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New Moves on Old Boards



Final position Castellví-Vinyoles, with the first checkmate by the queen. This position shows the first recorded checkmate with the queen in chess history. It comes from the *Scachs d'amor* poem, composed in Valencia around 1475 by Castellví, Vinyoles, and Fenollar — the earliest known text describing the modern rules of chess. The game features Castellví (Mars) with White, Vinyoles (Venus) with Black, and Fenollar (Mercury) as arbiter. The white queen delivers checkmate on move 21, marking a turning point in chess history. The poem was inspired by a rare planetary conjunction of Mars, Venus, and Mercury, observed in Valencia on 30 June 1475. This symbolic celestial event reflects the alignment of the three authors and the birth of the modern game.

by José A. Garzón

1475–1512: The Great Transition from Medieval to Modern Chess

In this chapter from *Ajedrez, arte y cultura*, Spanish historian José A. Garzón recounts the fascinating half-century when **medieval chess** and **modern chess** briefly coexisted.

Between **1475** and **1512**, a generation of poets, humanists, and printers transformed a slow, symbolic game into a dynamic intellectual art — a perfect reflection of the Renaissance spirit.

From *Shatranj* to the Valencian Revolution

For seven centuries, Europe played chess according to the Arabic *shatranj*: a weak “*alferza*” (queen) and a short-moving bishop.

Everything changed around **1475** in **Valencia**, where Bernat Fenollar, Narcís Vinyoles, and Francí de Castellví composed the poem *Scachs d'amor* (“Chess of Love”).

This extraordinary work — both allegory and manual — introduced the **modern Queen**, the **en passant** capture, the **double pawn move**, and even an early form of **castling**.

It also describes the **first complete modern chess game ever recorded**, in which Castellví (Mars) defeats Vinyoles (Venus) under the arbitration of Fenollar (Mercury).

Vicent and the Spread of the New Game

Twenty years later, on **May 15, 1495**, Valencian scholar Francesch Vicent published the *Llibre dels jochs partits dels scachs en nombre de 100*, the **first printed treatise on modern chess**.

Though the original book has been lost, Garzón reconstructed it through a manuscript discovered in **Cesena**: one hundred problems written in Valencian, many identical to those found later in Lucena's *Repetición de amores y arte de ajedrez* (Salamanca, 1497) and Damiano's *Questo libro* (Rome, 1512). Vicent thus stands as **the true father of modern chess** and one of the pioneers of scientific printing in Spain.

Other European Echoes

Garzón then surveys parallel works across Europe:

- the French manuscript *Le Jeu des Eschés de la Dame moralisé*, where the “furious queen” appears;
- the Italian *De Ludo Scachorum* by Luca Pacioli (c. 1500), possibly illustrated by Leonardo da Vinci, which still mixes old and new rules;
- and several manuscripts from **Perugia**, **Cesena**, **El Escorial**, and **Göttingen**, all documenting the transition.

All these sources, when compared closely, confirm Valencia's leading role: Italian and French texts merely adapted the Spanish innovation.

The Role of Damiano (Rome, 1512)

The bilingual Italian–Spanish treatise by Damiano Portugese, long attributed to a Portuguese apothecary, marked the **final victory of the modern game**.

Garzón shows that it was, in fact, a **Roman reworking of Vicent's lost book**, printed by publishers connected with the Borgia family.

Behind the pseudonym “Damiano” likely stood an Iberian author — perhaps Vicent himself — who brought the *ajedrez de la dama*, the “Queen's Chess,” to Renaissance Italy and beyond.

The End of Medieval Chess

After 1512, the old *shatranj* disappeared from Spain's intellectual life.

Only in Italy did a few manuscripts preserve echoes of the medieval problems.

In less than fifty years, the **new game of the Queen** had conquered Europe, carried by poetry, printing, and the imagination of humanist thinkers.

Conclusion

Garzón's narrative leaves no doubt:

Modern chess was born in Valencia, in the hands of a circle of poets and scholars who, around 1475, reinvented an ancient game for a new age.

From Fenollar to Vicent, from Lucena to Damiano, the story of chess is not merely about competition — it is a story of **art, culture, and the humanistic spirit** that shaped the Renaissance.

Reference:

Garzón, José A. (2023). «*Jaques nuevos en viejos tableros. La coexistencia entre el ajedrez moderno y el medieval*». En: Ajedrez, arte y cultura. Uruguay: Universidad de la República (UDELAR), capítulo V, pp. 175-196.

- [Jaques nuevos en viejos tableros - José A. Garzón \(625.5 KiB\)](#)