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Spain as the cradle of modern chess

Frank Hoffmeister and José A. Garzón

Here is the presentation given by José A. Garzón in Valencia (Spain) on Friday, September 5, 2025. This was part of the General Assembly of the CH&LS Chess History and Literature Society ([A memorable meeting in a historic location – CH&LS annual meeting in Valencia](#)).

José A. Garzón: Spain as the cradle of modern chess: Scachs d'amor (1475) and the first books on modern chess by Vicent/Lucena/Damiano



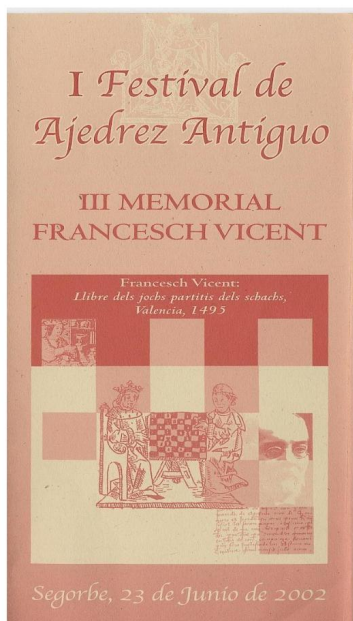
General Assembly, Valencia
5-6 September 2025

Spain as the cradle of modern chess: Scachs d'amor (1475) and the first books on modern chess by Vicent/Lucena/Damiano

José A. Garzón



Valencia, September 5th 2025

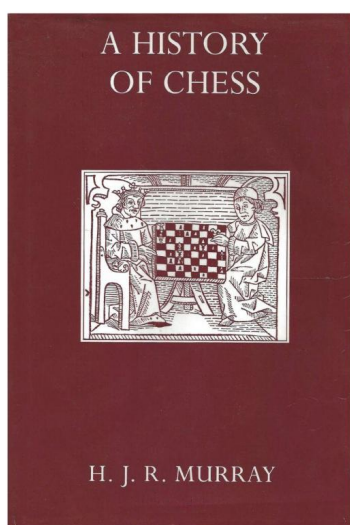


Old chess is in fact a different game

-In 2002 we organized a tournament in Segorbe like no other in the world, as it was played under medieval rules

-With the chess board as a testing ground, the participating players did not hesitate to affirm: "this is a whole other game".

The endeavor of the great historians of chess



-Great scholars such as van der Linde and von der Lasa spared no effort to clarify the origin of modern chess

-Essential documents were missing at that time: *Scachs d' amor*, Cesena MS (Vicent), Escorial MS, Treatise of Luca Pacioli

The dilemma of the three possible cradles of Modern Chess



Lucena, f. 39r (detail)

-Lucena himself prompts this dilemma by citing his sources: “entiendo escribir todos los mejores juegos que yo en Roma, y por toda Italia, y Francia y España he visto jugar a jugadores: y yo he podido por mi mesmo alcanzar”.

FRANCE: Van der Linde

ITALY: Murray

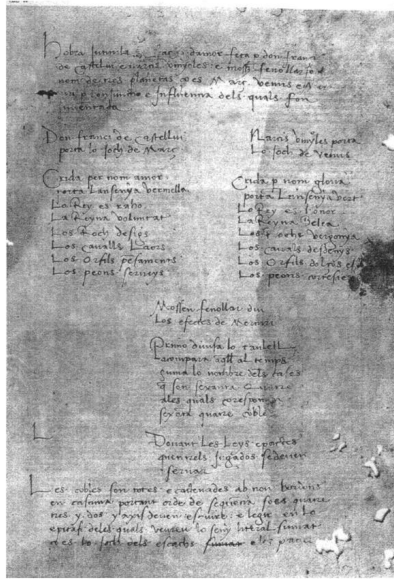
SPAIN: Von der Lasa

The arrival of Modern Chess



- Valencia, first Spanish city
- Golden Century of Valencia
- Weekly commerce with Rome, Naples, Palermo
- Constant references to chess Valencian poems of the 15th century

The birth certificate of Modern Chess

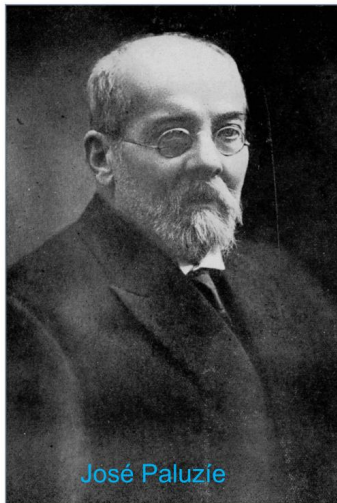


The poem Scachs d'amor (Valencia c. 1475)

The document of consensus:

- Name and origin of the authors (Fenollar, Vinyoles and Castellví), enables dating
- Explicit description of the new movement of the Queen (Dama)
- Inequivocally alludes to the moment of the reform and to them being the creators

Scachs d'amor (Valencia, c. 1475)



- We highlight the merit of José Paluzié, who made the poem known in 1912 and emphasized its importance
- The works of Ramón Miquel i Planas, Salvador Guinot and Antoni Ferrando
- Special mention to the work and study of Ricardo Calvo**
- Modern chess originated in the Golden Century of Valencia, from a group of poets, printers and chess players

The first game of modern chess



Source: El País

-Murray has his magnum opus in press when the studies of Paluziés are published (1912)

-He notes that the poem describes the special regulations of the Crown of Aragon (?). As Calvo pointed out, a stance of intellectual rebellion is necessary in this matter

-The Castellví-Vinyoles game stands at the beginning of all game collections, including the Mega Database of ChesBase (1475-2023)

The first game of modern chess

I wonder if you ever succeeded in obtaining copies of the Chantilly MSS. of which you told me some years back, or of the Catalan poem *Scachs d'amor*. If you have succeeded, I should very much value the opportunity of seeing them. I discovered some time ago (I forget whether I told you of it) that Mossèn Bernardo Fenollar (appointed in 1510 Catedrático de matemáticas), Francesc de Castellví, Cavalier, and Narciso Vinyoles, are all known as Catalan writers of the period 1474-1511. All contributed to the *Obras e trobas, les quals tracten de l'honra de la sacratíssima Verge Maria*, the first book printed in Valencia in 1474. See Pulster, *Ibbl. Valenciana 1467*; *Ítemo I*, 69 and Luis Velazquez, *Orígenes de la poesía Castellana*, 51.

© Cleveland Public Library, letter from H.J. Murray to J.G. White (16/7/1922)

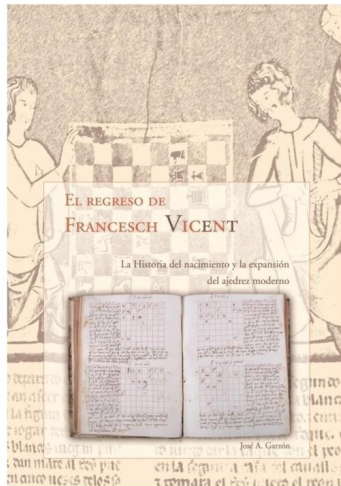
-Murray does not link the poem to Valencia in 1913

-It appears that he did not study *Scachs d'amor* directly. We know this from a letter he wrote to J. G. White, in which he asked if he had been able to get a copy of the poem.

-In this letter, he remarks that he had discovered some time ago that the Marian contest of 1474 was organized in Valencia precisely by Fenollar, with Castellví and Vinyoles also participating

- He also indicates that he would greatly appreciate being able to see the manuscript. White replies (22/8/1922) that he will send a copy of it

Two important pieces of evidence for dating the poem: c. 1475



- I studied the poem in 2001, 2004, 2005, 2012 and 2021
- With the absolute certainty that it is the first work of modern chess, it was crucial to get a precise dating (Garzón, 2005)
- The planetary conjunction which, according to the poets, gave rise to the poem was visible in Valencia in 1475 and 1477
- According to Paluzié's description of the watermark on the paper, I was able to identify it as Briquet 11156 (Genoa, 1478), similar to those of the first Valencian incunabulum (1474-1475)



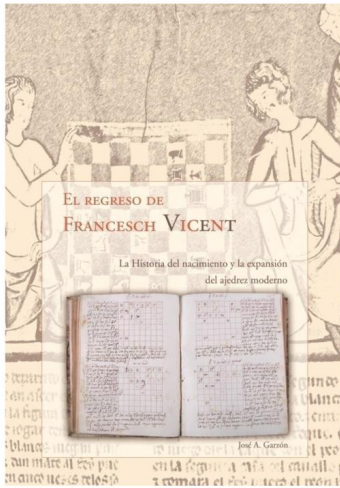
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Valencia, 30th of June 1475,
courtesy of Juan Antonio Belmonte
(IAC, La Laguna)

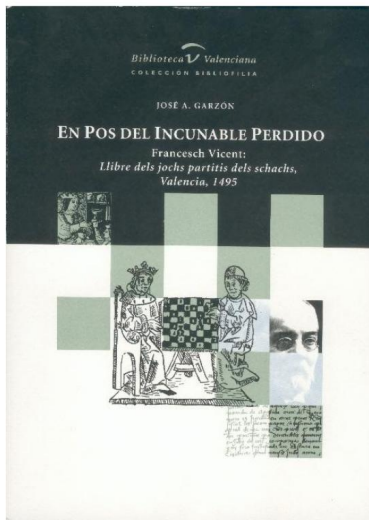
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The expansion of modern chess



- *Llibre dels jochs partits dels scachs en nombre de 100*. Francesch Vicent (Valencia, May 15th 1495)
- Its truth has been obtained through complex research (Von der Lasa, Averbakh, Calvo, Garzón, Monté)
- In 2005, I brought to light the contents of the book, having found it copied in Cesena MS
- It became evident that this is the primary source of the books by Lucena (c. 1497) and Damiano (1512)

Proofs of existence and content of Vicent's book (2001)



1. Purchase and sale of 30 copies in January 1496 (Berger, 1987)
2. Letter from Vega y Sentmenat to Juan Antonio Mayans (15th of November 1783)
3. Vargas' description (1799) of the Montserrat copy is found with the legend "De la Dama" in the majority of problems

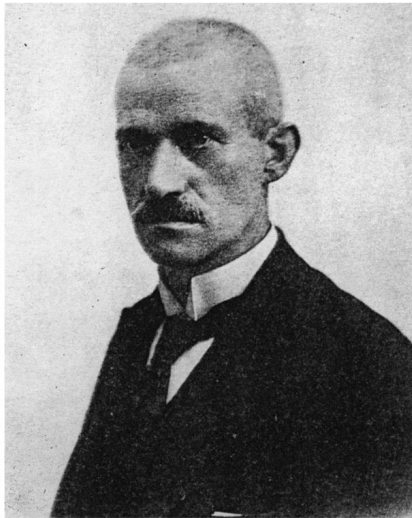


José Vargas Ponce. Portrait by Goya (R.A.H.)

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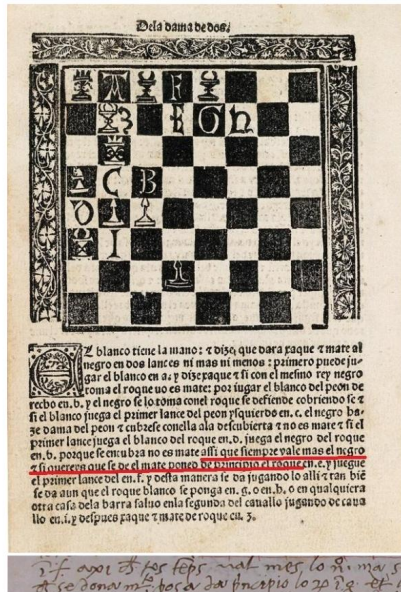
4. Sale of a copy of the book in Barcelona (c. 1913)

The reliability of the source, Antonio Palau (image), and the witnesses, Josep Pin i Soler and Pablo Font de Rubinat, attests to it

Babra sold the book to an American collector, thought to be J.G. White, of Cleveland

[Important developments in NEBEA](#)

The expansion of modern chess



-In Cesena's codex, the original text of Vicent's book, in Valencian is preserved

-Upon comparing it with Lucena's book we concluded Lucena's work to be a translation to Spanish

-The printers of both books worked in Valencia in 1495, with Lope de Roca being a successor of Hutz

The expansion of modern chess



© Library of Miquel Artigas (Sabadell)

-The importance of Cesena MS, very likely Vicent's work, is decisive, as it contains all the technical material from Damiano's book

-Damiano's book with 8 editions between 1512 and 1564, sets an end to the practice of medieval chess

-In a recent study I put forward the connection between the *editio princeps* and the printer of Pope Alexander VI (Roderic Borja)



The monogram “MI” and the “numbers 1 and 8” are actually the printer’s mark of Martin of Amsterdam and Johannes Besicken

Damiano and Vicent



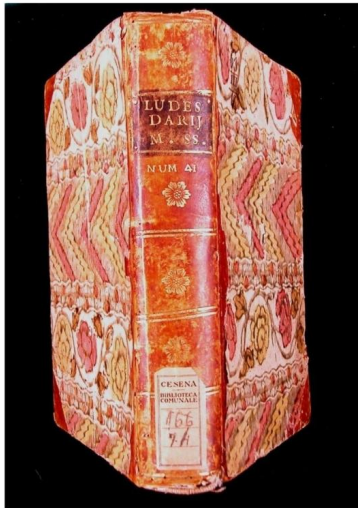
Besicken is the printer of Gaspar Torrella, Valencian author and doctor

Personal doctor of Alexander VI and his son Caesar

A new link between Damiano and the genesis of his book with Valencia, and the entourage of the Pope and his sons (Vicent chess teacher of Lucrecia in 1506)

The old idea of an edition, or project, in 1502 is rehabilitated

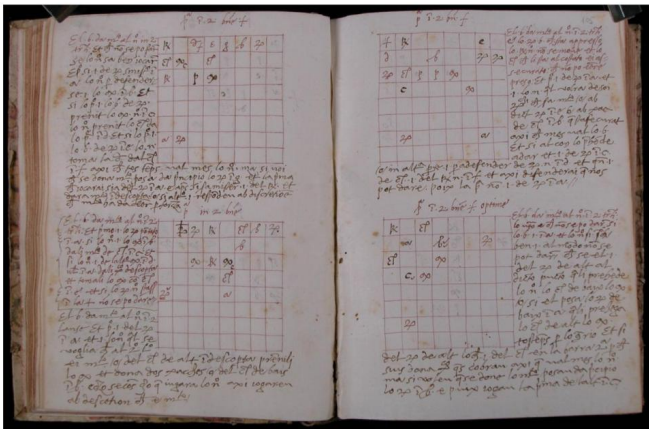
The codices of Perugia and Cesena



© Biblioteca Malatestiana of Cesena

- Works by the same autor (Vicent)
- The common part can be dated c. 1501
- Sketches of the reform of chess rules in Valencia are preserved (1475-1495)
- Vicent's book and the material for the future book of Damiano are transcribed
- Some of the most original and complex compositions of modern chess are incorporated
- First ever position in the game of checkers (*marro de punta* in Valencia)

Discovery of Vicent's book after 5 centuries in Cesena's manuscript

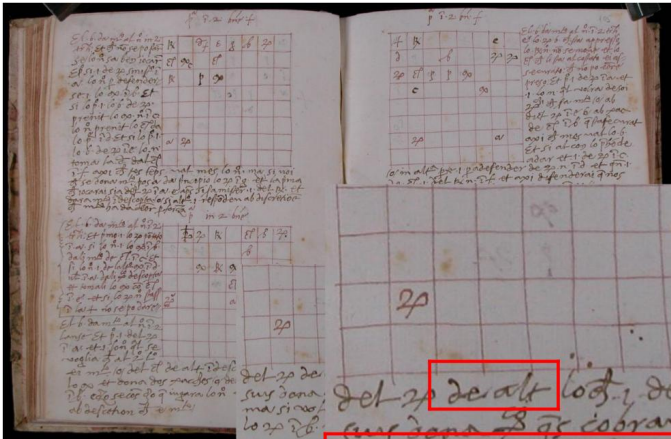


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- 4 pages of Vicent's book appear, with numerous terms in Valencian
- The treatise of 1497 is a simple translation to Spanish (we have the DNA of the book)
- Another conclusion: the autor of the manuscript, Francesch Vicent, knows what transcurrred in Salamanca
- Hypothesis: Vicent must have been linked to Caesar Borgia between 1501-1503. Cesena was the capital of Romagna

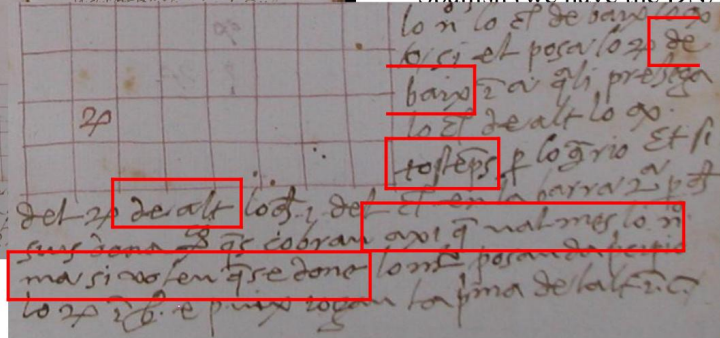
Courtesy of Biblioteca Malatestiana de Cesena

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Vicent, Lucena, Damiano: three authors, only one book



-Lucena is a Vicent + 50 medieval problems. Actually, it constitutes a regression. A project for a book in Spanish containing only Vicent's problem existed

-Damiano is a Vicent removing the medieval problems. This explain its editorial success. Even the subtleties are anticipated in Cesena MS

The technical treatises from the period of coexistence of old and modern chess (1475-1512)



-In the Spanish treatises the old and modern chess problems are found in the same section

-The Italian treatises present them in independent sections

-There is no regression in Spain

-Just one generation of chess players was able to end seven centuries of medieval European chess

Valencia, Cradle of Modern Chess



-Valencia was one of the most significant cities in Europe

-The city experienced its Golden Century, culturally, but also commercially and socially

-The *axedres de la dama* emerged in an innovative group of poets and chess players

-The German printers Lope de Roca and Hutz played an important role in the expansion of the modern rules

-Most in this progressive group are Jewish converts

-The great revolution persists in our days!

Acknowledgements

Fundación Deportiva Municipal de Valencia
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Chess History&Literature Society
Biblioteca de Catalunya
Cleveland Public Library
Real Academia de la Historia (Madrid)
Biblioteca particular de Miquel Artigas (Sabadell)
Biblioteca Malatestiana de Cesena

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[The presentation as PDF file:](#)

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