

On the early diffusion of draughts

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Draughts is played with a “hardware” consisting of two ingredients, the board and the pieces.

It is now well established that many precious draughtsmen preserved in several museums are in fact pieces of the backgammon family of games. On the other hand, it is usually impossible, before the introduction of the 100-square board in several countries, to affirm whether a chess-board was actually used for draughts.

This coincidence in the hardware of different games makes an effective identification of many archaeological findings very difficult and the history of the initial period of draughts a hard field to investigate. Thus, in order to provide useful contributions toward solving the problem of the origin and diffusion of draughts “software”, different approaches are needed such as an extensive investigations using dictionaries, archives, and literary sources, of the kind reported in Van der Stoep’s *History*.

These approaches, however, are not completely satisfactory either, since it often happens that one starts by studying one game and ends up by studying another, due to the interconnections in the subject matter. As an example, one may consider the book *Chess in Iceland*, where Fiske practically dealt with every boardgame in every country. In particular, in order to obtain significant results, one must first overcome the handicap of continuously finding different pieces and games called by the same name and, on the contrary, identical ones under different denominations. Thus, if a strict procedure is followed so that every documentation which is not applied with certainty to the game of draughts is discarded, draughts software turn out to be a very recent discovery, in many countries too recent to be believed. On the other hand, if every possible indication is accepted, it is very difficult to keep draughts apart from the other boardgames. To find the proper middle track is not easy, and one of the main merits of Van der Stoep’s *History* has been to reopen several channels for investigating the field. In fact, the relation of draughts with alquerque had already been suggested by Brunet y Bellet

and one author after another had proposed some kind of gradual transformation from older games to draughts. For such theories we do not suffer from a lack of authors, but rather from a lack of documentary proof and an exact knowledge of the diffusion channels for draughts.

After the fundamental *Histories* by Murray and Kruijswijk, the situation became static, rather difficult to modify. It was firmly stated that draughts originated in Provence, in the 12th century. From there the game must have passed to England and Scotland after a while, and finally after several centuries it reached Spain and Italy. For several reasons, however, these hypotheses about the origin and the early diffusion of the game appear rather puzzling.

In particular, there is not, to my knowledge, any other example of a similar delay in transferring a fashion, a game, a cultural conquest, or any other “software” among neighbouring European countries. As an example of expected behaviour, one may consider the chronology derived from the first documentations on cards in different European towns; see H. Rosenfeld in *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 52 (1970) 75. That case may be particular, but it is unlikely, in any case, that the software could be exchanged less rapidly than the hardware. Remaining in the field of cards, let us consider the rapid diffusion in every European country that occurred for prime and hombre, mainly in the 16th and 17th centuries, respectively. Even if one takes into account the different circumstances, it remains very difficult to admit that the transit of draughts from Provence to Italy required approximately three centuries, while there existed an old-dated tradition of vast interchanges in every economic, cultural and literary sector. Probably the right path has still to be found in detail, but, at least, the *History* by Van der Stoep has fortunately reopened several channels for future investigations.

Samenvatting

(Redactioneel) De “hardware” van het dammen, bord en stukken, is niet ondubbelzinnig aan het spel zelf verbonden. In verscheidene nusa tentoongestelde “damschijven” zijn in feite vaak alleen voor een of ander triktrakspel gebruikt. En van een schaakbord kan vaak nooit met zekerheid worden vastgesteld dat het ook voor dantmen is gebruikt.

Wie de geschiedenis van het dammen bestudeert moet dus ook de “software” van het spel in rekening brengen en moet dus woordenboeken, archieven en literaire bronnen aanboren, zoals Van der Stoep dat in zijn “A history of draughts” dan ook metterdaad gedaan heeft. Maar

ook hier stuit men op specifieke noeilijkheden omdat de voor de stukken en de verschillende spelen gebruikte woorden geen konstante en geen vaste betekenis blijken te hebben.

Dat een in de 12e eeuw in de Provence ontstaan damspel drie tot vier eeuwen nodig heeft gehad om in Italië en Spanje bekend te worden, wil er bij de schrijver niet in. Naar zijn beste weten is er geen enkel voorbeeld te vinden van een mode, een spel, een kulturele ontwikkeling met zo'n langzame verbreiding over Europa, integendeel. Een snelle verbreiding over West-Europa (in enkele tientallen jaren) had, historisch gezien, veel meer in de rede gelegen. Als voorbeeld noemt de schrijver de geschiedenis van enkele kaartspelen, waarin dan ook inderdaad zo'n snelle uitbreiding over West-Europa aanwijsbaar blijkt.