

Early Stages of Italian Draughts

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During the 16th century, several Italian dictionaries were printed, which are now generally difficult to find, even in Italy's greatest libraries. It is therefore not surprising if they escaped attention by the historians, mainly of foreign nationality, who analyzed Italian board games. Fortunately it is possible to leaf through most of these ancient dictionaries in the National Library of Florence, and in the library of the Crusca Academy, (which for centuries prepared THE Italian dictionary) now located in the wonderful Villa Medicea of Castello, near Florence.

These works are very different from each other, and generally rather different from present-day dictionaries, also. Some are simply recordings of the words used in the masterpieces of Italian classical authors, such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. In some cases, the order is alphabetical (Luna, 1536), in others it follows a kind of system (Alunno, 1584; Marinelli, 1562), in which everything has its own place in some hierarchical order beginning with theological matters. The general character of these works does not seem to be adequate to provide useful information of the people's everyday life, or of idioms or popular names.

A different category of works is formed by dictionaries whose principal aim is to provide the Latin equivalent of the 'modern' Italian language; (Venuti, 1661) somewhat similar to the format, and maybe in the general aim, to any modern dialect dictionary. A Few of them have, moreover, several equivalent words taken from contemporary foreign languages. Among them the most renowned is certainly Calepino, 1666, as proved by the many successive editions. Also, Toscanella, 1668, is interesting for the many Flemish words reported, together with French, and sometimes German ones.

As far as DAMA is concerned, the research in those works has been fruitless. Most of them don't report the word at all, in any meaning. Calepino reports it as 'damma', a kind of faun, whereas Toscanella states it is a name of French origin for indicating ladies. From that lack

of evidence it is impossible to conclude either that the game did not yet exist, or that it had a different name, because very little attention is given to games in the literary works of the time.

It was considered of special interest to check also different words which in the past were connected with board games. Toscanella has an interesting ‘giocare al MERLARO’, translated as ‘ludere calculis discoloribus’, which will be commented on later. Other games are quoted under names more clearly pertaining to the family of (s)mar(r)ella or (s)mer(r)ella. Those words have already been analyzed for their relationship to games; for instance, by Fiske, (*Chess in Iceland*, 1906), and by Zamboni, (*Studi Friulani*, 3, 1973). Also, some conclusive remarks can be found in the *History of Draughts* by van der Stoep. The only information I feel authorized to add is that in the spoken Tuscan language of those words, only MURIELLA has been preserved, and its meaning is a little flat stone such as children skip across a water surface, or use for other movement games. The same meaning has existed for several centuries for an entire family of words, and for similar terms in French, English and so on. If referring to board games, the same words were mainly connected with morris. If one writes down every word of this Family to indicate morris and other games, probably one hundred slightly different terms can be listed, which in extreme cases may be difficult to be acknowledged as pertaining to a single family of words.

[Continued in the next issue]

What is here of interest is that, in some cases, these words were also used for draughts. The most important one is probably the Spanish one, where MARRO has been the most common name for draughts. On the other hand, uncertainty in the use of the same words for morris and draughts occurred in the early times of draughts diffusion. This is shown by the contrary use of damspel for morris reported by van der Steep on pp. 88 and 116. In Italy the explicit case is the Sicilian one, known from Carrera, (*Il gioco degli scacchi*, 1617) where MARRELLA is reported the actual name for draughts. Thus, we are left with the problem to detect first if a name of that family is applied to a boardgame and second, if draughts and not morris is intended. IF one speaks of 3-men or even 8-men morris, there is no problem of misunderstanding; but what about a 12-man board game? An interesting discussion about the possibility of ‘duodecim scrupis’ being used for draughts can be found on page 116 of *The History of Draughts*, where van der Stoep inclines to reject this possibility. The Sicilian use of ‘marrella’ for

draughts, however, may provide a hint to the possibility of the contrary. Venuti quotes two variants under the entry ‘gioco’: SMARELLA is said to be the 12-man game, while NOVE is the easy name for the 8-men one. The Latin translation is similar for the two cases, being ‘ludere calculis discoloribus’, respectively ‘novenis’ or ‘duodenis’. It is impossible from this evidence to conclude that ‘smarella’ was draughts, particularly since the alternative name of ‘nine’ cannot be extended to other games than morris. On the other hand, we cannot exclude the possibility that names of the MARELLA Family were used elsewhere in Italy for draughts. A possible such case is again related to Toacanella’s MERLARO.

While Toscanella defines playing at ‘merlaro’ as ‘ludere calculis discoloribus’ in the mentioned dictionary, he adds an outline of the corresponding board in another work, a translation from Quintilian, *L’Istituzioni oratorie*, seemingly printed for the first time in 1568, but which underwent many reprints in the following years by the same Venetian printers. The reference is quoted precisely in this respect by Dossena, *Giochi da tavolo*, 1834. The board outlined is a real checkered board, the usual one for chess and /or draughts, except for the dimensions of 8x6 squares. This most probably can be explained by typographical reasons or errors, since it cannot plausibly be considered a local variant of the game. However, it is certainly not a morris board and it provides some support to proposals of a diffusion of Italian draughts taking place earlier than the name of DAMA itself became usual. A different explanation can be based on the known existence of two-faced boards, on which morris could be played on one side and chess on the other. In this case the ‘new’ name of the whole set must be admitted to have derived from the morris board. This seems, however, difficult to be accepted, particularly since morris has always been explicitly considered of a much lower level with respect to chess.