

Turkish Draughts or Chess?

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Introduction

Some years ago a new theory was suggested by Mr. Westerveld connecting the origin of Turkish draughts with the forced spread of Jews out of Spain, starting from the end of the 15th century. (1) The theory was both original and interesting, although it needs some more confirmation in order to become fully convincing. As a partial support, it may be noted that for the spread of some card games there are experts having also suggested a Jewish channel recently. (2) It is possible that a spread of draughts following Jewish migrations has really occurred, but only in certain cases and not in others.

It is hard to see that Turkish draughts and similar variants derive from any kind of European draughts, played on a chequered chessboard and on squares of one colour. I instead prefer to consider Turkish draughts as a residual product of older variants, which flourished when the chessboard was still unchequered. (3) Thus, older draughts variants of this kind may provide useful hints for reconstructing board games of the classic age. To this aim, I have recently been engaged in searching for new information about variants played on the unchequered chessboard, to begin with the Turkish one.

Unfortunately, I was unable to trace any document on Turkish draughts earlier than those already known, dating from the second half of the 17th century. The well-known histories of the game by Murray, Kruijswijk and Van der Stoep list quotations by Jean de Thévenot (1663), Mallet (1668) and Hyde (1694), the last two sources providing some information on the rules. (4)

It must be noted that ‘dama turcica’ and similar expressions in bibliographies or indexes do not necessarily refer to Turkish draughts as we now define it. These terms, as used by Europeans, could mean a variant of mancala or even chess, as will be shown below.

However, in my opinion, earlier records may have remained. They may be found either in local records or in reports of travellers, the former case looking more promising if we are seeking for a detailed description. Since I am not familiar with the languages and the literatures involved, I have asked several experts for information. I also applied to the secretary of the FMJD, Mr. Plantin, who had provided me earlier with copies of some documents concerning draughts history. Unfortunately, he could not find anybody in the Federation having information on Turkish draughts before Hyde. (5)

A Spanish report

Recently Mr. Westerveld has reported some new evidence from the 16th century, which is more than one century earlier than the dating of the already mentioned quotations. (6) This would precisely correspond to what I have been looking for! Unfortunately, however, his points do not resist a critical analysis. In particular, he interprets a passage clearly referring to chess as if it actually described Turkish draughts. (7)

Mr. Westerveld's first point is that the reported chess game was instead a simplified (!) form of Turkish draughts - the initial positions are similar and pebbles could be used as pieces. However, the comparison with children at play may be limited in the text to the simplicity of the game set, to the speed of moving, to the capability of going on playing for hours, and so on; at least leaving room for the view that the boardgame described was chess indeed.

The second point of Mr. Westerveld would prove that Turkish draughts is not an original Turkish game since it was played by seamen who could learn it during their voyages. It is also true, however, that precisely during voyages it is easier to remark alien habits. If the game was familiar to the Spanish writer, he had hardly remarked it. On the other hand, the fact that it was played among Turks, and not among seamen of different countries seems to imply that it was a specific game of their own. A variant of chess seems here the best answer again.

In fact, Turks could have hardly played a game identified as a simplified form of Turkish draughts since Turkish draughts itself was unknown to the Spaniard! As a matter of fact, however, there did exist a game simpler than 16th century European chess, namely shatranj, the old Arabic version of chess. In the 16th century chess had evolved in

Western European countries to modern chess as we know it today. But our Spanish writer clearly did not recognize this Turkish chess game as the old Arabic form of chess from which the modern form had evolved.

A French report

A further example of such a situation may be found among the observations that Pierre Belon, 1517-1564, a renowned French scientist, published after a long voyage of 1546-1549. (8) Again, this passage is clearly related to chess, even if H.J.Clodius referred in 1761 to a Latin version by C.Lecluse as dealing with ‘dama turcica’. (9) The relevant passage from Lecluse is reported here in full:

In latrunculorum ludo Turcae sunt industrii, eoque maxime delectantur: interdum enim totum diem ludendo traducunt, ea de causa latrunculos, alveique loco telam pictam, semper circumferentes. Admodum illis convenit hic ludus: nam cum humi sedeant otiosi, facile ludendo totum diem impendere possunt: eburneis nonnumquam personis sculptura expressis reperiuntur: sed ea quam Reginam nos vocamus, carere nobis visi sunt, aliamque ejus loco substituere. (10)

[Turks are skilful in chess and they delight in playing it. Sometimes, in fact, they spend all day in playing and thus they always bring with them chessmen and a painted cloth instead of the chessboard. This game is very suitable to them: they can actually easily spend the whole day in playing while lazily sitting on the ground. Some chessmen are found as personages carved in ivory, but they (the Turks) seem to lack the piece which we call Queen and have substituted another piece at her place.]

This passage may be compared with the 1559 text reported by Mr. Westerveld. Both witnesses are similar and almost contemporaneous. They both record the surprise of a European faced by a popular game which is chess played with different rules, lacking in particular the main innovation in old Arabic chess, namely the mighty European queen. What both travellers did not know is that, until less than a century before, this was precisely the form of old chess, also universally played, including their own countries, Spain and France respectively.

After an analysis of both passages, everything becomes clear, as far as Turkish chess in the 16th century is concerned. Unfortunately, however, we are left with our usual lack of information about the early spread of Turkish draughts! In order to obtain some real information

about it, let us extend the analysis to somewhat later times, approaching the end of the 17th century. Again, before any known witness from local authors, we encounter some other quotations by Europeans who record local habits and games that they have observed while travelling among Muslim peoples.

A Dutch report

Let us consider in some detail the report by Cornelis de Bruyn, 1652-1727, about his stay in Constantinople in 1678-1680. His description of the difference in indoor pastimes is lively: Turks, on their part, cannot understand what Europeans are doing when continuously walking here and there through their rooms, instead of sitting down quietly. After reporting some common habits (as tobacco smoking, playing a three string lute, making outdoor exercises), a short paragraph is devoted to their indoor games.

The full quotation, as taken from the 1732 French edition, is:

Mais quand ils commençent a s'ennuyer de cette oisiveté, & qu'ils veulent prendre quelque passe-tems, ils se font apporter un jeu d'Echecs, a quoy ils sont fort habiles, ou bien un Damier, ou un jeu de Marelle; mais ils ne jöient jamais pour de l'argent, car ils croyent que c'est un peché. Et quoy qu'ils jöient d'un ci grand sang froid, & qu'ils ne fassent jamais paroître de joye ni de tristesse, soit qu'ils perdent ou qu'ils gagnent, ils ne laissent pas d'y prendre grand plaisir, jusqu'à y passer des jours entiers. (11)

Thus, when they get bored of remaining idle and wish some pastime, they let some game set be brought to them - three are mentioned in sequence: a chess set, a draughts board, a morris game. Then their peculiar behaviour in play is outlined: they never play for money, since this would be a sin; they appear to be indifferent to gain or loss; nevertheless, they are very fond of playing and may remain at the board all day long.

Then De Bruyn, after mentioning two other games, 'Mankala' and 'Verker', closes with a short sentence before passing to military games: "Le Damier n'en est aussi que d'une couleur" - "The board is also of a single colour". This sentence could easily be interpreted as related to draughts: in this case De Bruyn is reporting that the Turks make use of the unchequered draughts board. But in my opinion this would be a

misunderstanding since De Bruyn is clearly speaking of 'Verker' (the Dutch word for English backgammon or French trictrac) when he calls the pieces of this game 'Dames' and the board of this game a 'Damier'. This last interpretation is supported by the corresponding Dutch text of 1698, to be found in Kruijswijk's *Algemene historie*, page 166. (12)

The context still maintains the fundamental elements already indicated in the previous century - the same idle habit, the same length of the games. But here we find not only a description but also something which was lacking in previous witnesses, an illustration. It is reproduced here after the 1732 edition.



Middle part of an engraving taken from 'Voyages de Corneille Le Bruyn au Levant', 1732.

Six Turks are sitting practically on the ground. They wear their typical clothes and turbans and most of them are smoking their characteristic long pipes. The board is represented on a side, so that we have various situations: two men on the right are engaged in playing; two others look at the development of the game; the two remaining ones, on the left, are talking without paying any attention to the game. The player on the right has put his pipe on the ground and is making a move on the board.

What is most interesting to us is the playing set, both the board and the pieces. The board may be either a chess or a draughts board; certainly it cannot represent any of the other game sets mentioned. Some

squares appear to be darker than others; on the whole it seems that we are faced by a chequered board, at the time in common use in Western Europe. Another unusual feature of this board is its construction. We know from several sources that Turkish boards were generally of cloth; such boards can be folded when needed. Here the situation is practically reversed: instead of a soft board on a hard support, we see a hard board, of a given thickness too, on a soft cushion.

The game men, in number of four, are somewhat puzzling. As far as can be seen, they appear rather too uniform to represent chessmen, and too various to represent draughtsmen. The use of slender draughtsmen is however attested not only among Turks but also in the first descriptions coming from Spain.

On the basis of Brunet, Graesse and similar catalogues, De Bruyn's *Travels* was originally printed in Delft, in Dutch (1698) and in French (1700). These editions were very appreciated by collectors, particularly due to the larger quantity and the better quality of the engravings, as compared with those of later issues. Another edition was published in Paris and (or) Amsterdam in 1714. Then, the author published another book about a second travel to Moscovia and Persia. In a later French edition the two travel books were collected together, re-edited somewhat by Banier, and printed in Paris and Rouen (1725) and in The Hague (1732). We thus have five engravings to compare, of which I have seen only four until now.

In the 1725 edition, the corresponding picture can be found between pages 432 and 433; the initials B.M.F. are marked at the bottom of the page. This picture entirely corresponds to the 1732 picture, reproduced above. Some differences exist, but they are minor ones. The board is similar and seems to be drawn as a chequered one, although adjacent squares have the same colour in some cases.

More different is the drawing in the 1698 Delft edition, reproduced below. In this case, as in the figure of the 1700-edition, the dimensions are larger and the full page is divided into two picture parts instead of three. Moreover, the same scene is drawn as if it was observed under a smaller angle of view – here the group of six men is close at hand, the margins are cut off, the windows in the background are three instead of four. But let us consider the game set.



Middle part of an engraving taken from 'Reizen van Cornelis de Bruyn', Delft 1698, next to page 136.

The board is here certainly chequered, half of the squares being hatched by regularly spaced lines; moreover, the board is certainly a 100 square board. Still visible on the board are the four pieces. Here they are not perfectly defined, however, and this may not be attributed to their small dimension or to a lack of precision of the artist, who outlined all other details of the figure with great care and precision. The final impression is that these vaguely defined pieces can better be interpreted as chessmen.

The game scene in the different editions of De Bruyn's *Travels* confronts us with three serious problems. First, the material of the board, made of wood instead of cloth; second the dimensions of the board, with 10x10 squares instead of 8x8; and third, the chequering of the board, the old Arabic chess being played on an unchequered board. Each of these three unexpected features is hard to explain, perhaps one

has to assume that these features are simply mistakes of the original Dutch engraver. (13)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the more we study the extant witnesses on Turkish draughts, mainly deriving from travellers' descriptions, the more we find that certain elements are few and late. Unfortunately for us, no mention has been brought to our attention from the most likely early sources – local Turkish archaeological findings and evidence from literary documents of their own; these represent, however, the most promising sources for any future research.

References

- 1 Westerveld in HND 1988-2, 29.
- 2 For example Robert Kissel.
- 3 Pratesi in HND 1991-4, 85.
- 4 Mallet 1668, page 433/435: In describing what seems to be Turkish draughts, Mallet specifies that kings (Dames damées) cannot be taken by common pieces (Dames) and this is one of the rules of modern Italian draughts!
- 5 The reference to Mallet 1668 (see footnote 4) being provided by Gerhard Bakker.
- 6 Westerveld in HND 1991-2, 43.
- 7 I am sorry that I could not check the original Spanish source; in particular the word 'thousand' looks very odd in Mr. Westerveld's translation.
- 8 F.Pratesi, 'An old witness on Turkish chess', 'The Chess Collector' 1992-4, page 15/16, with the quotation of the original French text as of 1588.
- 9 H.J.Clodius, 'Primae lineae Bibliothecae lusoriae', Leipzig 1761.
- 10 Caroli Clusii Atrebatensis 'Exoticorum libri decem', (Lyon) 1605, page 200.
- 11 From 'Voyages de Corneille Le Bruyn au Levant', The Hague 1732, page 434/435.

- 12 Since ‘dame’ and ‘damier’ clearly mean ‘backgammon piece’ and ‘backgammon board’ in the last sentences, it seems highly probable that ‘damier’ means also ‘backgammon board’ in the quotation specified in footnote 11. In that case De Bruyn never mentioned ‘draughts’ at all!
- 13 The first edition of De Bruyn’s *Travels* is of 1698, 20 years after the stay of De Bruyn in Constantinople, from 1678-1680.