

PREFACE

Time flies, six, seven years ago a modern clerk, Mr. Duilio Contini, stepping in the honoured tradition of humanistic scholars like Poggio Bracciolini and Lorenzo Valla, stumbled on a 500 years old manuscript hidden among the funds of the Coronini Cronberg's library in Gorizia, a town in northeast Italy, and recognized it as the handwritten draft of a mythical book, thought lost and for centuries, actively but vainly sought after.

"DE LUDO SCACHORUM" (*About Chess's Game*) lost opus of Luca Pacioli, Franciscan friar, father of modern accounting, populariser of classic and Arabic mathematics, courtesan, confidant and adviser to the mighty, friend, counsellor, teacher & contributor to the century's incomparable genius, Leonardo da Vinci.

I guess one can easily understand the excitement that the news of the discovery stirred in some circles: the Luca Pacioli's admirers for one and the chess game enthusiast for one other.

In fact, further to the retrieval announcement, among the first to be called in to appreciate the value of the discovery was the Italian chess grand master Aldolivio Capece to whom I'd be forever grateful to call me in to have a look at and study the manuscript.

To say that the manuscript fascinated me would be an understatement.

The more I studied the document the more it hypnotized me.

You should see and hold the document in your hands to understand why.

You see? This is not the DE LUDO SCACHORUM book that scholars have been searching for centuries and that, quite possibly, never made it to print.

Rather this is the draft, sketched on a hand held notebook, consolidating chess studies that Luca Pacioli must have been collecting for a very long time since no one can come up overnight with hundreds of complicated problems like the ones presented there.

It is possible that the draft was dated by the time that Luca and his friend Leonardo were at the court of Ludovico il Moro but now they were leaving Milano which just felt to the army of Louis XII of France whose soldiers destroyed Luca's (and Leonardo's) mathematical models, believing they were the work of the devil¹.

They were heading to the court of Isabella d'Este, Marquise of Mantua to whom the new opus "DE LUDO SCACHORUM" was to be dedicated.

It is just a supposition but we may not be mistaken too much in thinking that Luca and Leonardo counted on Isabella's well known interest and love for

¹ Double Entry by Jane Gleason-White - page 83

the chess game to accept, and sponsor (and pay handsomely for) the treatise to her dedicated.

Never mind the suppositions, things did not go that way. Isabella's love for the game notwithstanding, when the pair arrived to Mantua all the Marquise wanted was a portrait made by Leonardo, her interest for chess paling before that urge.

The rest is history:

Leonardo was not at all interested, made two pencil portraits of the Marquise, just out of courtesy, then the two bowed their reverence and left for Venice. Luca staid there and Leonardo headed for Florence. The two never traded road together again.

This I knew and now, perusing the booklet over and over again something was catching my attention and the more I was looking at it the more I saw it evident.

While the comments are all definitively Pacioli's, two hands instead had been there penning in the chess pieces, the first with scholarly diligence the second with artistic swiftness.

Whose hands? Luca's and Leonardo's.

They were friends, congregating and travelling together, they had a history of partnership Leonardo having illustrated Luca's DE DIVINA PROPORTIONE.

To me it was evident:

Luca was set to prepare another yet of his popularising textbooks and Leonardo had lent to his friend his "*incomparable left hand*" once again.

And yet

Duilio Contini wasn't working, like Poggio Bracciolini, for himself alone, almost nobody does that now days, he was scouting for his research under the sponsorship of the Aboca Museum.

Aboca is a foundation located in San Sepolcro, dedicated to the study of herbs and the production of natural medicine and that expanded recently its interests to the activity of San Sepolcro's illustrious citizens: Piero della Francesca and Luca Pacioli.

Understandably thrilled by the discovery the Aboca Museum published a thorough and precious volume "GLI SCACCHI DI LUCA PACIOLI" (*Luca Pacioli's Chess*) translating the manuscript in modern Italian and enlisting the savvy of many learned people to light up all of its many facets.

Of course, the possible implication of Leonardo da Vinci in the drafting of the manuscript could not, not to be taken into consideration.

And it was rejected.

Duilio Contini stated (page 66) "*On the chess' design flutters the pleasant but unconfirmed suspicion that it could be work of the great Leonardo*" to

which I couldn't ask myself but what it would take to confirm the suspicion.

Further on, pursuing a fastidious, detailed graphical analysis of the manuscript and its chess images, Attilio Bartoli Langeli says (page 96) *"The hand oneness is certain. The hypothesis that the pieces have been drafted by someone else than the writer must be excluded clearly. It is a hypothesis that contrasts with the data observation and that is frankly unrealistic in a booklet like this one"*

For sure, I said to myself while turning to the manuscript, Mr Contini is close to the truth and Mr Bartoli is stepping out of his field of expertise. Two hands have indeed drafted the pieces and while the first was Luca's the second was Leonardo's.

To me that's clearly evident if just you know how to look, what to look for and, also, if you happen to know how to put the clues together.

Yet at times like ours, adept to Dan Brown's like flights of fancy, doubt is a virtue and suspicion should be *"de rigueur"* which means that I could not hold a lasting grudge to the *"expert"*² who, possibly startled by the news, not having been warned or seen the manuscript, quipped, *"the silly season on Leo never closes"*³.

That granted it could be added as well that there is no blinder expert than the one who does not want to see.

In fact the discovery of Luca Pacioli's lost manuscript heralds, without doubt, that the *"a la rabiosa"* problems therein reported are of Leonard's hand and we well know that Leonardo penned between 1487 and 1490 a rebus *"I a roccha ro"* (*I shall castle*)³ thus confirming his perfect knowledge of the castle move and, thus, of the games new rules.

We know today that that such rules can be traced back to the coronation of queen Isabella of Spain in the year 1474⁴ and to her crowning are dated the new powers attributed to the Bishop and the Queen whose status of most powerful piece on the chessboard justified the new rules nickname of *"mad queen"* or *"a la rabiosa"*.

Yet nothing is said at that time about castling, that important move absolutely necessary in modern chess to counterbalance the overpowering new

² Martin Kemp, history professor at Oxford University, in a telephone interview. Quoted by Dylan Loeb McLain on the New York Times 2008/04/18

³ Folio RL 1269 kept on the Royal Library of the Windsor Castle

⁴ See the 2005 book of Garzón Roger EL REGRESO DE FRANCESCH VINCENT (*The return of Francesch Vincent*)

status of the Queen⁵.

Nothing, I cannot forbid myself to think, from 1474 until Leonardo's rebus of 1487.

Would it be its inventor Leonardo should then be considered, if such hypothetical case were true, not only the co-author as he is, of "DE LUDO SCACHORUM" and designer of the chess pieces therein drafted but, as well and rightfully, one among the major:

FATHER OF MODERN CHESS.

Time flies.

While the excitement due to the discovery of Luca Pacioli's lost work is slowly and ineluctably subsiding, so the focus on this other of Leonardo's prodigious accomplishment is quietly getting blurred while the finding itself is worming its way into the cosy corner of expert knowledge and world oblivion.

To avoid this fate this book is my contribution to confirm the suspicion that the chess design is indeed the work of the great Leonardo, that careful data observation confirms without doubt that two hands have been drawing the booklet's chess pieces and that, so great was his genius and so swift his incomparable left hand, that the season on Leo still brings beautiful fruits.

When one wants to look for evidence and knows how to.

Speaking of evidence, you'll find, in appendix, a study of the Vitruvius Man showing, for the very first time I think, its exacting geometrical structure, based on an intriguing, complex, and extraordinary conception of the Golden Section further to a deep reflection and elaboration of the principles Leonardo and Luca Pacioli outlined in DE DIVINA PROPORTIONE.

In truth, the design of the *Vitruvian Man* stands as a paradigm for the geometric structure and proportions of the DE LUDO SCHACORUM chessmen set.

Therefore, the Vitruvius Man and the DE LUDO SCHACORUM chessmen both show how and how much the great Piero della Francesca's lesson transmitted by Luca Pacioli has been in those years source of great inspiration for Leonardo.

Few but splendid works in which the natural beauty of Leonardo's stroke melt into the elegance of the golden proportion.

Wonder and enjoy!

⁵ Arne Moll - CHESS VIBES - September 2009 (<http://www.chessvibes.com/columns/valencia-and-the-origin-of-modern-chess/>)