The Classical Era of Modern Chess

Peter J. Monté
The Chesse of all games, wherin is no bodily exercise, is moste
to be commended, for therin is ryghte subtile engyne,
whereby the wytte is made more sharp, and remembreance quickened.
Sir Thomas Elyot, The Boke named the Governour, Londini 1534 (first edition, 1531)

* * *

El juego del axedrez es una de las cosas que mas descubren la ymagnativa.
Juan Huarte de San Juan, Examen de los ingenios para las ciencias, s.l. 1575
Cheese-play is one of the things which best discovereth the imagination.
( translated in The Triall of Witts 1616, quoted in Twiss, Chess II, page 68).

* * *

Parrà quasi incredibile, che da trentadue Scacchi,
i quali si ravolgono per sessantaquattro case,
ne divenga un numero di giochi diversi tanto immenso,
che l'intelletto humano non possa farsene capace.
Pietro Carrera, Il gioco de gli scacchi, Militello 1617, i, xi, page 78.
# Table of Contents

*List of Illustrations* ......................... xi  
*Acknowledgments* .......................... xiv  
*Preface* ..................................... xv  
*Abbreviations* ............................... xix  
*Glossary* ..................................... xxi

## Part I — The History of Early Modern Chess

### INTRODUCTION
- The diffusion of shatranj .......................... 3  
- Medieval chess .................................. 14  
- The birth of modern chess ........................ 19

### CHAPTER 1. THE FIRST SOURCES
- A. Scachs d’amor ................................ 26
- B. Le Jeu des Echés de la Dame, Moralisé ...... 31

### CHAPTER 2. LUCENA
- Rules ........................................... 36  
- Openings ....................................... 37  
- The Problem Section ............................ 39  
- The Background of Lucena’s Life ............... 65  
- Dating Lucena’s Book ............................ 67

### CHAPTER 3. THE LUCENA
- Manuscript ..................................... 69  
- Rules ............................................ 70  
- Openings ........................................ 71  
- Conclusion ...................................... 73

### CHAPTER 4. THE GÖTTINGEN
- Manuscript ..................................... 74  
- Date and Origin ................................ 76  
- Rules ............................................ 79  
- Openings ........................................ 79  
- Comparing Three Sources ....................... 82  
- Conclusion ...................................... 83

### CHAPTER 5. DAMIANO
- Rules ............................................ 87  
- Openings ........................................ 88  
- Subtleties and Problems ......................... 89  
- Reprints ........................................ 100  
- Gruget and Rowbothum ......................... 105  
- White’s Damiano ................................ 108  
- Conclusion ...................................... 116

### CHAPTER 6. THE GERMAN
- Manuscript ..................................... 117  
- Rules ............................................ 118  
- Openings ........................................ 118  
- Subtleties and Problems ......................... 120  
- Conclusion ...................................... 122

### CHAPTER 7. RUY LÓPEZ
- Visiting Rome ................................... 127  
- Rules ............................................ 129  
- Openings ........................................ 133  
- Italians on Iberian Soil ......................... 136  
- Conclusion ...................................... 145  
- The López-Complex ............................. 146

### CHAPTER 8. THE URBINATE
- Manuscript ..................................... 147  
- Rules ............................................ 148  
- Openings ........................................ 150  
- A Spanish and an Italian Author ............... 152  
- Conclusion ...................................... 154

### CHAPTER 9. THE “ELEGANCE”
- Manuscripts .................................... 156  
- A. The Elegantia ................................ 156  
- B. The Regole ................................... 159  
- C. The Riccardiana ............................. 160  
- D. Comparing the Documents ................. 163  
- Rules ............................................ 163
### Table of Contents

- **Openings** .................................................. 166
- The **Eleganza and the Regol** .............................. 170
- The **Italian Manuscripts and the** Riccardiana .......... 171
- **Conclusion** .................................................. 172

#### CHAPTER 10. PRINTED WORKS OF THE LÓPEZ-COMPLEX

- **A. Žarsia** ..................................................... 175
- **B. French López-Editions** ............................... 178
- **C. Seleus** .................................................... 180

#### CHAPTER 11. ANNIBALE ROMEI

- **Rules** ......................................................... 188
- **Openings** .................................................... 190
- **Subtleties** ................................................... 191
- **Conclusion** .................................................. 193

#### CHAPTER 12. POLERIO'S BONCOMPAGNO MANUSCRIPT NO. 1

- **Rules** ......................................................... 194
- **Openings** .................................................... 197
- **Comparing Other Manuscripts** ............................ 199
- **Ascriptions** .................................................. 202
- **Spanish and Neapolitan Features** ....................... 203
- **The Problems** .............................................. 217
- **Conclusion** .................................................. 219

#### CHAPTER 13. POLERIO'S LEON MANUSCRIPT

- **Rules** ......................................................... 222
- **Openings** .................................................... 222
- **Contemporaries** ............................................ 223
- **Conclusion** .................................................. 226

#### CHAPTER 14. POLERIO'S BONCOMPAGNO MANUSCRIPT NO. 2

- **Dedication** .................................................. 228
- **Rules** ......................................................... 230
- **Openings** .................................................... 231
- **Subtleties and Problems** ................................ 232
- **Conclusion** .................................................. 238

#### CHAPTER 15. ROTILIO GRACCO

- **Dedication** .................................................. 244
- **Poetry** ......................................................... 246
- **Rules** ......................................................... 246
- **Openings** .................................................... 247
- **Conclusion** .................................................. 248

#### CHAPTER 16. POLERIO'S ORDINI MANUSCRIPT

- **Dedication** .................................................. 250
- **Rules** ......................................................... 251
- **Conclusion** .................................................. 253

- **Openings** .................................................... 254
- **The Problem Section** ...................................... 255
- **Conclusion** .................................................. 257

#### CHAPTER 17. ANONYMOUS WORKS OF THE POLERIO-COMPLEX

- **A. The Doazan Manuscript** ............................ 260
  - Transcriptions .............................................. 260
  - Contents ..................................................... 261
  - Rules ......................................................... 264
  - Openings ..................................................... 265
  - The Problem Section ...................................... 268
  - Contemporaries ............................................ 269
  - Conclusion .................................................. 271

- **B. The Boncompagno Manuscript No. 3** ............... 274
  - Rules ......................................................... 275
  - Openings ..................................................... 275
  - An Ending .................................................... 277
  - Conclusion .................................................. 277

#### CHAPTER 18. HORATIO GIANUTIO

- **Rules** ......................................................... 280
- **Openings** .................................................... 283
- **The Problem Section** ...................................... 284
- **Conclusion** .................................................. 286

#### CHAPTER 19. ALESSANDRO SALVIO

- **His Life** ..................................................... 288
- The "Trattato" (1604) ....................................... 289
- La Scaccia (1612) ............................................ 291
- "Il Puttino," "Apologia" and "Seconda Impressione" (1634) .... 292
- **Rules** ......................................................... 293
- **Openings** .................................................... 294
- **Problems and Endings** .................................. 295
- **Conclusion** .................................................. 300

#### CHAPTER 20. PIETRO CARRERA

- **His Life** ..................................................... 301
- **His Chess Work** .......................................... 301
- **Rules** ......................................................... 302
- **Openings** .................................................... 307
- **Problems and Endings** .................................. 308
- Vespaio's "Risposta" ........................................ 314
- **Conclusion** .................................................. 316

#### CHAPTER 21. GIOACCHINO GRECO

- **His Life** ..................................................... 318
- **The Manuscripts** .......................................... 321
- Greco's Sources .............................................. 341
- Presenting Greco's Writings ................................ 344
Table of Contents

Rules ........................................ 347
Openings .................................... 348
Problems and Endings ..................... 350
Conclusion ................................... 354

CHAPTER 22. THE PAWN'S LEAP ............. 355
Passar Battaglia ............................. 358
Taking En Passant ......................... 361
Conclusion ................................... 369

CHAPTER 23. FROM THE KING'S LEAP TO CASTLING 371
The King's Leap ............................. 371
Castling ...................................... 387
Conclusion ................................... 410

EPILOGUE .................................... 416
Evaluation ................................... 416
Miscellaneies ................................. 417
Aftermath of the Classical Era .......... 428

Part II — Openings and Games of the Classical Era of Modern Chess .......... 439

Part III — Appendices, Bibliography, Index ........................................ 531
Appendix A. Problem Sections .............. 531
   i. Lucena's problem section .......... 531
   ii. Concordance of Problem Sections ........................................ 540
Appendix B. Concordance of the Lucena-Complex ................................... 546
Appendix C. Concordance of the López-Complex .................................... 549
Appendix D. Concordance of the Polerio-Complex .................................. 552
   i. Openings ................................. 552
   ii. Ascriptions ............................. 561
Bibliography ................................ 567
Index ............................................ 577
## List of Illustrations

### Maps
1. *Shatranj* and chess in the Middle East and Eastern Europe ........................................ 2
2. *Shatranj* and chess in the Mediterranean ............................................................. 3
3. *Shatranj* and chess in other parts of Europe ....................................................... 4

### Plates
1. The Venafro pieces ......................................................... 6
2. Page from the *Einsiedeln Poem* .......................................... 7
3. The Osnabrück (3a) and Sandomierz (3b) pieces ................................................... 8
4. Finds on Russian territory (4a–d) ........................................ 12
5. The Vreta pieces (5a) and the Schleswig king (5b) ............................................ 14
6. Portrait of Luca Pacioli ..................................................... 27
7. Page from *Scachs d'amor* .................................................. 30
8. Title page of *Lucena* .......................................................... 34
9. *Lucena*: first regla (pawn's move, taking en passant, pawn promotion and king's leap) ................................................................. 35
10. *Lucena*: conclusion of the first regla .......................................... 35
11. *Lucena*: the ninth regla .................................................... 38
12. *Lucena*: problem no. 1 ................................................... 47
13. *Cesena MS*: problem no. 1 ............................................... 48
14. *Lucena*: problem no. 76 ................................................... 52
15. *Göttingen MS*: problem no. 8 ........................................... 53
16. *Lucena*: title paragraph of the chess part .................................................. 65
17. *Lucena MS*: two pages ................................................... 70
18. *Lucena MS*: riegle 7 ....................................................... 73
19. *Göttingen MS*: regularae 6 and 7 ........................................ 75
20. *Göttingen MS*: problem no. 1 ........................................... 76
21. *Damiano*: title page and imprint (1512) .......................................................... 86
22. *Damiano*: description of the pawn's move, its promotion to queen and taking en passant .......................................................... 88
23. *Damiano*: description of the king's leap .......................................................... 88
24. *Damiano*: the last subtlety and the first problem ............................................ 92
25. Title pages of *Gruter* (25a) and of *White's Damiano* (25b) .................. 106
26. *Gruter*: third chapter (game with diagram) ................................................. 107
27. *White's Damiano*: the first subtleties (27a–b) ............................................... 110
28. *White's Damiano*: problem no. 106 (28a) and an explication of Moorish and Turk rules (28b) .................................................. 111
29. *German MS*: subtlety no. 4 .................................................. 120
30. *German MS*: problem no. 47 .................................................. 121
31. *German MS*: first game of the "Lucenes part" ........................................... 121
32. Title page of *López* (32a) and a Cuban postage stamp (32b) .................. 125
33. Portraits of two chess patrons: King Philip II of Spain and Giacomo Buoncompagno .............................................................. 125
34. *López*: fragment of III, vi (visit to Rome in 1560) ...................................... 128
35. *López*: II, xiii ................................................................. 134
36. King Philip's letter in *Carrera* ..................................................... 137
37. *Boncompagno MS no. 1*: game 31 and the first part of game 32 ................ 141
38. *Leon MS*: game 11 and the first part of game 12 ........................................ 141
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Boncompagni MS no. 2: headings of games 45 and 83 (39a-b)</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Boncompagni MS no. 1: game 61</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Urbinate MS: fragment of III, xiv</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Urbinate MS: fragment of III, vi (visit to Rome s.a.)</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Elegants MS: first page</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Frontispiece of the Riccardiana MS</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Regole MS: one of its final pages</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Riccardiana MS: game LXIIIb, mentioning the Duke of Sora</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Title page of Tarsia</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>French López: title page of the first edition</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>French López: title page of the second edition</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Selenus: copperplate engraving</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Selenus: example of its notation and diagrams in III, ii</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Romei MS: last page of the dedication</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Romei MS: first game at even odds</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Romei MS: subtlety no. 4</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Title page of the Boncompagni MS no. 1</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Boncompagni MS no. 1: the pasted sheet of paper</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Boncompagni MS no. 1: heading of the translation of the first chapter of López (II, i)</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>Boncompagni MS no. 1: games 56–58</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Boncompagni MS no. 1: heading of game 3, ascribed to Santa Maria</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Boncompagni MS no. 1: heading of game 23, ascribed to d’Avalos</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Boncompagni MS no. 1: game 62</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Leon MS: game 10</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>Leon MS: game 38</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>Boncompagni MS no. 2: headings of games 24 and 56</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>Boncompagni MS no. 2: part of the dedication, drawings (65a-b); Gracco’s dedication (65c)</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>Front cover of the Ordini MS</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>Ordini MS: dedication</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>Ordini MS: title</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>Ordini MS: problem no. 20</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>Doazan MS: first page of von der Lasa’s transcription (The Hague version)</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>Doazan MS: pages of von der Lasa’s transcription (Cleveland version)</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>Title page of Gianutio</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Gianutio: game 6a</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>Gianutio: problem no. 8</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>Title pages of Salvio’s “Trattato,” of La Scaccia, and of “Discorso,” “Il Puttino” and “Apologia”</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>Salvio: survey of rules in the “Trattato”</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77</td>
<td>Salvio: survey of rules in the “Discorso”</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>Salvio: poem in “Il Puttino”</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>Salvio: chapter xii in the “Apologia”</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>Salvio: (second) chapter ix in the “Apologia”</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81</td>
<td>Title page of Carrera</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82</td>
<td>Portrait of Pietro Carrera</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83</td>
<td>Title pages of Vespaio’s Risposta</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84</td>
<td>Title page of Greco’s Libretto</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>Title page of Greco’s Corsini MS</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
<td>Title page of Greco’s Orsini MS</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>Title page of Greco’s Lorraine MS</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>Title pages in Ancel’s translation of Greco’s Lorraine MS</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89</td>
<td>Title of the Godolphin MS</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>Title page of Greco’s Mountstephen MS</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>Title page of Greco’s Bodleian MS</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>Greco: heading in the Grenoble MS</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>Title page of Greco’s Colbert MS</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>Title page of Greco’s uncompleted 1625 MS</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>Title page of Greco’s Samuda MS</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>One of the frontispieces of Greco’s Narde MS</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>Title page of Greco’s Paris MS</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>Greco: part of the Usanza in the Paris MS</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>Greco: heading and the first moves of game LXXI in the Paris MS</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>Beale: frontispiece and title page</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101</td>
<td>Inner cover and title page of the French Greco translation of 1669</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>102</td>
<td>Greco (partiti): Lorraine MS no. 8</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>103</td>
<td>Greco (partiti): Grenoble MS nos. 5–6</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Illustrations

104. Saul: chapter V .................................. 360
105. Title pages of Saul (105a) and
    Barbier (105b) ................................. 403
106. The Cartel in Selenus (appendix to
    I, xii) ........................................... 405
107. Title page of Kochánowski’s
    Száchy ........................................... 407
108. Kochánowski’s Száchy: the king’s
    “run to the kitchen” ......................... 408
109. Mars and Venus at chess, painted
    by Varotari .................................... 419
110. Title page of Middleton’s play A
    Game at Chess ................................ 421
111. Lucas van Leyden’s “The Chess
    Players” ........................................ 422
112. “The chess players” by Bordone
    (112a) and “Game of chess outdoors”
    by Anguisciola (112b) ......................... 423
113. Court scene of living chess ............. 424
114. Luther and the masked students ...... 425
115. John Frederick of Saxony’s death
    sentence: a painting and a copperplate
    engraving (115a-b) ............................ 426
116. John Frederick of Saxony’s death
    sentence: a painting by Blaettner ........ 427
117. Ivan the Terrible, playing chess in
    Eisenstein’s film Ivan Groznyi ........... 428
118. Gnédich’s décor (Ivan the Terrible’s
    death) for Tolstoy’s play .................. 428
119. Ivan’s death on a poster for
    Tolstoy’s play ............................... 429
120. A game of chess at the Spanish
    court, painted by Mussini ................. 430
121. Two chess players (Jonson and
    Shakespeare?), painting ascribed to
    van Mander ..................................... 431
122. Woodcut from Von der Artzney
    beyder Glück ................................ 431
123. Title page of the Kleinodienbuch ...... 432
124. Two chess players, painted by
    Carracci ...................................... 433
Preface

In the course of twenty years the present work has taken the shape of a matryoshka. Shortly before 1990 I carved the smallest “doll,” a history of the King’s Gambit. Having observed that almost one third of the classical repertoire was devoted to this gambit (see Part II: Openings and Games of the Classical Era of Modern Chess), I resolved to record all openings that were written down between 1497 (Lucena) and 1597 (Gianutio). Hence, the second doll was called the First Century of Modern Chess. Fascination for the Vicent-mystery (see Chapter 2) urged me to cover this doll by a third one, paying attention to problem chess in all of the sources for the sake of consistency. Finally, in view of the strong connection between these and 17th-century works, the first century was extended to a period embracing approximately 150 years of the modern European game. As a result the “mother” doll was dressed in a more suitable overcoat: The Classical Era of Modern Chess.

The historiography of this chess era was initiated foremost by Thomas Hyde at the close of the 17th century. His Latin account (De ludis orientalibus; Oxford, 1694) was considered “the first really scientific contribution to the history of chess” (Murray). A first evaluation of classical games, as recorded by López, Gianutio, Carrera and Greco, was made by Ponziani (Il giuoco incomparabile degli scacchi) in 1769. Although depending on Hyde, whose work was frequently translated, Twiss (Chess, 1787–1789) collected interesting peculiarities of his own. After translations by Sarratt (Damiano, López and Salvio in 1813; Gianutio and Selenus in 1817) and Lewis (Greco in 1819; Carrera in 1822) and Massmann’s work on medieval chess (1839), a more coherent historiography of the modern game was presented by von der Lasa and van der Linde in the second half of the 19th century. Both chess historians discovered and disclosed many documents.

Paying much attention to chess history in the famous Handbuch (Bilguer) as well, the Prussian diplomat von der Lasa wrote many articles in German periodicals and a major work, Zur Geschichte und Literatur des Schachspiels, in 1897. He was a more cautious investigator than the Dutchman van der Linde who wrote his main works in German (Das Schachspiel des XVI. Jahrhunderts and Geschichte und Litteratur des Schachspiels in 1874; Quellenstudien zur Geschichte des Schachspiels in 1881). Although he is to be credited for his outstanding bibliographical research, van der Linde’s conclusions, often inspired by prejudices and conveyed in an acid style, were criticized in chess literature all over Europe. Other German works on chess history were written by Bachmann (1920s), Silbermann and Unzicker (Geschichte des Schachs, 1975–1977), Petzold (Schach. Eine Kulturgeschichte, 1986), and H. and B. Holländer (Schachpartie durch Zeiten und Welten, 2005).

In England the 19th-century writings of Walker, Lewis, Forbes (The History of Chess, 1860) and Leon were eclipsed by Murray’s pioneering oeuvre in the early part of the 20th century. His authoritative A History of Chess appeared a cen-

After Dubois, who disclosed Vespaio’s Risposta in the 1870–1880s, Chicco became the leading chess historian in Italy. Revealing unknown or forgotten works, he published books (Il libro completo degli scacchi and Dizionario Enciclopedico degli scacchi with Porreca; Storia degli scacchi in Italia with Rosino) and more than a hundred articles between 1938 and 1990, the year of his death. Sanvito, his pupil, collaborator and successor, made valuable discoveries (*inter alia*, the Gianutio MS and Greco manuscripts). Other disclosures were accomplished by Baffioni (Polerio’s Boncompagno no. 2 and Ordini MSS, Rotilio Gracco), Pratesi (the Riccardiana and Cesena MSS) and D’Elia (Greco’s early manuscripts and the Boncompagno MS no. 3).

In Spain the first works of the modern game were examined by Calvo (among others, Lucena: La evasión en ajedrez del converso Calisto) and Arriaga (El incunable de Lucena: Primer arte de ajedrez moderno) in 1997, and by Garzón in 2001 (En pos del incunable perdido), 2005 (El regreso de Francesc Vicent) and 2007 (Estudio del tratado ajedrecístico de Luca Pacioli).

Along with less informative encyclopedic works on the game, a voluminous chess encyclopedia (*Shakhmaty: Entsyklopedicheski slovar*, the Russian counterpart of the Oxford Companion) appeared in 1990. One of its main contributors was Averbakh, who served the chess world as a grandmaster, an authority in the field of endings, an administrator and a historian. Together with Whyld (posthumously), Pratesi, Sanvito and other contributors, he also took part in Scacchia Ludus, a collection of historical chess studies (2008).

In the present work the Introduction deals with the spread of Arabic chess over Europe, medieval chess and the birth of the modern game. The classical sources of modern chess are discussed in Part I: The History of Early Modern Chess, chapters 1 to 21. For thematical reasons they are not all presented in chronological order. After Chapter 1 (Le Jeu des eschès de la dame and Scachs d’amor) two groups are discerned in chapters 2–5: the Lucena-complex (Lucena and the Lucena and Göttingen MSS in 2–4) and the Damiano-complex (Damiano, Grütet, Rowbotham and White’s Damiano in 5). The German MS (Chapter 6) is related to them. Chapters 7–10 are devoted to a third group: the López-complex (López, the Urbinate and Elegante MSS and the printed Tarsia, French López-editions and Selenus). After Chapter 11 (Romei MS), the Polerio-complex (Boncompagno no. 1, Leon, Boncompagno no. 2 and Ordini MSS, Rotilio Gracco and the Doazan and Boncompagno no. 3 MSS) is dealt with in chapters 12 to 17. The works of Gianutio, Salvio, Carrera and Greco are discussed in the remaining chapters 18–21. The last two chapters (22, 23), referring to main sources (and several minor sources as well), are devoted to the medieval roots and further development of the pawn’s leap and the king’s leap.*

The Epilogue, containing a summary of my conclusions and hypotheses, presents miscellaneous information on chess authors and famous contemporaries in the field of literature, art and general history. With regard to the aftermath of the game’s classical era special attention is paid to the application of various notations and changing rules.

Part II is a major presentation of all opening variations and games as recorded by the classical authors. It obeys an old recommendation, put forward by Bledow and von der Lasa, both belonging to the famous Berlin Phænomen, in 1847. Whereas the sequence of openings and variations is often determined by technical classification, the sources are, whenever possible, arranged in a chronological order. Several particularities presented in Part II enabled me to draw conclusions with respect to dating and sequencing the documents and the possible existence of unknown sources. Its often meticulous and even seemingly

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*In quotations from the primary sources the vowel є is replaced by a v, when it represents the consonant. This spelling was already advocated by G.G. Trissino in his “Epistola intorno alle lettere nuovamente aggiunte alla lingua italiana,” written to Pope Clemens VII in 1524; even at the end of the 17th century, however, his proposal was not generally adopted (A. Sanvito, private correspondence, December 2003, and in SL, p. 188n).
futile data might prove useful for future research, especially when new material is unearthed.

References to frequently quoted publications throughout the text are given in abbreviated form; full citations are in the bibliography (infrequently mentioned publications are fully cited *ad hoc*). A key to these abbreviations appears on pages xix–xx.

The book concludes with Part III, containing four appendices, a bibliography and an index.

Mainly based on an analysis of Lucena’s problem section in Chapter 2, the concordance of problem sections in Appendix A (ii), referring to many medieval and modern sources, serves as a hypothetical reconstruction of the lost collection of *Vicent* (1495). Concordances of openings and variations are presented in the other appendices, comparing the contents of the documents in the Lucena- (Appendix B), López- (C) and Polerio-complexes (D, with a list of ascriptions).

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