

Tables, morris or draughts?

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The very origin of most games remains unknown to us. The case of draughts is even more difficult than usual due to the utilization of the hardware from earlier developed games, the board from chess and the men from several games, particularly of the backgammon kind. Moreover, it is uncertain whether the present name of the game was introduced right at the beginning or whether it concerns a later introduction. Therefore, researching the origin and the first spread of draughts requires attention to several fields: literature, linguistics, art history, archaeology, and so on. Let us only consider here some comments on the name of the game.

Apart from previous studies on the board games of the ancient civilizations, the first scholar treating in some detail the history of board games with reference to the corresponding terminology in various countries was Thomas Hyde in *De Ludis Orientalibus* (1694). Unfortunately, his contribution to European games and particularly to draughts remained limited. Another renowned scholar studying the history of games with reference to their names was Willard Fiske, especially in *Chess in Iceland*, published after his death in 1905. These results were taken into account by such experts as H.J.R.Murray and K.W.Kruijswijk. More recently, a step forward has been accomplished by Arie van der Stoep, who published in 1984 *A History of Draughts* and is now finishing his thesis dealing with the origin of the word “dame” and its relationship with our game. Many new data and relations are expected from it.

What all these contributions make clear is the multivalence of the technical terms involved in the board games, to begin with the specific names of the games themselves. For instance, terms of the morris/marrelle family were mostly used for the kind of games in which the aim is to obtain three men in a row. However, some names of the family were early used for draughts, to begin with marro in Spain and marrella in Sicily.

On the other hand, terms of the “table” family can also be connected to draughts. In Italy the name of tavole for a board game and/or its men is now outdated. Experts agree that the name was commonly used for games of the backgammon kind in the past. However, I can report here a case where it is also explicitly used to refer to games played without dice. Unfortunately, the date is not so old as we would like. Nevertheless, it may be a useful indication, being practically of the same age as the most ancient references to Italian draughts that are known at present (since the famous Berni ‘s passage has been duly discarded).

The book in question is: *Trattato del Debito del Cavalliero di Pomponio Torelli Conte di Montechiarugolo. Nell'Accademia de' Signori Innominati di Parma, Il Perduto*. In Parma. Nella Stamperia di Erasmo Viotti 1596; cc. 192 and *Tavola delle cose notabili*. The author, Pomponio Torelli (1539-1608), was a nobleman of Parma who held academic and public positions [see G.B.Jannelli *Dizionario biografico dei Parmigiani illustri*, Genova 1877, pp. 448-450]. Near the end of the book, playing games is discussed as one of the typical leisure time activities of a gentleman. The following games are distinguished:

- 1 games of pure luck, *tali sono i giuochi de i dadi soli, & delle carte, ch'à dadi somigliano, ove la semplice carta senza ingegno s'adopera;*
- 2 games of skill, *tale è il giuoco de gli Scacchi, delle tavole sole, o s'altro giuoco simile si ritrova;*
- 3 games of luck and skill *tale è il giuoco delle tavole, accompagnato co'l dado, & quasi tutti i giuochi di carte ò s'altri simili si trovano. Questi paiono à me più comuni, & appropriati alla ricreatione di ciascheduno, & tra essi lo sbaraglino, o toccadigli con dadi, & primiera con le carte.*

There are actually few games that are mentioned as examples. Some additional comment is provided on group 3, which the author considers the most suitable as a pastime. Interesting for us is the use of tavole in two different groups, classifying games according to whether they are played with dice or not. Unfortunately, only for tavole with dice are some names of corresponding games mentioned such as sbaraglino and toccadiglio. In case of “tavole sole”, playing with tables only, no specific game is mentioned.

However, which can be the games of tables without dice which are similar to chess? There are not many candidates. First of all, a possible candidate is draughts, which was by then certainly known in Italian regions. Then the game of fox and geese may be mentioned as a candidate, already recorded in the codex of Alfonso El Sabio, although only few quotations of it have been preserved in Italy. Further, the third candidate comprises the various morris games that were largely played: the simplest version, played with three men for each player; the commonest one among adults with nine men; and the version with twelve men. Owing to the above mentioned ambiguousness of game terms, they could again have been recorded in some cases instead of draughts itself.

In conclusion, it seems quite possible that terms of a family different from “dama” or “dame” could indicate draughts during the first times of its existence – at least in Italy but probably elsewhere too. The terms for specific board games often appear to have been taken from other games played together – of the morris and/or the backgammon kind in case of draughts.