

## The last encyclopaedic manuscript

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### Summary

A manuscript with a collection of chess and morris problems is described here for the first time. It is kept in Malatestiana Library, Cesena, and can be dated in the 16th century. This collection has at least two specific characteristics: it contains problems composed both according to the old and the modern rules and it is very comprehensive. It can thus be considered as the last handwritten encyclopaedic collection of problems.

### Riassunto

L'ultimo manoscritto enciclopedico. Viene descritto per la prima volta un manoscritto contenente una raccolta di problemi di scacchi e filetto. Il manoscritto è conservato nella Biblioteca Malatestiana di Cesena e risale al Cinquecento. Questa raccolta ha almeno due caratteristiche peculiari: la presenza di problemi secondo le regole antiche e secondo quelle moderne e la completezza. Perciò può essere considerato come l'ultima raccolta enciclopedica manoscritta di problemi.

While studying the ancient collections of *Bonus Socius* and *Civis Bononiae* on manuscripts already known to the experts, I discovered a new specimen, kept in Biblioteca Malatestiana, Cesena. The library, established in 1452 and used for centuries by the Franciscans of the town, is a renowned example of ancient cloister libraries. This manuscript belongs however, with number 166.74, to the *Comunitativa* series, which entered the library in the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; no documentary information is kept on the provenance of this manuscript and we have to base our conclusions on its examination.

Nobody had acknowledged the chess contents of this work until now. There are several reasons explaining why, to begin with its title.

On the back of the binding, there is a printed Latin title and classification, *Ludes Darii - M.SS. NUM. 41*. Probably, *ludes* is due to a mistake in declension, instead of the correct *ludi* or games. More strange is Darius' involvement, plausibly due to a second spelling mistake, *Darii* instead of *varii*, referring to the games with the simple meaning of “various”.

The handwriting is apparently of the 16<sup>th</sup> century but it has not been possible for me to state the date more exactly. It is not the work of a professional copyist; the text is concise, full of abbreviations both for ordinary words and especially for technical terms. The author uses several languages – Latin, Italian, Spanish – sometimes mixed within a single item; his origin is not easy to deduce, maybe a Spaniard; indeed, several Spanish masters have been recorded as travelling through Italy, each with his own complete book of chess endgames.

Even after inspection, the chess contents is not evident for people with no specific knowledge of these old collections. Contrary to modern habits, the chessboard is unchequered and the diagrams are complex - they contain letters indicating the pieces in a systematic but uncommon way and, moreover, other few letters are scattered on the board to represent the correct sequence of moves. These letters are sometimes capital, sometimes small, and when marking chessmen they correspond to signs formed by joining two or more letters together, see figure.

On the leaves, there is no ancient numbering; pages have been numbered recently, marking odd numbers from 1 to 353. The book is divided into separate sections, following the different sources employed and, first of all, the original plan of the compiler. He begins his job by drawing void chess diagrams, two on each page of the book, then he devotes a selected number of pages to the various sections planned, and now he is ready to enter the single compositions; not differently were opened the inventories of various goods.

Thus the first impression in skimming through the book is of an unfinished work, with a lot of pages left with void diagrams. However, this is mainly the result of the structure of this collection, planned to accept entries whenever available. In fact, the author of this work has gathered a comprehensive collection, one of the most complete ever, certainly the most comprehensive among those including problems of both modern and old chess. We can therefore consider this book as the last handwritten encyclopaedic collection of endgames.

Lindus extefus: d:

2p	2p	2p	2p	2p	2p	2p	2p	Et b. tien la man ad chi vincera et ischa.
R	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
			P	P	P			
			2p	2p	2p			
P	P	P					P	P
R			2p	2p				

Lindus extefus: d:

2p	2p	R		2p	2p	2p	Et b. tien la man c'ra hoc parte et no de me iocare lo pmo tra fero det. R. no dico de 2
P		P	P	P	P	P	
	2p	c	2p	a	P		
6			2p				
		2p					
			R				
P	P	P		P	P	P	
2p	2p		2p		2p		

The first section, pages 3-33, does not contain common chess endings, except for a few exceptions. Here we find problems, and often initial positions, from unusual chess variants and also other boardgames which end up to having with chess only the chessboard in common. Some of these ‘compositions we already know from Perugia manuscript, and some questions on their meaning can again be asked as did Dr. Chicco (*Contromossa*, March 1984, p.10): it is often not clear which task is required by these “problems, except when play occurs by pairs of consecutive moves. Often the number of moves indicated must be considered as a limit; for instance, mate to be given in less than 25 moves, whichever defence is chosen. In such cases, many different solutions appear to be possible.

Between this initial section and the ‘traditional’ one, we find, on pages 89-96, a short collection of *subtilitates* or *primores*, practically the same section as can be found in Damiano’s book - probably taken from the same source. (That the author used Damiano’s book for orderly copying only these *primores* appears less plausible to me, although almost all of Damiano’s problems are present in the following.) This part may also be considered as an introduction to the main section, which immediately follows.

The main section, pages 97-297, corresponds to an updated collection of the *Civis Bononiae* kind and is similarly based on increasing number of moves required by the solution. However, the compiler did not exactly know the number of problems to be inserted for each section. Therefore, he reproduced within this section the same structure of the whole book – just outlining two void chessboards in each page and assigning a number of pages to each part (2-moves beginning on page 97, 3 on 139, 4 on 189, 5 on 219, 6 on 239, 7 on 259, 8 on 269, 9 on 279, 10 and more on 289). After entering the problems, several pages remained unused also within the section.

The numbers of problems actually recorded and those for which place had been provided are, respectively, as follows: 72/84 of 2-moves, 98/100 of 3, 54/60 of 4, 35/40 of 5, 36/40 of 6, 17/20 of 7, 15/20 of 8, 12/20 of 9, 17/26 of 10 and more, namely 356/410 on the whole. This is the most traditional section of the book, even if together with older examples, a remarkable part of the endings gathered here are *alla rabi-osa*. Usually each part begins with a few modern problems, then other items follow both modern and old without an apparent order.

With respect to the traditional collections of boardgames, here the section on tables is lacking at all. This does not prove that such games had died out. We know that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century games of the backgammon family were competing with chess in popularity. I suppose that excluding the section on tables is here due to a lower interest by the individual compiler and/or to the uncommon kind of the variants inserted in these collections, namely being played without dice.

The third and last section of the traditional collections, that on morris games, does however exist: the final part of the book, pages 303-353, is devoted to morris, even though several pages (305-326, 343-345) have instead diagrams prepared for or provided with compositions of chess variants. Here it is evidently the interest of the compiler that is lower – he outlines the diagrams after some current source, but leaves

them, with some exceptions, without solution. However, these pages with morris diagrams – the clearest to be interpreted by modern standards – have not escaped the attention of the librarian, who in the 19th century recorded this book as devoted to some kind of morris game. His interpretation of the contents has lasted among local librarians until now.

A final remark must be devoted to the latest additions present in the book, even if they may be insignificant for chess. Many later short writings, scattered here and there, correspond to dates around the year 1640 (a 1642 date can be read in an internal page). They are often limited to just a line of text, sometimes to several sentences, up to a page. The subject of these additions is religious and their character openly fanatic. It is not clear to me whether all this fanaticism was real – as it might even be expected by someone living in a cloister. An alternative hypothesis is that the writings had a pragmatic aim: the book thereby acquired a somewhat holy character, which was enough to preserve it from destruction.

This description will be enough for presenting this important book to the chess world. Before long, a more detailed description will be published in Italian, as a supplement to this review.