

## An Old Witness on Turkish Chess

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A short description of chess as played by Turks in the 16<sup>th</sup> century has been left by the scientist Pierre Belon. It will be reported and discussed here, after some preliminary information on his life and works.

Pierre Belon was born in about 1517 at La Soultière, near Le Mans; under the protection of several noblemen and dignitaries of the church, he was educated and carried out scientific research at a high level until 1564, when he was murdered on the road near Paris. He had obtained the degree of doctor of medicine from Paris University in about 1540 and was then a follower of renowned botanist Valerius Cordus with whom he accomplished a scientific journey throughout Germany. Then, between 1546 and 1549 he visited Greece, Crete, Constantinople, Lemnos, Thrace, Macedony, Anatolia, Chios, Samos, Rhodes, Egypt, Palestine and Syria. A few years later, he published in Paris a full report of his observations, together with several works devoted to specific subjects.

His scientific works often were of a pioneering nature. He described for the first time many species of birds and fish. His observations in the whole field of natural sciences were not limited to detailed analytical descriptions; on the contrary, he suggested several basic ideas of comparative anatomy which were not fully accepted by the scientific world for another 200 years.

The book of interest here, *Les Observations de plusieurs singularitez et choses mémorables trouvées en Grèce, Judée, Egypte, Arabie, et autres pays étrangers, rédigées en trois livres*, was published in French in 1553 and often reprinted in Paris and in Antwerp. In Antwerp in 1559 it first appeared its Latin translation by Charles de l'Escluse, which was also reprinted many times enabling it to be read widely among scholars of geography and natural sciences all over Europe. In this book Belon provides many interesting details of ethnographic nature about the various peoples encountered. The high scientific level of the writer assures a great interest and reliability to every detail of his descriptions.

Let us examine what he reports about Turks playing chess. The passage of interest here is in the 3<sup>rd</sup> book, at the beginning of ch. 49 (page 456 in the Paris edition of 1588):

Les Turcs sont bons ioueurs d'eschez, et y prennent grand plaisir. Ilz seront quelquefois un jour entier sans cesser de iouer: porquoy portent tousiours leurs eschez quelque part qu'ilz aillent, avec eux: mais ont seulement un linge peinct pour tablier à iouer dessus. Lon y trouve des eschez d'ivoire de relief ou les personnages sont entaillez au naturel, et nous semble qu'ilz n'en ont aucun qu'ilz recoignoissent pour celuy que nous nommons Reine. Mais en constituent un autre d'autre nom en son lieu. C'est un ieu qui leur est bien duict: car estans accropis, passent les iours entiers en paresse sans rien faire.

First of all, the attention is focused on the love of Turks for chess – they are able at it, they enjoy it greatly, they may go on playing it in the course of the whole day. Then, there is the judgement that the game is suitable to their life style. Belon implies that, as they are accustomed to lie crouched and idle, this game allows them to play without changing habits.

These are ethnographic comments made by a scientist who observes everything around himself; soon afterwards, he goes on to describe a plant and how it was used by Turks. However, there are some intermediate remarks which are even more relevant to chess; they are related to the chessboard, the pieces and the queen, respectively.

Connected with their love for chess, is the use of a chessboard. Just for having it always with them, the chessboard made of cloth which can easily be carried and used everywhere. This habit in Islamic countries is known to us from other sources too; in some cases Arab chess was played not on cloth but on skin boards – a different material for the same result of an easily folded chessboard. The grid on the board is simply painted. Probably more valuable boards existed in which the grid was embroidered, but the boards described by Belon seem to have been the most common.

His approach is different with chessmen. Several kinds were present. The commonest ones – not mentioned here – should have been those which we know as Arab, that is of a geometric abstract design. In fact, Belon speaks of playing with carved chessmen not as something occurring everywhere; he instead relates this fact to ivory chessmen, certainly not the most popular ones. His attention is focused on carved chessmen, unfortunately unknown to us for that date and that region. There may

be a fundamental reason why he pays more attention to that pattern: it was the most similar to chessmen from his own country. With carved chessmen he can better compare the pieces with those he was accustomed to. What is the result? He could recognise the game at once as nothing less than the same noble game of chess.

However, there is a fundamental difference: among chessmen the queen is absent here and another piece – bearing another name – takes its place. That was surprising for Belon. Not so much for us, because we know that the queen is really an European introduction. As a modern queen with its extraordinary faculty of move it was a relatively new object even for Europe. According to Murray (*History of Chess*, p.353) for the queen “the older move was probably obsolete in the Mediterranean lands by 1560”. Here, for a slightly earlier date, we seemingly obtain a witness to the contrary. In fact, even though no mention is provided as the actual moves of the “substitute” piece, the ancient minister was likely kept, with its own move of one square to every direction.

In conclusion, from the quoted passage by Belon we obtain several useful information on chess as played by Turks in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. That information is earlier and more complete than other reports by European travellers. Several differences with respect to chess as played in Europe struck Belon during his voyage. A few of them we could expect from other sources and/or other countries, as the use of cloth chessboards and the absence of the queen.

Probably, the most unexpected information for us is the record of carved ivory chessmen being in rather common use. Taking the absence of a queen into account, they may be imagined as an army, more similar to the ancient chess patterns – before the court features, so typical of Western chess, were introduced. We are thus left with some regret that Belon did not describe the set in greater detail nor did he add some illustration of these valuable Turkish chessmen, carved in ivory and challenging the requirements of Islam.