

The Oldest Chess Pieces in Europe

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INTRODUCTION



*Mozarab chess piece known as "the pieces of Saint Genadio". Ivory. Preserved in the Mozarabic monastery of Pe-alba de Santiago (Leon/ Spain). Dated at least from the first years of the 10th century, and very likely from the 9th century.
(Many thanks to Dr Ricardo Calvo)*

It is a known fact that chess was introduced to Europe via Muslim Spain. A musician named Ziriab traveled from Baghdad to Cordoba in the year 822. There he exercised a tremendous influence upon the court of the Ummayyad emir Abd-al-Rahma II, introducing the game of chess, among many other novelties. The historical evidence supporting this claim as well as a complete bibliography were published by me personally: (R.Calvo "Der Musiker, der das Schachspiel brachte". - In: Schach-journal, Berlin, 3. jg., 1993, N'1/1993, pp. 86-93 "El musico que trajo a Europa el ajedrez". In: Artedrez, Pedro Muñoz (Ciudad Real), año 1, 996/97, N' 2, 1996, pp. 4-11)

From Muslim Cordoba, chess diffused to the Christian kingdoms in northern Spain. The evidence comes to hand in the form of several lots of Islamic chess pieces which remain preserved today, as well as references to chess sets in early Spanish documents, mostly of testimonial nature. At least, four groups of pieces presently survive. In NW Spain, may be found the 4 ivory artefacts from Pealba de Santiago and the 8 pieces from Celanova. In NE Spain, the 3 pieces at San Millan de la Cogolla compliment 17 pieces which are currently preserved in Lerida. An additional 14 pieces of this last group were plundered and sold recently in an auction to the emir of Kuwait. Each set displays the characteristic Islamic shape, and except the for first one, all are made from rock crystal. All sets have been documented as products of the 10th-11th century.

A fascinating question with regard to the diffusion of chess through contact with Muslim afficiandos can be answered as follows: The 4 small ivory artefacts preserved in the Mozarabic monastery of Pealba de Santiago (Leon/ Spain) known there as "the pieces of Saint Genadio", are Mozarab chess pieces dating to at least the first years of the 10th century, and very likely from the 9th century. Here is a picture of the venerable lot.

A few introductory words: The term ÒMozarabÓ (Pronunciation: [mOzâr'ubz]. Spanish MOZÁRABE from Arabic musta'rib, "arabicized") refers to any of the Spanish Christians living under Muslim rule (8th-11th century), who, although unconverted to Islam, nevertheless adopted Arabic language and culture. Their position was typical of Christians and Jews living under Islamic rule at that time. Locally autonomous, as a distinct and separate community,

they paid a special tax in place of the conscription requirement made upon Muslims to serve in the army. Separate Mozarab enclaves were located in the large Muslim cities, especially Toledo, Cordoba, and Seville, where they formed prosperous communities ruled by their own officials and were subject to a Visigothic legal code. They also maintained their own bishoprics, churches, and monasteries and translated the Bible into Arabic. Their liturgy, called the Mozarabic rite, was like that of ancient Gaul. It is preserved only in chapels at Toledo and Salamanca.

At various times, notably during the 11th cent., the Mozarabs were persecuted. The Christians were probably Arabic-speaking, and although their culture was basically Romance-Visigothic, it was also heavily influenced by Muslim civilization. In turn, the Mozarabs greatly influenced modern Spanish culture. The Mozarabs eventually relocated in the north of the Iberian Peninsula, bringing with them the architectural style of Islamic Cordoba's characteristic horseshoe arch and the ribbed dome. Most likely, they also brought the crystal chess pieces from Orense, St. Millan de la Cogolla and Urgel and almost certainly, the chess pieces of Pealba de Santiago as well

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY In terms of the geography, the small town of (Pealba?) can be found on a detailed map of NW Spain in the middle of an imaginary line linking the NE corner of the Portuguese border with the city of Leon. The "best" road is actually a terrible one which starts from Ponferrada, and terminates as a dead-end in Pealba de Santiago. (Please refer to the lower right corner of the attached image.) Pealba means "white rock" and "de Santiago" indicates an ancestral path of pilgrimage to St. Jacques of Compostela via the so-called "Silver Route". In time, this renowned Roman road became a Mozarab pilgrimage route as well as the commercial route linking the ports of Andalucia with those of the north. In Extremadura, the Silver Route connects with such monumentally important cities as Caceres and Plasencia. In Castile-Leon through Bejar and Salamanca it joins the route taken by pilgrims from Toledo and Avila through Alba de Tormes. The old monasteries of Moreuela and Benavente are two locations where the route enters Sanabria, and from there, Orense. Before arriving at these junctions however, it intersects with the bishopric of Astorga (the Asturica Briga of the Roman Silver Route) in which is found Pealba de Santiago. Pealba de Santiago is presently a dying town. During the winter months, only about two dozen elderly and ill inhabitants remain.

The beautiful landscape of surrounding mountains goes by the name of "The Silent Valley". These peaks cradle the banks of the Oza River. In the center of the town arises the impressive Mozarab church-monastery of Santiago, which gives both name and fame to the village. The church was built in 909 A.D. by a Mozarab saint, St. Genadio, who was also Bishop of Astorga between 898-920. Though his office, St Genadio received instructions from his friend, King Alfonso III of Leon. St. Genadio is the first Christian saint related to chess. He died in 936 and was buried at the counter-apse of his beloved mozarab church in Pealba, where he dwelled the last 16 years of his life.

Preliminarily, he had been bishop of Astorga, but later he was above all a hermit, dedicated to meditating inside a cave near the Oza River. Reputedly, this is a place which miraculously produces no noise whatsoever and is looked upon as holy. His Mozarab disciples considered Genadio's devotion to chess an aid for the study of concentration habits and a method of approaching God. The monastery was active until the 12th century, and three of its abbots were consecrated as saints as well.

A legend explains how, one day, while meditating at the entrance of his cave, the deafening tumult of the waters of the creek spilling from the mountain impeded his concentration. Upon exclaiming "Silence!", the waters receded into the bowels of the earth and were quieted. From then on, the place was known as the "Valley of Silence". This is a legend which has some credibility, because, as bishop of Astorga, St. Genadio was closely connected to communities of Mozarab monks and several churches with histories dating back to the 10th century remain in this area (M. Gomez Moreno "Iglesias Mozárabes" Madrid 1925. Reed Leon 1970. I p.214). The remaining ivory chess pieces testify to this spiritual connection, and even today they the local folklore considered them miraculous talismans.

THE PIECES OF ST. GENADIO There are 3 written references dealing with the chess pieces of St Gernadio. The above mentioned Gomez Moreno writes: "Two pieces are tall, with rectangular faces, incorporating an upper concave surface such as is found in the so-called Charlemagne set. Both pieces bear circular engravings and are cylindrical, with a semi-spherical top showing, one or two protuberances. The second piece is double the size of the first one" According to Augusto Quintana Prieto, in his book "Peoalba" (1963, p. 114), throughout the course of many centuries, popular tradition was well aware of the use of these pieces in chess, and is quoted on this point by Benjamin Martinez ("Montes-Peoalba..."p.56). The tallest one is clearly an incomplete rectangular Rook of 50x40x23mm. The upper side shows the typical excavation (carving?) of an obtuse angle. In more recent times, part of a lateral face was incised by an ill man who did this out of a desire to access its magical healing properties.

In the Leon newspaper "Promesa" (Sunday 1st of June 1952) there appeared an article by José María Luengo indicating that the style of the pieces is clearly Arabic. Together with a picture (photograph?), he also made some drawings and appended them with following comments: "Piece num.2., has the shape of a half-spheric helmet, a little bit inclined, and has a protuberance in one side. It is a Pawn. Piece num.1 presents a similar in shape, although it is larger. One side has a salient (?) in form of a crest. It can be identified as a Bishop or Alfil. Piece num. 3 is a parallelepiped, (?) with an extended rectangular base. The upper side is cut at a very obtuse angle. The planes forming this angle are ornamented with circles of two concentric circumferences each and four tangential circumferences forming a cross. Among the small circles, four lines resembling some type of root form a bigger circumference. Inside each of the circles resides a central point. The central part of the piece is ornamented with three parallel lines. This piece was a Rook"

SCULPTURE OF ST. GENADIO In the Mozarabic church of the monastery of Peoalba, where the saint was buried, there is a sculptured image of San Genadio dating from the mid 16th century. In this wooden sculpture, the saint is featured as a bishop, with pastoral staff, mitre, chasuble (?) and pluvial cloak. Everything is enhanced by the beautiful polychrome of the wood and the naturalness of the pleats. In the composition, a stylized, serpentine *serpente* is integrated in such a way that all perspective appearances of the body characterize the serpentine aspect, which is naturally engaged through the open stance of the figure and the forwardly advancing left knee. The situation of the upraised right arm and the staff in the left hand determines that the work was fashioned during the XVI century.

CELANOVA Together with the crystal chess pieces conserved in San Millán de los Residuales la Cogolla and Urgel, the lot of Celanova is among the older chess materials dating from the early Middle Age. The monastery of Celanova is located in the mountains of Orense, although, more recently, the chess pieces have been transferred to the Diocesan Museum of the capital of the county, probably to avoid pillage or theft. The pieces, eight in total, are of greater variety than those of the other lots and therefore probably date further back. Camón Aznar attributes them to the first half of the 10th century because there is a donation letter to the monastery for the year 938.(J. Camón Aznar) calling attention to "The pieces of rock crystal and Fatimid art found in Spain: lot of the monastery of Celanova". *Al-Andalus*, IV (1936-39) pp.396-406). So, this lot is slightly newer than the St. Genadio pieces. The lot contains all the types of medieval chess pieces, and was exhibited in the Universal Exhibition of Barcelona in 1929 during a commemorative Tournament. It has also been shown in the exhibition *Åges of Man*, Astorga 2000.

SAN MILLAN In the 11th Century monastery of Yuso of San Millán of the Cogolla (Logroño, NW Spain), a reliquary-box was built for the remains of San Felices, the teacher of San Millán. In the upper cover, there are three chess pieces made of rock crystal: a Knight and two Pawns embedded into the reliquary as ornamentation. They are better dated than those of Celanova and Urgel because it is recorded that they were donated by Sancho III of Navarre in 1033 (Gomez Moreno. "Ars Hispaniae". vol III). A recent description of these pieces together with a documented analysis of the pieces of rock glass in general, appears in Antje Kluge-Pinsker ("Schachspiel und Trictrac". Jan Thorbecke. Sigmaringen 1991. p.35-39.)

URGELL, AGER, LERIDA A fourth Spanish group of early chess men are the beautiful crystal chess pieces known as "Urgell chess men". Part of these pieces are still preserved in Lérida, but

the most valuable items pertaining to these sets have disappeared. A particular group of some 14 pieces went to Paris towards the end of last century (Francesch Fité. "El lot de peces d'escacs de cristall de roca del Museu Diocesà de Lleida procedents del tresor de la col·legiata d'Ager (s. XI). Acta Historica et Archaeologica Medievalia 5-6. Barcelona 1984-85.P. 281-312.) and reappeared recently in a public auction. The Emir of Kuwait purchased the lot, which was plundered by Iraqi soldiers during the Gulf War.

Supposedly, these 14 chess pieces from Urgell were in Iraq during the war. (Thomas Thomsen. Personal communication) Irving Finkel, from the British Museum, mentioned in the CCI (Chess Collectors International) meeting of Paris (21-24 May 1992) that the pieces are now back in Kuwait.

The Chess pieces from Ager and Lerida Among the stronghold fortresses owned by the counts of Urgell was the closed valley of Ager. It is easy to miss the entrance. When driving in the road N-260 from Urgell till Pobla de Segur, one heads to the South (road C-147) and some 20 Km after Tremp, there is a deviation towards the West through which one will arrive at Ager. Even today, visitors are charmed by its rare beauty. Ager lies along one of the ancient European pilgrimage routes to St. Jaques of Compostela.

The Urgellian lord, count Arnau Mir de Tost, built a monastery at Ager in the middle of XI century. This church-castle of St. Peter, situated above the dying town, is now in ruins, although it was considered very splendid many centuries ago. Among its treasures were several lots of chess pieces and interesting chess documents. To comment on the more fascinating details of Ager and the Heraldic arms of the city were composed of a chequered board of 60 squares fashioned in or (gold?) and sable. As late as 1547, the abbot Juan Sobrino listed an inventory of its treasures, among them the "Urgell lot": *"Una caxa de fusta amb quaranta-quatre peces de crestell diu-se son escacs. No se sap qui les donà i creu-se les donà lo comte d'Urgell"* (P. Sanahuja. "Historia de la villa de Ager". Poblet 1961. p. 190. Quoted in Fité).

Evidently, from the original 96 pieces of 1071, only 44 remained five centuries later. These 44 crystal chess pieces were also seen in Ager at the beginning of 19th century by Villanueva (Murray. . p. 765. See also Fité.), who also transcribed Sobrino's document, which has, by the way, disappeared since then. Likewise, according to Fité, 13 of the pieces must have been lost during the 19th century, and only 14 pieces remained in the parish of St. Vicent d'Ager in 1887.

The chess historian Brunet i Bellet tried in vain to purchase the pieces. (Brunet i Bellet.J. "Sobre unes pessas d'un joch d'escacs de crestell vingudes d'Ager". Butlletí de la Associació Catalana d'Excursions Científiques. Barcelona. vol IX-X). After failing, he made a descriptive drawing of the 14 chess men in a well known book (J. Brunet i Bellet. "El Ajedrez: Investigaciones sobre su origen".Barcelona 1890. p. 215). In 1907, these 14 chess pieces appear in the private collection of the Parisienne countess Mme. de Béhague.

Let us label this lot the "Ager pieces", no matter if their crooked path goes from Ager to Paris, Kuwait and Iraq.

Amid the transaction (I prefer the word exploitation) both a priest in Ager named Francesc Mora, and Mr. Fontdevila, an antiquarian broker of Barcelona, born in Ager, played a role. The monastery of Ager was closed in 1857, and a part of its properties went to the bishop of Lerida, included among them, 17 chess pieces fashioned in rock crystal. Until recently, the bishops kept the pieces in their private sleeping quarters.

Let's call them the "Lerida pieces".

Adding to the lot 14 Ager pieces which went to Paris-Kuwait-Iraq after 1887, we know that 13 further chess pieces of the Urgell lot seen by Villanueva at the beginning of 19th century have completely disappeared. 5. Description of the 17 "Lerida pieces" Of the 17 pieces, 8 are pawns, 1 is a rook, 3 are knights, 2 are bishops, and 3 are kings. The material is, in every case, transparent rock crystal. Only one bishop displays a smoky, darker colour. The overall design is abstract, following the well known Islamic pattern. Pawns differ slightly in shape and in size.

Basically, the form is conic, the diameter of the circular base being in average some 16mm and the height, approximately 27mm . Lateral carving also differs. One of the pawns is larger than the others, and so, it would appear as though they belong to two different chess sets, unless this particular "pawn" represents a ferz or "queen", as suggested by the crystal queen found in Khorassan and belonging to the private collection of Lothar Schmid. (Joachim Petzold. "Das Königliche Spiel". Kohlhammer. Stuttgart. 1987. p. 29)

The bottom of most of the pawns still shows traces of a reddish tincture & perhaps a kind of resin similar to that used in Egypt during Pharaonic times.(V. Keats. "The illustrated guide to World Chess sets". New York 1985. P.44) A beautiful rook is one of the most impressive items of the collection. Thirty-five mm in height, 30mm broad and 16mm thick (3), it shows the typical rectangular shape with a deep incision cut into the middle of the top. There are 3 knights, with their bases consisting of a cylinder and carved lateral incisions. On the top, we find a smaller head with a single protuberance. Two of the knights are almost complete, although the third has lost its hump. The differences in size suggest that they belong to two different sets. The two bishops belong, likewise, to different sets. Their shape is cylindrical, with a head showing the two humps usually considered an abstract representation of elephant tusks. The crystal of the smaller bishop is smoky, being therefore the darkest piece of the whole lot. This may suggest that the two opposing chess parties of Islamic chess, red and black, composed the collection. Red pieces were fashioned by adding a reddish resin in the bottom and the black pieces by using another kind of smoky rock crystal. Kings are represented in form of a cylindrical block suggesting a throne or a seat, due to two perpendicular cuts in the upper section of the piece.

The material of the Urgell lot, rock crystal, points clearly to a foreign origin, because this kind of carving is considered a typical production of the Fatimid Egyptians. Experts on this subject have ascribed the art of carving hard stones as a part of an ancient Egyptian tradition connected also with Hellenistic and Mesopotamic cultures. The abstract Islamic design reinforces the assumption that these chess sets were not produced in Urgell, but imported from a Muslim zone.

In distinguishing these pieces from other locations of manufacture, it is important to remember that in areas with no Muslim influence (Lewis island, for instance) figuratively styled chess pieces appear from the very beginning. The style of the Lerida pieces is almost exactly the same as other Islamic crystal pieces, such as the "Osnabrück" lot (C.J.Lamm. "Mittelalterliche Gläser und Steinschnitter beiten aus den Nahen Osten". Berlin 1930). The rooks of both sets are brothers. Also the giant chess king of rock crystal from the cathedral of Halberstadt belongs to the same kind of kings as the ones in Lerida. The Ager-Paris-Kuwait- Iraq chess pieces, as described by Brunet, are much bigger and more elaborate. Although less pleasing aesthetically, the humble lot left in Lerida could be older. Petzold. op. cit. p.60