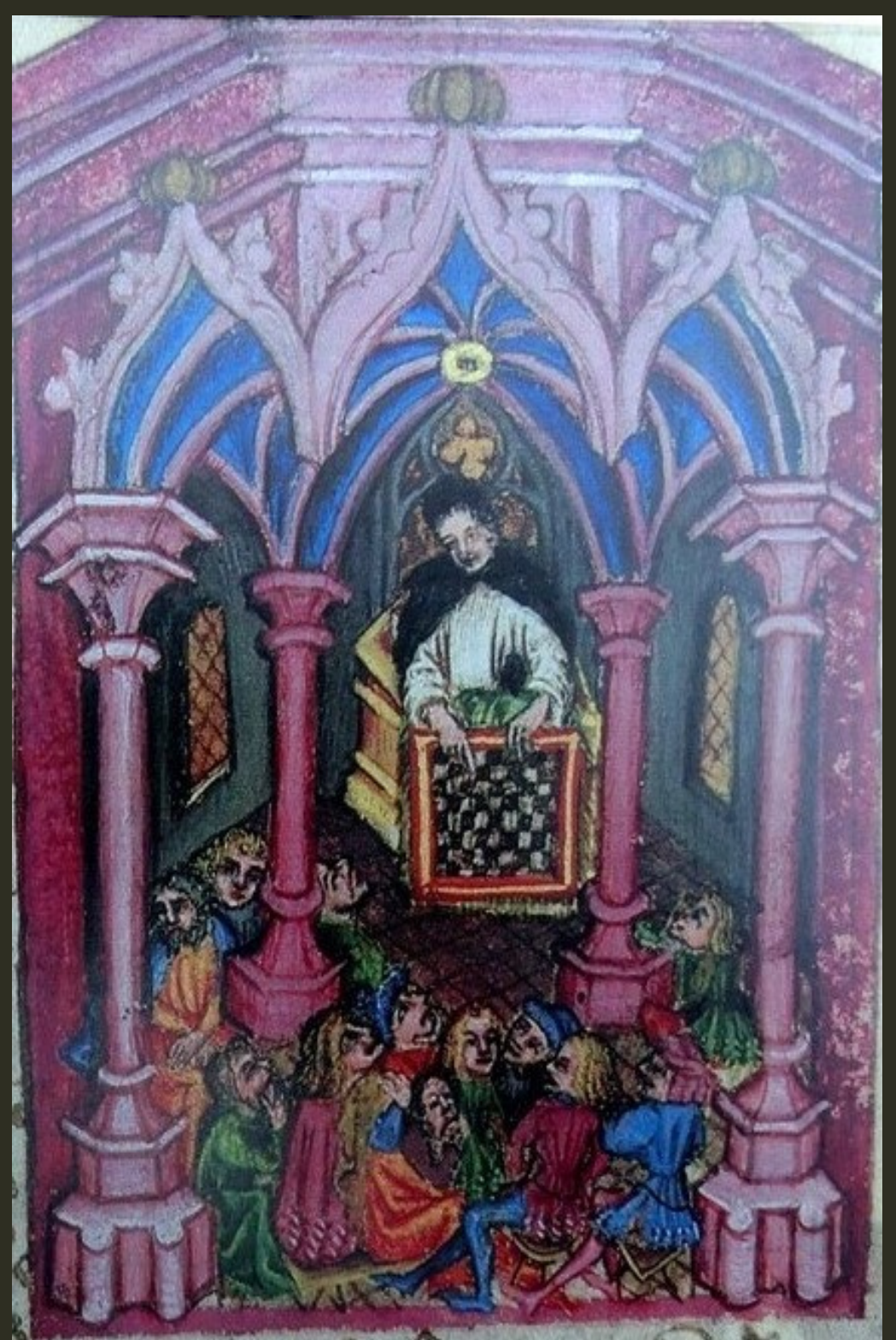
Carissimi, sic milites ad bella
descendentes et campum requirentes
strenui et fortes bellare debent et
regem ad modum corone cingere ac
defendere; omnes enim nos milites
sumus et pugnare contra diabolum in
campo hujus mundi nos oportet, et
regem nostrum i. e. animam
defendere, quia adversarius noster
fortis est temptando aliqua mala et
illicita suggerendo, sed debilis est, si
volumus superare;[1] cui, ut Paulus
ait, fortes in fide resistere debemus,
nec timere

My dearest: when knights go into
battle and seek a place to fight,
they should fight valiantly and
bravely, surround their king like a
wall and protect him. We are all
fighters and must fight against the
devil on the battlefield of this
world and defend our king, that is,
our soul. For our adversary is
strong when he tries all kinds of
wickedness and inspires unlawful
things in us, but weak when we
really want to overcome him, as
Paul says: 'Bravely in faith we
should resist him and not be
afraid.'

V.

Jacobus de
Cessolis:
Liber de moribus

(1300 ad; over 250 latin manuscripts)



Liber de moribus
about 250
manuscripts

French
Translations e.g.
- Jean de Vigny:
*Jeu des echecs
moralisés*
- Jean Ferron: *Le jeu
des eschaz moralisé*

Swedish
Translations e.g.
Schacktavelslek

German Translations
e.g.
- Heinrich von
Beringen: *Schachbuch*
- Konrad von
Ammenhausen:
Schachzabelbuch

Liber de moribus
about 250
manuscripts

English
Translations e.g.
William Caxton:
*The Game and Playe
of Chesse*

Dutch Translations
e.g. Johannes de
Vollenhoe: *De ludo
scachorum*

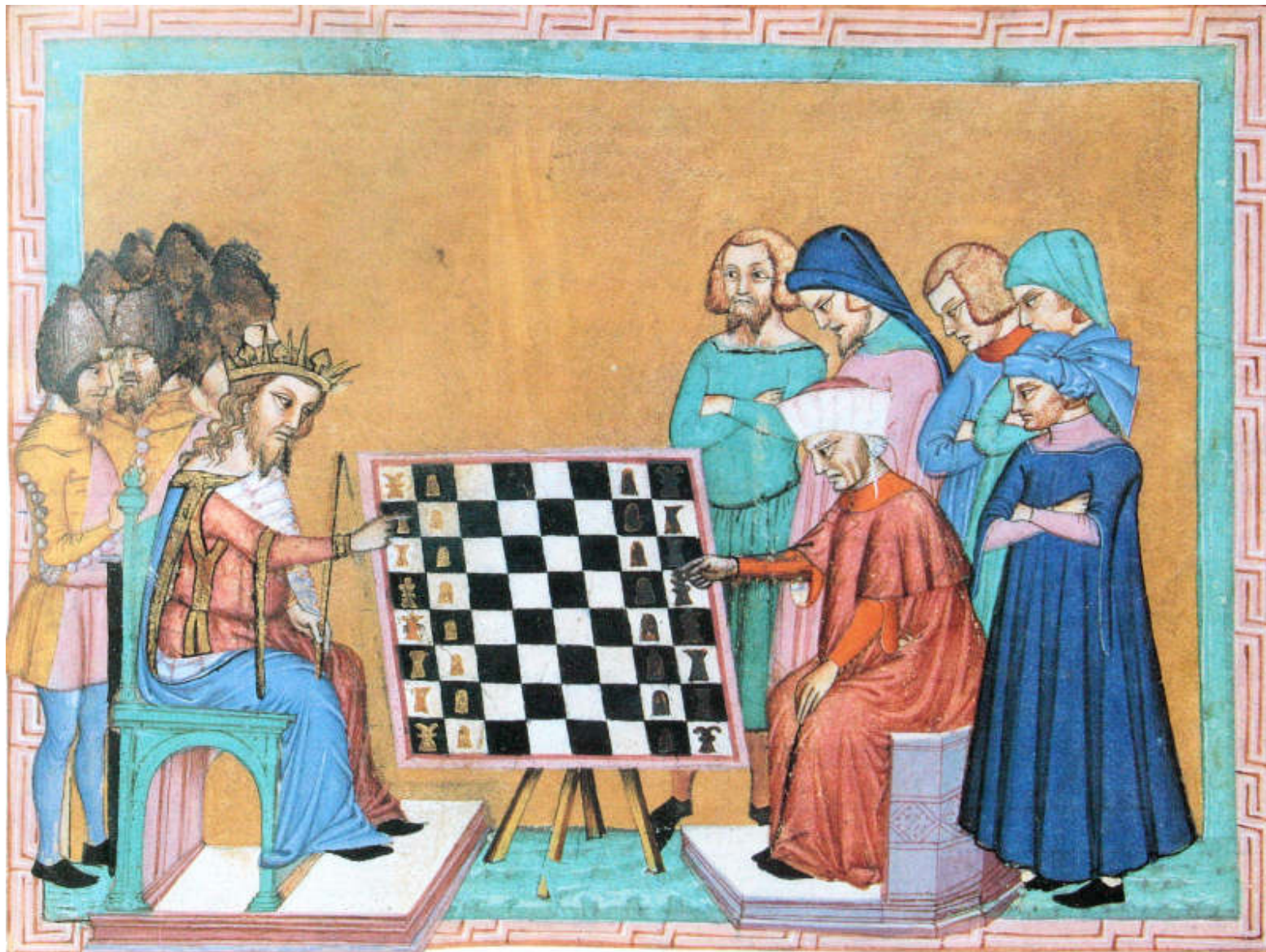
Czech
Translations e.g.
Thomas Stitny:
*Knizky o hre
sachove*

Spanish Translations
e.g. Martin Reyna:
*Dechado de la vida
humana*

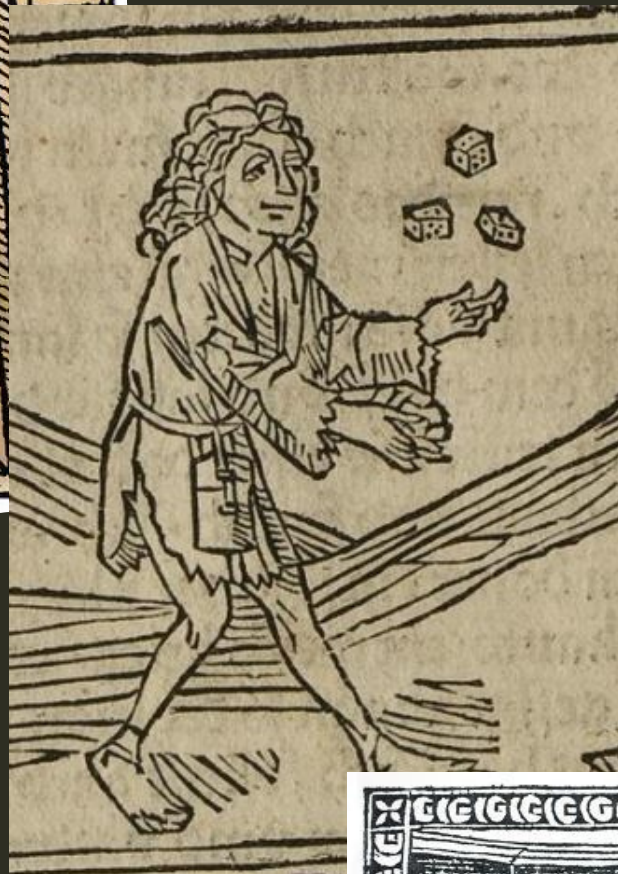
Italian
Translations
e.g.
*Libro di
Giuocho di
Scacchi*

Catalan
Translations

Danish
Translations e.g.
*Solatium ludi
schacorum*



Evilmerodach playing chess with Xerxes Philometer



VI.

The chess
literature after
Jacobus de
Cessolis

wer tugenthafter dis büchelîn
hört und es gemerken kan,
er gebesser sich daran
in etslicher masse

(Konrad von Ammenhausen,
Schachzabelbuch, Vs. 144–147;
19,336 Vs. in total; created in 1337,
25 manuscripts)

Whoever virtuously hears this
booklet and remembers it, will
improve himself in many ways.



Dieweil nuon die kuortzweyl desß
hoch | berrümbtē Schachzabels, von
allē weysen luostig, nuetz | lich vn
erlich geschätzt ist, ansehē, das darin
die kluogk | heit mēschlicher
verstaentnüß sich selbs gescherpfft
empfind, viel laster verbeüt, groß
Hofzuocht vn tuogēdt ge | bürt, das
aller erbarkeit gemäß ist.

(Vorred)

Now, since the entertainment of the
most famous game of chess, which is
in every way enjoyable, useful, and
esteemed as honourable, understands
that in doing so the prudence of the
human intellect finds itself sharpened,
it prevents many vices, but gives birth
to great education and virtues, which
are in accordance with all honesty.

(Jakob Mennel, *Schachzabelspil*, 163f.;
582 Vs. in total; printed in 1507)



Dieweil nuon die kuortzweyl desß
hoch | berrümbtē Schachzabels, von
allē weysen luostig, nuetz | lich vn
erlich geschätzt ist, ansehē, das darin
die kluogk | heit mēschlicher
verstaentnüß sich selbs gescherpfft
empfind, viel laster verbeüt, groß
Hofzuocht vn tuogēdt ge | bürt, das
aller erbarkeit gemäß ist.

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Now, since the entertainment of the
most famous game of chess, which is
in every way enjoyable, useful, and
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that in doing so the prudence of the
human intellect finds itself sharpened,
it prevents many vices, but gives birth
to great education and virtues, which
are in accordance with all honesty.

Das jr eüch der maß laßt gezemen,
Eyns jungers tuogendt an eüch nemen

That you take the measure and
embrace the virtues of a disciple.

(Jakob Mennel, *Schachzabelspiel*, 163f.;
582 Vs. in total; printed in 1507)

fuernehmlich aber / hat sie [die
Materie des Spiels] / ihr fundament,
auss der Ethic, der Sitten-Politic
(Selenus 4)

(Gustavus Selenus / Herzog August
von Braunschweig, *Das Schach- oder
König-Spiel*, p. 4; printed in 1616)

Above all else, however, the
subject matter of the game has its
foundation in ethics, moral politics.



VII.

A little
advertising
at the end



S. Hirzel Verlag

Straßburger Kartenlosbuch

Herausgegeben von Björn Reich



S. Hirzel Verlag

Gedruckte deutsche Losbücher des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts

Band 1

Herausgegeben von Marco Heiles,
Björn Reich und Matthias Standke





S. Hirzel Verlag

Heinrich von Beringen: Schachbuch

Hrsg., übersetzt und kommentiert
von Maike Claußnitzer



Upcoming Chess Books:

Heinrich von Beringen: *Schachbuch*
(1330). Edited by Maike Claußnitzer

Jean de Vigny: *Jeu des échecs moralisé*
(before 1350, printed in 1515).
Edited by Sofina Dembruk

Early Latin chess treatises. Edited by
Liuwe Westra and Björn Reich

The End

Thank you very much!

For further questions please
contact me under:

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