

Early Spanish Board Games / Arie van der Stoep

Historical linguistics, *i.e.* placing words in their historical context, is a fascinating subject. Table 1 for instance betrays in which way *alquerque* was played in the Middle Ages. We know some rules from a manuscript concluded in 1283, and manufactured under the authority of King Alfonso X of Castile and Leon, including that a piece moved to the nearest vacant point, and that it captured the enemy piece by jumping over it to the further vacancy (Steiger 1941:363-5). Surveys describe *alquerque* as a game without promotion. In this article, however, I contend with the help of Table 1 that the medieval game was (almost) identical to our draughts or checkers: a piece moved forwards (and sideways), and when reaching the furthest edge of the board it was promoted to king. It was played on board A, we play on board C.

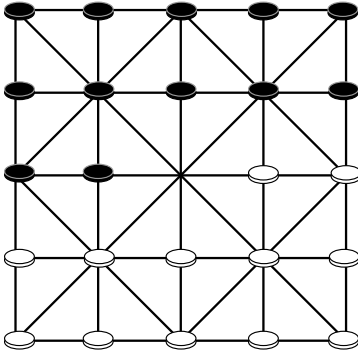
Language	NAME + <i>sense</i>	1200	1300	1400	1500	1600	1700
Castilian	ALQUERQUE	— ?	— ?	— ?	— ?	— <i>draughts</i>	
	ANDARRAYA			— <i>draughts</i>	— <i>draughts</i>		
	DAMAS					— <i>draughts</i>	— <i>draughts</i>
Catalan	MARRO		— ?	— ?	— ?	— <i>draughts</i>	
	MARRO DE PUNTA				— <i>draughts</i>	— <i>draughts</i>	
	DAMAS					— <i>draughts</i>	— <i>draughts</i>

Table 1: Spanish words for games with leaping capture

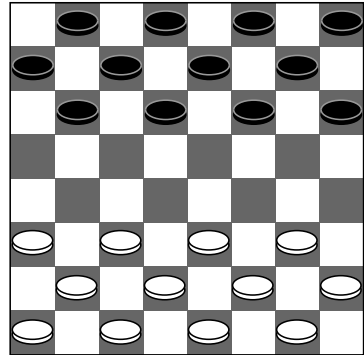
The table content

The table holds words from two important Spanish languages, Castilian, spoken in central Spain, and the northeastern Catalan, both going back to vulgar Latin. To account for the table content I quote, cite or refer to sources, with comment.

Cast. ALQUERQUE. First evidence: the Alfonso treatise. The adaptor mentioned three *alquerque* games: “alquerque de tres” (morris with 2x3 pieces), “alquerque de nueve” (morris with 2x9 pieces), and the main figure in this article, “alquerque de doze”, a game with 2x12 pieces. The manuscript was illustrated with board A and the pieces in the starting position.



Board A (alquerque)

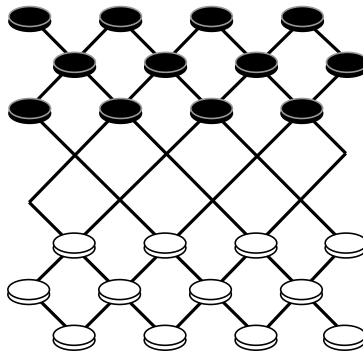


Board C (draughts).

The last description of *alquerque* was made by the lexicographer Sebastian de Covarrubias in 1611. His text runs as follows: “Alquerque es un juego de piedrecillas, sobre un tablero rayado que haze diversos quadros, y por las rayas van moviéndose, y quando hallan tercera casa vacia del contrario, pasan a ella, ganándole la piedra que estava en medio; que algunas vezes acaece ser dos y tres” (Alquerque is a game with pieces on a lined board with various squares moving along the lines. When they come across a third open point they capture the piece in the middle; in some cases two or three).

The game was played on a lined board, so board A or B (see below for board B). A piece takes three enemy pieces at the most, says Covarrubias. Supposing a piece captured in any direction, a capture on board A as well as on board B might consist of a series of four or more consecutive jumps. When there is a restriction to sideway and / or forward jumps, board A allows captures of four or more pieces and board B up to three pieces. Conclusion: Covarrubias described a game on board B with pieces taking only in forward direction.

A piece captures by a short leap: there is a third, open, point between yours and the opponent’s piece that is taken, says Covarrubias. Therefore a piece cannot have the long reach of the king in Spanish draughts or the bishop in modern chess; it moves to an adjacent point.



Board B (andarraya).

Forward capturing is bound to forward moving. A piece reaching one of the five back points cannot move, unless it is rewarded with promotion. Cf. Westerveld (1997: 94): Covarrubias described *draughts*.

Cast. ANDARRAYA. *Andarraya* was a game probably played on board B in view of the relation with the word ANDARRAYA, ‘fish net’ (Westerveld 1997: 70-4). A poem from 1454 hides an allusion suspecting us that a piece moved in forward direction but could return. It points to a game with promotion (Westerveld 1997: 77-8).

There is circumstantial evidence of draughts being still played in the Philippines on board B with Spanish rules. The game was borrowed from the Spaniards, who conquered the Philippines in the 16th century, argues Westerveld (1997: 84).

Covarrubias did not mention the game *andarraya*, even though we find the word ANDARRAYA in multilingual dictionaries until 1720 (Westerveld 1997: 82). We may agree with Westerveld (1997: 83) that the word had become obsolete in Covarrubias’ time.

Cast. DAMAS. Covarrubias distinguished between the games *alquerque* and *damas*. *Alquerque* is a game on a lined board, *damas* on a chequered board: “El juego de damas con el tablero de axedrez, todos le saben” (draughts on the chessboard is generally known), said he under the headword DAMA. *Damas* was played with a long king, i.e. with a king moving any distance, like the bishop in chess; in Covarrubias’ words “con la libertad de la dama” (with the liberty of the king).

Cat. MARRO had three board-game meanings: *morris* with 2x3 pieces (Brunet y Bellet 1890: 204), *morris* with 2x9 pieces (Fiske 1905: 100) and *alquerque* (Alcover 1969: VII 3 1). Alcover defines *alquerque* as a “joc antic, semblant al de damas” (an old game, looking like draughts). Alcover’s oldest reference goes back to 1370. He quotes an inventory from 1437: “Taullel de fust (...) de la una parta apte a jugar schacs e de la altra a marro” (wooden board, one side suitable for chess and the other for alquerque).

In the 16th century MARRO is a name for *draughts*. See for instance the titles of Spanish draughtsbooks, written in Catalan. Pedro Ruiz Montero 1591: “Libro del juego de las damas vulgarmente nombrado el marro”. Obviously *juego de las damas* is the new name; the popular name is *marro*, says Ruiz. Juan Timoneda 1635: “Libro (...) del juego del marro de punta”. Ruiz and Montero both have a drawing of board C. Westerveld (1997: 56-62) proved what the specification “*de punta*” meant: “diagonal”.

“*De punta*” in “*marro de punta*” is a specification. The function of a specification is emphasizing a striking aspect, and therefore the most particular quality of the game on board C was its diagonal character. If the Catalans exchanged board B for board C, they would not have had a reason to underline the diagonal character. Therefore I think they made the transfer from board A to board C, I do not see another possibility. They must have borrowed board C from the French – more precisely: the practice to play draughts on board C – likely together with the name DAMAS (Fr. DAMES) (van der Stoep 1997: 171-2). Afterwards they passed on board and name to the Castilians.

Game and name

With the names in Table 1 I try to prove, or at least to make plausible, that the game *alquerque de doze* from Alfonso was identical with draughts. As a visual support of my

argumentation I give three tables with Castilian words. Table 2 is based on the reconstruction of *alquerque de doze* in the literature (cf. Parlett 1999: 257), Table 3 follows Westerveld, Table 4 Covarrubias. In Table 4 I omit the name DAMAS, because it is no object in my argument.

Game	Name	Board
<i>alquerque de doze</i>	ALQUERQUE	A

Table 2: Situation 1400

Game	Name	Board
<i>alquerque de doze</i>	ALQUERQUE	A
<i>draughts</i>	ANDARRAYA	B

Table 3: Situation 15th-16th century

Game	Name	Board
<i>draughts</i>	ALQUERQUE	B

Table 4: Situation 1600

The human being tries to catch the world in a lexical system. To bring order in a language like English with its hundreds of thousands of words, the user strives for the ideal system of one word for one concept (van Bree 1990: 122). A word with more than one meaning brings uncomfortable communication, and it is unpractical when there are more words for one concept. That a language is loaded with synonyms is not inconsistent with this, on the condition that synonyms have a different emotional value. “A fat boy” has another emotional value than “a corpulent boy”, and a *loo* is not the same as a *toilet*. Going from this law we compare the tables, first the games and then their names.

The board-games of the Castilians underwent a development. They start with *alquerque de doze* (Table 2). In the 15th century a new game, *draughts*, came up (Table 3). In the 16th century the new game outstrips the old game (Table 4).

What about the language? The name for the medieval *alquerque de doze* was ALQUERQUE (Table 2). The game arising in the 15th century got its own name: ANDARRAYA (Table 3). In the 16th century *alquerque de doze* disappeared, as we may expect together with its name ALQUERQUE. But it was the word *andarraya* that disappeared, and draughts got the name of the game that disappeared (Table 4). This is peculiar. As if we decide, after an unknown virus eradicated all the horses on earth, to call the cow *horse*.

What has happened? With the rise of the name ANDARRAYA in the 15th century, the lexical system obviously got out of balance. It was repaired in the 16th century by removing ANDARRAYA, table 3A shows the result. From this removal follows that ALQUERQUE and ANDARRAYA were synonyms.

Game	Name	Board
<i>draughts</i>	ALQUERQUE	A and B

Table 3A: Situation 16th century

Comparing table 3A with table 4 we discover another change: board A passed into disuse. Table 5 substitutes the improved tables 2-4.

	1200	1300	1400	1500	1600
ALQUERQUE			?	_____	
ANDARRAYA				_____	

Table 5: Catalan names for draughts

By this approach we found that the Castilians in the first half of the 15th century played draughts. But table 5 has a question mark: can we swooth it away? Positively.

Every language has words dating back to old times. Some examples: Eng. *church, river*; Fr. *échecs, rose*; Germ. *Königin, Gang*, Cast. *ajedrez*. Eng. *church* survived, even though there is only a slight resemblance between our modern buildings and the medieval cathedral. And Fr. *échecs* and Cast. *ajedrez*? Modern chess rather differs from the medieval game, with its slow development and deviating rules. In the 15th century chess was reformed, but the game kept its name. Why? The answer is, that we go on using a word as long as the reality it refers to does not undergo an essential change. In spite of the alteration chess stayed the board game that aims at checkmating the opponent king. Evidently, we invent only a new name when a new phenomenon rises or when a phenomenon we are familiar with is subject to a revolution.

What are the consequences, if we use this fundamental principle of naming on the Castilian word ALQUERQUE and the Catalan word MARRO? See Table 6:

NAME + meaning	1200	1300	1400	1500	1600	1700	1800	1900	2000
Eng. CHURCH ("church")	_____								
Eng. RIVER ("river")	_____								
Fr. ÉCHECS ("chess")	_____								
Fr. ROSE ("rose")	_____								
Germ. KÖNIGIN ("queen")	_____								
Germ. GANG ("walk")	_____								
Cast. AJEDREZ ("chess")	_____								
Cast. ALQUERQUE ("draughts")	?		?	_____					
Cat. MARRO ("draughts")	?		?	_____					

Table 6: Medieval words and their meanings

Board-game surveys describe *alquerque* as a game with pieces moving in any direction. Suppose in the 13th century *alquerque* was played in this way and in the 15th century promotion was added, is the result a variety of a familiar phenomenon or a new kind of board game? A new game, that stands to reason, for it needs another, unknown strategy. The break through the ranks of the enemy is a new weapon, and demands another arrangement of the pieces. There is less doubt, I believe, that such a new game should not have received a new name. We may, as a consequence, state: when the game name ALQUERQUE meant “draughts” in the period 1450-1675, it also meant “draughts” in the Alfonso manuscript of 1283.

The Castilian word AJEDREZ and the Catalan word MARRO are susceptible to this rule too: the most plausible assumption is that the meaning of these words remained unchanged.

Questions

Are there arguments pleading against my exposure of the medieval game *alquerque*? I shall disprove three of them.

Counterargument number one. Readers of this journal, who class board-games and are interested in the history of games, are raising an objection to my view. Promotion to king is such an essential rule, that the adaptor of the Alfonso text would have mentioned it had it existed. That he did not speak of promotion is a proof that this rule did not exist yet, see for instance Parlett (1999: 257). This is an anachronistic reasoning, I am afraid. We, board-game students of the 21st century, are interested in this aspect, but former generations were not. Draughts was called Lat. *ludus duodecim scruporum* (van der Stoep 1984: 127; 1997: 112-3), Germ. *zwölfstein* (van der Stoep 1997: 151) or Du. *twaalfstukken* (van der Stoep 1997: 151-2), and these names literally meant the same as the 13th century *alquerque de doze*: “game with 12 pieces”.

One can advance a second counterargument: games with leaping capture and without promotion are in our time widely played on a lined board. Only a few of these games involve promotion, “so few as to suggest a later borrowing from Draughts” (Parlett 1999: 245-6). Well then, the medieval *alquerque* was played on a lined board. Once more we project the present on the past, I think. We know now that in Spain draughts first was played on a lined board and that the Spaniards later on made the transfer to the chequered board, borrowed from the French. The transfer of draughts from a lined to a chequered board is not an incident, however, it represents a pattern (van der Stoep forthcoming).

In connection with the present distribution of *alquerque* and *draughts* I have a Darwinistic question. When we greet with open arms the western belief in evolution, we must assume that draughts was first played without promotion and that games with promotion are a later development. As far as I can see, *alquerque* and *draughts* are rarely played together, which means that draughts swept the low level leaping games away. From the sentence with which Covarrubias in 1611 opens his description of SOPLAR, it appears that he and his contemporaries played several draughts games on the *alquerque* board: “En ciertos juegos del alquerque [...]” (In certain *alquerque* games [...]).

The third and last counterargument, too, has to do with Darwin. When we may believe a what Parlett calls “sophisticated assumption” (Parlett 1999: 243), draughts represents a hybrid of *alquerque* (the leaping capture, the number of pieces) and chess (the board, the promotion). The spiritual father was Murray (1952: 73-5). Murray laid the foundation of the historiography of board games (see Parlett 1999: 8), and for the very reason that his book has become a classic, his interpretation comes back in many, if not all, surveys, and has been embedded in our consciousness. As a son of Darwin I am mentally not able to challenge Murray’s vision – in the classroom, however, we played tic-tac-toe instead of the sophisticated *alquerque de nueve*, and generations before us could have simplified that sophisticated game with promotion, draughts, into a game without – but his argumentation, founded on the terminology of chess and draughts in the past, is invalid. The exchange of *alquerque* for *draughts* must have happened earlier than Murray or Westerveld (1997: 167) assumed, see van der Stoep (forthcoming). I summarize Murray’s line of reasoning.

Draughts borrowed three words from chess (I confine myself to examples from French). One: *fierge* = “chess queen” > *jeu de fierges*, literally “game with chess queens” = “draughts”. Name of the singleton (cf. Parlett 1999: 251): *fierge*. Two: *dame* = “chess queen”. About 1500 the chess queen got a new name: *dame* > *jeu de dames*, literally “game with chess queens” = “draughts”. Name of the singleton: *dame*. Three: in the 17th century *dame* = “singleton” was replaced by *pion* = “chess pawn” (and *dame* received its present meaning “doubleton”).

The borrowing from *fierge* and *dame* proves, said Murray, that the promotion in draughts was borrowed from chess, and the borrowing from *pion* is a new proof of the great influence from chess on draughts. And as, in addition, draughts is a game on the chess board, we may conclude that draughts partly owes its existence to chess.

Thanks to the terminology, Murray continues, we know one ancestor of draughts: chess. Where do the number of 2x12 pieces and the leap capture come from? From the game in the Alfonso manuscript. Draughts represents a merge of chess and *alquerque* then. And Murray concludes: in this way we know that *alquerque* was played without promotion.

Murray’s linguistic approach requires a linguistic reply. I published it in 1984 and – more elaborately but in Dutch – in 1997. A medieval *jeu de fierges* has never existed (van der Stoep 1984: 156-7; 1997: 191-9); the medieval name for draughts was Fr. *jeu de merelles* (van der Stoep 1997: 139-63). Fr. *jeu de dames* is older than Fr. *dame* = “chess queen” (van der Stoep 1984: 138; 1997: 200-9); the most likely etymon of Fr. *jeu de dames* is Fr. *dam* = “embankment” (van der Stoep 1997: 211-7). There is no interdependence between Fr. *pion* in the sense of “chess pawn” and in the sense of “singleton in draughts” (van der Stoep 1984: 158-60; 1997: 78-83).

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- (Diagrams from: Depaulis, Thierry & Jeanneret, Philippe. *Le livre du jeu de dames*, Paris, 1999, with kind permission of the authors.)