

INTRODUCTION

This work will come as a surprise to the reader already familiar with my research, carried out over the course of more than two decades. It is devoted in particular to elucidating and proving that the most beautiful moment in the History of Chess, the birth of modern chess, is a milestone that took place in Valencia in the twilight of the 15th century.

Now that the consensus needed has been reached¹ among scholars about the original document where modern chess receives its approval stamp (the *Scachs d'amor* poem, Valencia c. 1475, written by the eminent Valencian poets Fenollar, Vinyoles and Castellví), we are promoting a proposal for the renewal of the game, a search for new chess horizons.

And yet this is the right time and the individual endorsing this project is fully justified as we will go on to show below. The first thing I would like to put on record is that in my vision for chess renewal some premises must be respected—they virtually become axioms. Throughout chess history we will find proposals, which we will examine in this monograph, to modify both the board, the scene of the game, as well as the number of pieces, the actors intervening in the chess fight.

In our view these variants are not chess games proper. It is in this sense that we deem very elegant the reform undertaken in the 15th century, when by modifying only the movement of two pieces (the bishop and, in particular, the queen) a real upheaval took place on the chessboard.

But we were talking about justifying our proposal. The authors of *Scachs d'amor*, creators of the modern queen, already find a serious problem regarding the promotion of the pawn. They prescribe that two queens of the same colour cannot exist at the same time, and that the queens cannot capture each other. These incipient regulations involve two implicit messages: on the one hand it is clear that it is them who endorse and create the new form of play, and therefore only they encounter the problem of pawn promotion; on the other hand, the fact that they confer on the queen almost human features, banning her bilocation, is clear evidence that they are following a model from real life. According to most recent research Isabella I of Castile (Isabella the Catholic) is the natural favourite, as Govert Westerveld² suggests. Her candidature is further strengthened by her great fondness for the game, as we proved.³

The problem of pawn promotion would be tackled in Valencia 20 years later from a more technical perspective and with the knowledge of chess master Francesch Vicent. There are several examples of problems with two queens in his book, printed in Valencia in 1495. We know this through the contents of the Cesena manuscript, of which he was in all likelihood the author. In Spain, and later in Italy, throughout the 15th, 16th and at least part of the 17th centuries the only possible promotion is to queen, that is, queening.

We will see below how convulsive the 19th century is with regards to the pawn promotion rule. The question will not conclusively closed—although we are reopening the topic here—until the arrival of the 20th century, that is, more than four centuries after the introduction of the modern queen.

The need for chess reform, not in the sense of renouncing the current refined rules but of offering new possibilities so that chess players can make up their own minds, has an eminent supporter in the great Bobby Fischer. His proposal to randomize the starting positions of the eight pieces has in our view the ingredients needed to invigorate the game while respecting the great revolution of the 15th century: the movement of the pieces is not modified, only their starting positions. This completely overturns opening theory but the rich written output devoted to the endgame is still valid.

It should be noted that Vicent himself (as we will see below in more detail) proposes at least four variants of his new chess. The initial positions of all of them have been preserved in his manuscripts, one of the them anticipating Fischer Random Chess by five centuries. Two overwhelming geniuses united by the same chess vision. All these proposals must have

been tested by Valencian chess players in the late 15th century. Under the watchful eye of two such fiduciaries one surely can walk tall.

The idea for this proposal originated from fieldwork for *Nuevo Ensayo de Bibliografía Española de Ajedrez* [New Essay on Spanish Chess Bibliography] between the years 2004 and 2011. In that book the authors set ourselves to do a thorough study, personally checking all the books and manuscripts in connection to Spanish chess throughout eight centuries. To be more specific, it was when studying the first work we list in the bibliography, the *Book of Games* by Alfonso X the Wise. This beautiful manuscript, kept at the Royal Library of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, has fortunately merited many studies⁴ and its 103 problems are already very well known. However, another variant preserved in the codex of Alfonso X has not raised so much attention, the one known as *Great Chess*. Along with the new pieces proposed by Alfonso X the great peculiarity regarding the rules, the one which quickly captured our imagination, is that the pawn promotes according to the rank of the piece initially occupying the file where the promotion takes place. This rule, as well as the strange movement of the new pieces, conferred upon the game an extraordinary complexity. It is therefore not surprising that the codex from El Escorial does not contain a single example of *Great Chess*.

In May 2011 our friend and colleague from the Ken Whyld Association Michael Negele, who has helped our research so much, visited Valencia. Our conversations turned to the topic of the pawn promotion according to its file, and the first sketch of its presence in the history of chess. We both reached the conclusion that it would be a good option for the future of chess, a commitment to creativity and the renewal of the game. From that day on I have given much thought and worked on this project. How far were we from imagining (at least I was) that this small alteration completely changed, as we will see in this work, all the stages of the game, thoroughly demolishing endgame theory.

We will carry out in this work a review of the history of chess in order to highlight the most interesting proposals for renewing the game of chess and, in particular, those advocating promotion according to file, a proposal that therefore has historical roots.

Finally we will develop our proposal introducing only a single change to the rules of chess, **the promotion of the pawn according to the rank of the piece which was initially placed on the file of promotion**. In our view a revolution is so much the greater when it is capable of invigorating the reality

upon which it acts, introducing as few new rules or changes as possible. Within the current rules of modern chess we are not aware of any other guidelines for this version of chess. Accordingly, our proposal is original and exceedingly respectful: it does not change the initial arrangement of the pieces, nor their movement. It revolves around the most unstable rule in the five-century practice of modern chess, pawn promotion. We present a small change that nevertheless changes everything.

A crucial aspect will be how to resolve what happens with the promotion of the king's pawn. In that instance I propose three different options, all of them fully logical according to the historical precedents. Briefly, they are as follows: the king's pawn promotes to a queen, the usual promotion; it promotes to any piece (keeping in this case at least the player's discretion); lastly the king's pawn promotes to a new piece, which did exist in the past, and which has the movement of the king but without the privilege of invulnerability; effectively, pawn promotion according to the file is fully enforced in all cases. The latter is our preferred choice and we call it *Virrey Chess* to honour the city of Valencia, where this high government magistrature played a key role, oddly enough from the period of expansion of modern chess, in the early 16th century.

Ours is by no means a proposal attempting to eradicate official chess. We only wish for both amateurs and masters to fathom these new horizons we advocate for chess so that they can pass their own judgement. Relinquishing the rich theory on the endgame, the most scientific part of chess, can be a serious obstacle for many—we leave behind safe paths but with the promise of new creative challenges. However, we are convinced that our reform, in particular *Virrey Chess* will delight all those who still think chess is above all an art—the artistic realm we are directing them towards is still the exclusive preserve of humankind.

Valencia, December 2014

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

First of all a hint about the pronunciation of *Virrey*: in Spanish it sounds like the words *bee* and *ray* put together, but with a shorter vowel in the first syllable, the accent falling on the second one [bi-'rei]. A brief explanation of this figure, which somewhat differs from the connotations that *viceroi* has in English, can be found in the notes.

I have translated most of the technical terms—this being a bilingual edition the reader will easily find the original words in the Spanish section. There are a few exceptions to this, e.g. *aanca* or *dama cavallota*. The former presents particular problems (for an explanation of which see Golladay's work). *Dama cavallota* could be translated as “Knighted Queen” but taking into consideration that the two words refer in Spanish to dame and horse respectively I have opted to leave the original expression. The movement of both pieces is in any case fully explained in the book.

In the section on *Great Chess* I have used Sonja Musser Golladay's translation of Alfonso's text adopting, though, the method of counting squares used in the original to better reflect the Spanish text in the present book and avoid any confusion to those readers who might be collating both versions. I have also followed the suggestions in her dissertation as to the most appropriate translation for the names of the different pieces. Hence unicornio is translated as rhinoceros rather than the straightforward unicorn.

A case that deserves further study is that of the *cocatriz* or *cocotriz*. It is very tempting to see in the former a possible origin of the English word *cockatrice* despite the fact that the Oxford Dictionary of English traces it back to the Latin *calcatrix* [‘tracker’] through Old French. In any case I have followed previous English historians of the game who translate this as crocodile [Spanish ‘*cocodrilo*’]. Further research would be required to establish whether perhaps the Old French took it from Spanish, or whether it is all just a strange coincidence.