

A GAME THAT NEVER WAS: VERNEY’S DUODECIMAL CHESS

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Abstract

A large chess variant played on a 12x12 board was inadvertently created by G. H. Verney, author of *Chess Eccentricities*, who seriously misinterpreted one of his sources, A. van der Linde’s *Quellenstudien zur Geschichte des Schachspiels*. Despite its serendipitous origins, the game, for which the name Verney’s Duodecimal Chess seems appropriate, is surprisingly playable. A set of rules is suggested since those provided by Verney are incomplete.

Keywords: Chess history; chess variants; *Chess Eccentricities*; serendipity.

Introduction

G. H. Verney’s *Chess Eccentricities* contains the description of “Game by Alfonso X. Seville, 1283” (Verney 1885, pp. 175-176) which, as pointed out by Beasley (2010), deviates significantly from the one in his source, A. van der Linde’s *Quellenstudien zur Geschichte des Schachspiels* (Van der Linde 1881, pp. 265-266). Verney’s mistake, as I intend to demonstrate below, apparently comes from quoting – and misinterpreting – a different part of van der Linde’s work.

Verney’s Duodecimal Chess: a comedy of errors

Discussing the appearance of modern long-range bishop, van der Linde used the medieval game of Courier Chess and its eponymous piece as an early example. To refute the possibility that the description of the game (and the courier’s move) by Selenus was anachronistic¹, Alfonso’s Great Chess was

¹Postdating the first mentioning of Courier Chess by more than two centuries and written at a time when the bishop already had its modern move.

used as an additional argument for the early occurrence of such a piece. This idea was illustrated by a diagram (Van der Linde 1881, p. 243) that omits the pawns and the exotic pieces peculiar to Alfonso’s chess (and irrelevant to van der Linde’s argument), with crocodiles (=B) on the e and h files, and unicorns (B+N, according to van der Linde but not other authors) on c and j (Fig. 1). Apparently, both the context of that diagram and the “real” description of Alfonso’s game (with errors²) provided in chapter 8 (ibid., pp. 265-266) somehow eluded Verney’s attention: the illustration in *Chess Eccentricities* seems to be based on van der Linde’s diagram, with “gaps” filled in with pieces from the Courier Chess diagram on the same page above – and bishops moved to their “proper” places on the d and i files (occupied by the couriers, depicted as bishops by van der Linde)³.

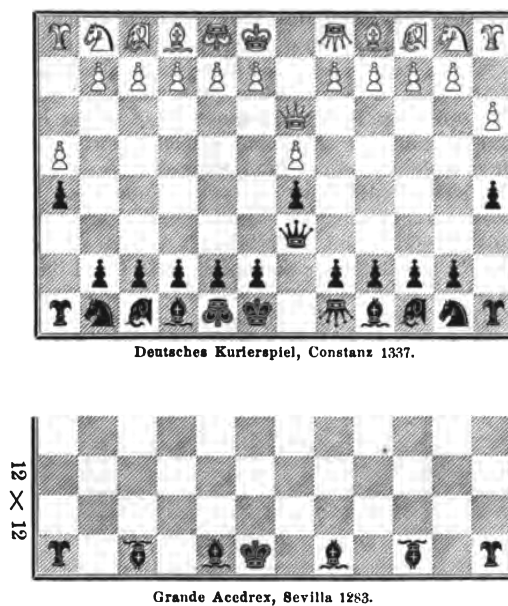


Figure 1: The two diagrams (Van der Linde 1881, p. 243) on which Verney’s description of the “game by Alfonso X” seems to be based.

²Rules of Alfonso’s Great Chess, or “Grant Acedrex”, are still a matter of debate to some extent, but van der Linde’s moves for several pieces seem to be a mistake: for a recent discussion of the game, see Cazaux and Knowlton (2017), and references therein.

³The coincidence of two games with boards containing 12 files being depicted on the same page, and the incompleteness of the second diagram, could have misled Verney into believing that these were two variants of the same game, one played on a 8x12 and the other on a 12x12 board.

Judging from Verney’s text on “The Courier-Spiel” (Verney 1885, pp. 153-155), he apparently failed to realize that the rules by H. C. Albers⁴ he quoted were not those for the original mediaeval game but for Albers’ own “verbessertes”, or “improved” version (Albers 1821). Consequently, the “King’s Councillor” and the “Queen’s Fool” in Verney’s description have the moves from Albers’ game: K+N (i.e. crowned knight, or centaur) for C, and non-royal K (or mann, or wazir + fers) for F. The names and moves of those pieces cannot be a mere coincidence; note as well that Verney’s diagrams for both “The Courier-Spiel” and the “Game by Alfonso X” show the setup from Black’s point of view – just like the two diagrams on p. 243 of van der Linde’s *Quellenstudien*. The original scheme by Albers, on the other hand, is from White’s viewpoint (Albers 1821, p. 38).

Thus, due to a series of misunderstandings, and without realizing it, Verney created a game that never was: effectively a version of Courier Chess on steroids, with the pieces from Albers’ variant moved to a larger board, and the weak “bishops” of the latter (and even weaker alfiles of the original medieval game) on the c and j files replaced by the powerful B+N pieces – themselves a result of van der Linde’s erroneous interpretation of the unicorn move in Alfonso’s game. Surprisingly, despite its unlikely origins, the game – for which the name Verney’s Duodecimal Chess seems appropriate – is rather playable. Understandably, some of its aspects are not covered by Verney’s text; a set of rules is suggested below:

Verney’s Duodecimal Chess: suggested rules

Game played on a 12x12 board, with the following setup (Fig. 2):

RNUBFQKCBUNR.

Unicorns (U) move and capture as B+N, “king’s councillor” (C) as K+N, and “queen’s fool” (F) as mann, or non-royal K. Pawns move, capture and promote as in orthochess (i.e. initial double move, *en passant* rule and promotion to any piece as per FIDE rules). When castling, K moves any number of squares up to and including the R square and vice versa – but K and R must exchange positions (this “modified Turkish castling” was suggested by Markov and Härtel (submitted) for their Reformed Turkish Great Chess rules and seems convenient for other large variants as well).

Alternatively, with Verney’s chess being in fact an enhanced variant of the 19th century Courierspiel by H. C. Albers, one might adopt the latter’s

⁴Misspelt by Verney as “H. G. Albers”.

(somewhat whimsical) rules on pawn promotion and castling instead of those suggested above:

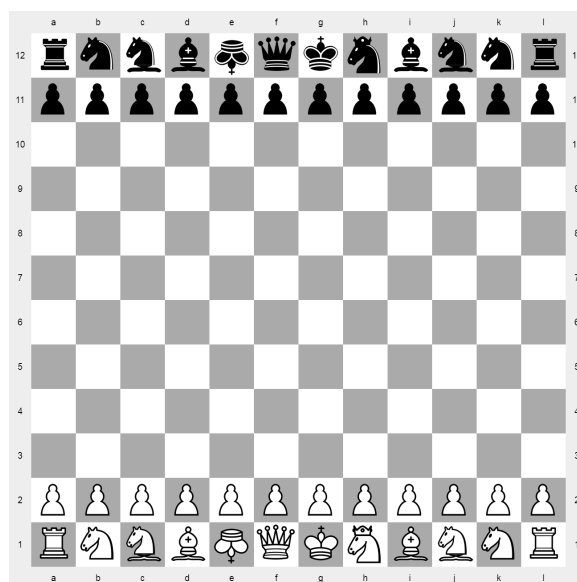


Figure 2: Verney's Duodecimal Chess, initial array.

Pawns promote only on the third move after having reached the last rank (i.e. they must stay there while two other moves are played), and apparently to a captured piece only. When castling, K goes to the c or j file and the rook next to it, on d or i. However, castling is forbidden if any square of the first rank on the side of castling is under attack, regardless if the king crosses it or not. Albers does not explicitly mention if double initial pawn move and *en passant* rules apply, but, judging from the text (“all other regulations of the chess game apply”) (Albers 1821, p. 40) that seems to be the case.

One could also experiment with pawns moving to the sixth rank in any number and combination of moves (pawn on second rank can move one to four squares on its initial move, pawn on 3rd can move one to three on its next, pawn on fourth still has a double-step option), *en passant* rule applying all the way. The number of leapers, however, seems to make this unnecessary.

Summary and conclusions

The “game by Alfonso X” as described in Verney’s *Chess Eccentricities* has little to do with Alfonso’s Great Chess and is more similar to Albers’ 19th century version of Courier Chess. Apparently taking a diagram in his source out of context and misinterpreting it to complement the illustration of Courier Chess on the same page, together with mistaking Albers’ 19th century “improved” rules for those of the original medieval Courier Chess, Verney inadvertently created a chess variant which is surprisingly playable, a remarkable case of serendipity. The name Verney’s Duodecimal Chess and a complete set of rules are suggested for the game.

Acknowledgements

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