

2025-10-10

The Damiano Mystery



Damiano, 2nd edition (Rome, 1518) Unusual chromatic play on the spurious word QVESTO, a term that is surprisingly discarded in the colophon as part of the title. This bibliographic rarity is amplified by the fact that there appear to have been copies with different encryption. Courtesy of the Library of Lothar Schmid (1928-2013), Bamberg (Germany) 19. Op.

Third article by José Garzón on major changes in chess during the Renaissance.

The full text, in Spanish, can be downloaded at the end of this summary.

The Damiano Mystery

by José Garzón

Rome, 1512 – When a Portuguese Pseudonym Revealed Modern Chess

In **1512**, a small bilingual book appeared in Rome, printed in Italian and Spanish: *Questo libro e da imparare giocare a scacchi et de le partite*. Its author called himself simply Damiano Portuguese — “Damiano the Portuguese.”

That modest volume became **the first true bestseller in chess history**, reprinted throughout the 16th century and cited by every later theorist.

A Success Born in Spain

Modern research by José A. Garzón and others has shown that the *Damiano's* contents were not original. Its 72 problems, “subtleties,” and descriptions of the new rules all came from an earlier source: the *Llibre dels jochs partits dels scachs* printed in **Valencia in 1495** by Francesch Vicent.

In other words, the *Damiano* was not an Italian invention at all, but rather **the Roman transmission of the Valencian revolution** — the moment when the Queen, the modern Bishop, and our familiar game of chess were born.

The Mask of an Author

But who was this enigmatic “Damiano the Portuguese”?

The supposed biography — a certain *Pedro Damiano*, an apothecary from Odemira — was pure fiction. According to Portuguese scholar Dagoberto Markl, the name “Damiano” may have been a **pseudonym**, borrowed from **Saint Damian**, patron saint of physicians.

Markl identified the likely real author as Judah Abrabanel, better known as Leone Ebreo (“Leo the Hebrew”), the Jewish philosopher and physician who wrote the *Dialoghi d’amore*.

The emblem printed on the third edition (Rome, 1524) — an **eight-pointed star resembling the Abrabanel family crest** — strongly supports this theory.

Printers, Borgia, and Valencia

Garzón’s investigation also uncovers a network of printers in Rome tied to Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia) and his Valencian physician Gaspar Torrella.

The printers Besicken, Guillery, and Nani, who issued the early editions of the *Damiano*, belonged to this same Borgia circle.

At the same time, Francesch Vicent, author of the lost Valencian treatise, was exiled in Italy — possibly serving as **Lucrezia Borgia’s chess tutor**.

It therefore seems clear that the *Damiano* was, in fact, **a revised reprint of Vicent’s book**, published under a pseudonym to protect its real author from the Inquisition.

The Masterstroke of a “Converso”

For Garzón, “Damiano” represents **the grand master move of a converted Jew**: publishing under a false name, preserving the Valencian reform of chess, and concealing his identity for five centuries.

Behind the mask of “the Portuguese” stands an Iberian humanist, moving between Valencia and Rome, exile and Renaissance, faith and survival.

Perhaps the greatest move ever played in chess history didn’t happen on the board — but **in the margins of a book printed in Rome in 1512**.

Reference:

Garzón, José A. “La jugada maestra de un judío converso llamado Damiano portuges. El misterio del

tratado de ajedrez de 1512.” En *Pasiones Bibliográficas II*. Valencia: Societat Bibliogràfica Valenciana Jerònima Galés, 2017, 35-46.

<https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=6028922>

- [La jugada maestra de un judío converso llamado "Damiano portugese" - José A. Garzón \(733.6 KiB\)](#)