



BOOK
REVIEWS

Ancient History Revised, Fischer Recompiled

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The Anatomy of Chess, edited by Dr. Hans Ellinger, 2003 Promos-Verlag GmbH, Pfullingen, Germany, Paperback, 97 pages, €2.80.

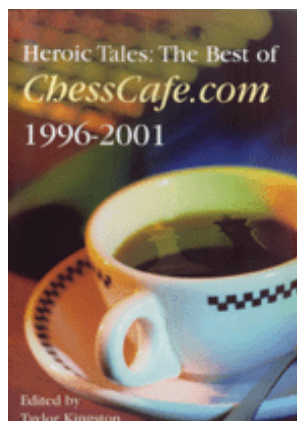
Bobby Fischer Rediscovered, by Andrew Soltis, 2003 B.T. Batsford, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 287pp., \$24.95.

This week we review two books with almost no relation to each other, one dealing with recent chess history, the other with the game's most ancient past. Admittedly an odd pairing, but life abounds in strange juxtapositions.

The ancient history first. Chess in its present form has existed for about 500 years, but its antecedents go back centuries, perhaps millennia earlier. The present state of knowledge and research into its origins is somewhat like that of human paleontology. After Darwin's *The Descent of Man* was published in 1871, and a few "missing links" were found and illustrations like the familiar (and very misleading) "March from Ape to Man" began appearing in every textbook, many people considered the matter more or less settled. Similarly, A. van der Linde's *Geschichte und Literatur des Schachpiels* (1874) and H.J.R. Murray's *A History of Chess* (1913) seemed to settle the question of the game's origin: based on references in ancient literature, Murray said chess arose in India circa 600 CE, from the game *chaturanga*, and that was that.

Yet just as today the picture of human evolution has become vastly more complex and unsettled, with new genetic and fossil evidence being discovered and various hypotheses such as "single origin" vs. "regional continuity" competing in scientific journals, so too are ideas about chess origins in flux. Now questions of whether it came from India, China, Greece, or Persia, or whether it derived from divination practices, mathematical "magic squares," or games of chance, or whether certain ancient artifacts are or are not chess pieces, are debated as hotly as any topic in evolutionary biology.

The Anatomy of Chess is essentially a scholarly forum presenting several essays on these issues. It is a modest-looking but well-produced small paperback. There are no game scores, either ancient or modern, but it does have many black-and-white illustrations. It is the eighth in a series called *Tübinger Beiträge zum Thema Schach* (Tübingen Contributions to the Subject of Chess) edited by Dr. Hans Ellinger of Tübingen, Germany. With the exception of Russian GM Yuri Averbakh, the contributors are not well known to most chessplayers (nor to this reviewer): Hans Höllander, Pavle



Bidev, Peter Banaschak, Alex Robert Kraaijveld, Jean-Louis Cazaux, Myron Samsin, Gerhard Josten, and Egbert Meissenburg. Most of the book is in English, however two items, the introduction and Bidev's essay, are in both English and German, while Ellinger's foreword, Höllander's essay, and the afterword by Meissenburg are in German only.

Some of the essays are intended for a rather specialized, erudite audience, assuming an understanding of terms and concepts unfamiliar to most readers, e.g. "In any phylogenetic analysis, the polarity of the characters is a crucial aspect. Shared apomorphies suggest relatedness, shared plesiomorphies do not." (Kraaijveld). Other essays, notably Averbakh's, are relatively free of esoteric terminology. Many games besides Western chess are discussed, both modern (Go, Shogi, Xiangqi, Pachisi, etc.) and ancient (the Roman *ludus latrunculorum*, the Greek *poleis* and *petteia*, the Chinese *liubo*, the Byzantine *zatrikion* and others).

The eight essays show wide diversity of opinion. Averbakh tends to agree with Murray's longstanding hypothesis of Indian origin, Bidev states flatly "chess comes from China," Samsin thinks hybridization of Eastern and Western games in the post-Alexander Greco-Indian kingdom of Bactria circa 180-50 BCE is a possible source, while Josten pushes things a bit further east, to the syncretic Kushan empire of northern India circa 50 BCE – 200 CE. Each writer provides plausible, sometimes very persuasive arguments, but, it appears, nothing sufficient for a final, definite conclusion.

However, even if a final answer is elusive, examining the various lines of reasoning and evidence will be intriguing, for some readers at least. Probably an interest in ancient history is a more important indicator than an interest in chess, as to whether one will enjoy the book. The majority of players, intent mainly on improving their game, will find it dull, and even chess history buffs whose interest goes back no further than the early days of the modern game may not care for it. To help prospective buyers decide, we suggest perusing Gerhard Josten's website <http://www.mynetcologne.de/~nc-jostenge/>. Also, the book's introduction can be read online at <http://www.chez.com/cazaux/Intro-anatomy.pdf>.

As we said above, this is the eighth in the *Tübinger Beiträge* chess series. The first, *Zur Frühgeschichte des Schachs* (On the Early History of Chess), also dealt with chess origins. Others on more modern topics include *Schlechter versus Lasker: Der Weltmeisterschaftskampf 1910* (The 1910 World Championship Match, #2, 1995) and *Schach unterm Hakenkreuz: Politische Einflüsse auf das Schachspiel im Dritten Reich* (Chess Under the Swastika: Political Influences on Chess in the Third Reich; #3, 1996). Mail inquiries to **Promos-Verlag, Postfach 7265, D-72785 Pfullingen, Germany**, or send a fax to **0049-7172-790135**, for more information. Ordering direct from the publisher seems to be the only source for these books.

Shifting to the current century, in past reviews we've made clear our skeptical attitude about new additions to the already huge, often redundant mass of books about Bobby Fischer, and our sadness and distaste at his present state. So when yet another book about the eleventh world chess champion arrived, our initial reaction was not enthusiastic. The last thing the world needs, and we want to read, is another trite rehash of Fischer's chess career or amateur analysis of his troubled psyche. Fortunately, *Bobby Fischer Rediscovered* turned out to be neither. Written by veteran journalist

Andy Soltis, the book does not explore wholly new territory, but neither does it stay entirely in well-worn ruts.

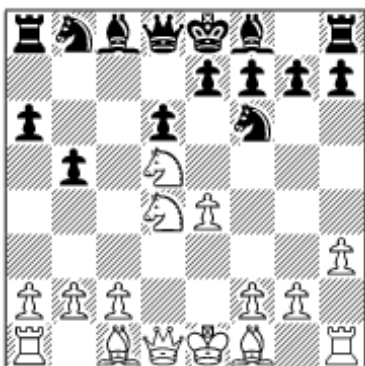
The book is basically a standard annotated game collection, discussing 100 Fischer games spanning 1956 to 1992. GM Soltis combines some new notes of his own with notes compiled from older, now hard-to-find sources, primarily of two types: (1) Fischer's own notes, in his book *My 60 Memorable Games* (1969) and in *Chess Review*, *Chess Life*, *Boy's Life*, *American Chess Quarterly*, and other magazines, and (2) Russian annotators in *Shakmaty v SSSR*, *Shakmatny Vestnik*, 64 and other Soviet-era periodicals and tournament books. While Soltis does not mention it specifically, it also appears he has drawn quite a bit on Plisetsky & Voronkov's *Russians versus Fischer* (1994), though this may be because both books refer to some of the same Soviet sources. Many of the games are well known, others are relatively obscure. 23 of the 100 also appeared in *M60MG*, 22 in David Levy's *How Fischer Plays Chess* (1975), and the most famous have been anthologized many times.

However, while Soltis has done a good deal of research, he has not simply cut-and-pasted or paraphrased others' work. Comparing *Rediscovered's* anecdotes and annotations to other books, we found some but not too much overlap, and a good deal of new commentary by Soltis himself. Occasionally he disagrees with Fischer's own analysis. For instance, in Fischer-Benko, Candidates Tournament, Bled-Zagreb-Belgrade 1959, Benko at this point



played **15...gxf6?**. In *M60MG* Fischer wrote "The best chance is 15...bxc3 16.Ne4 Qb4 17.Qg4 Bxf6 18.Nxf6+ Kh8 19.Qh4 h6 20.Ng4 threatening Nxh6 with a strong attack." Soltis, however, says 20...cxb2!, unmentioned by Fischer, "would prompt White to take the perpetual check — 21.Nxh6 bxa1(Q) 22.Ng4+ Kg8 23.Nf6+! — because he can end up with the worst of 21.Rab1 Kh7 or 21.Rad1 e4."

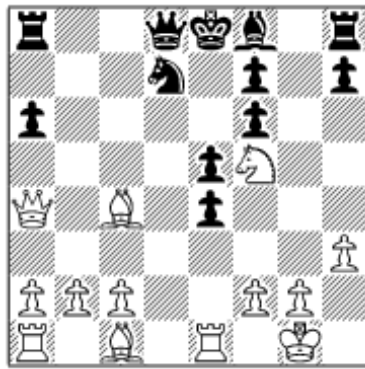
Another point of difference is Fischer-Najdorf, Varna Olympiad 1962, where after **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.h3 b5? 7.Nd5!**



Soltis writes "Fischer committed a rare blunder in *My 60 Memorable Games* when he said White would meet 7...e6 advantageously with 8.Nxf6+ Qxf6 9.c4 — overlooking 9...d5! with the threat of ...Bb4+."

Still, Soltis finds Fischer's notes generally sound, and overlap is most evident in games shared with *M60MG*. However, even in games annotated by Fischer, and especially in *Rediscovered's*

other 77 games, Soltis often comments on moves ignored by other analysts, or corrects or expands on their notes. An example occurs later in the Fischer-Najdorf game:



Here Fischer made no comment on **15...Bc5**. Levy in 1975 wrote "If the bishop had stayed 'at home' the attack on the Q file would have been decisive, e.g. 15...Rg8 16.Be3 Qc7 17.Rad1 (threatening 18 Bb5) 17...Rd8 18.Bxh6 Ra8 19.Rc1 Qd8 20.Qc6 etc." But Soltis gives the much stronger 15...Rg8 16.Bxf7+! Kxf7 17.Qb3+ Ke8 18.Qe6+.

Six games are from Fischer's 1971 Candidates Matches with Taimanov,

Larsen and Petrosian, and four are from the 1972 Spassky world title match. Having been analyzed *ad infinitum*, these offer Soltis little scope for original commentary, and quotes from Timman, Gligoric, R. Byrne, Alexander, Olafsson, Fine and other annotators are frequent. Whether original or not, the notes will at least give unfortunate buyers of the egregious *Bobby Fischer: From Chess Genius to Legend* (Thinker's Press, 2002) a decent idea of what went on in Fischer-Larsen, 1971 Candidates Match, game 1.

Soltis' annotations have something of a recurring theme. In his introduction Soltis says he had not looked at most of these games since Fischer won the world title in 1972. Returning to them 30 years later, he noticed a pattern:

"The more I played over the moves again, the more it occurred to me that Fischer's chess was shaped by a single goal — to beat the Soviets ... Strategy in chess — as in war, business, election campaigns and sports — evolves for a practical reason ... The Russians, Ukrainians, *et al* wanted to defeat the dominant style of the 1930s — the material-driven, endgame-oriented strategies that had served Capablanca, Flohr, and Fine so well. They developed a sharply different set of priorities, beginning with the initiative. Black was entitled to it as much as White and he could start the struggle for it as early as the opening, even if he has to give up material ... or incur positional weaknesses ... Fischer, it struck me, was a reaction to this reaction. He adopted many of the Soviets' weapons, like the King's Indian and the Najdorf Sicilian, but with the eyes of a Classical player ... He was, in the words of one Russian admirer, the perfect harmony of position and material."

Unlike some Soltis intros that promise more than he delivers (e.g. *Soviet Chess 1917-1991*), this time he manages to follow through, at least to some extent, highlighting points where Fischer's concept of chess and the Soviet concept directly clashed. A few examples:

"Mikhail Botvinnik ... made an elaborate study of [Fischer's] games. Among his most telling insights is that Fischer liked 'clear positions' so much that he was prepared for simplification whenever he held positional plusses. This ran counter to a common tenet of the Soviet school, that in favorable positions you should avoid exchanges unless they lead to a quickly realizable advantage."

(Annotating Fischer-Bisguier, Poughkeepsie 1963, after **9.Nh3**):



chess until this game.”

“A move superbly suited for Fischer, whose love of the two bishops trumped the risks (...Bxh3). He blamed ‘vigorous Russian propaganda’ for discrediting 9.Nh3 after Steinitz used it unsuccessfully against Tchigorin in the 1890s — the last times [*sic*] 9.Nh3 was used in grandmaster

(Annotating Fischer-Taimanov, Candidates Match, Vancouver 1971, fourth game, after 21.Qe2):



“Two men, two different views: Taimanov saw a knight-versus-bishop middlegame becoming a drawish endgame. ‘It seemed more or less problem-free for Black,’ he wrote. Fischer visualized the same ending but saw opportunities on both wings.” (Fischer won in 50 more moves.)

Another theme, not expressly stated but still clear, is that Fischer was often better informed about the Soviet chess school than were the Soviet players themselves. Several games show Fischer trumping Soviet opening novelties. Against Taimanov at Buenos Aires 1960, Fischer was able to draw a very difficult endgame because he remembered 1956 analysis by Averbakh in *Shakmaty v SSSR*, analysis Taimanov had not read.

Soltis provides an intermittent narrative with some interesting stories. For example, journalist Dmitre Bjelica tells how during the 1959 Candidates Tournament he and Fischer saw the film *Lust For Life*. After watching Vincent Van Gogh, played by Kirk Douglas, slice off an ear, Fischer said “If I don’t beat Smyslov I’ll cut off my own ear.” After drawing out a game with Barcza to nearly a hundred moves, Fischer wanted to post-mortem from move one. Barcza begged off, pleading “I have a wife and children. Who will feed them in case of my premature death?” Hungarian GM Lajos Portisch recounts a conversation with Fischer about methods of chess study. Asked if he really studied chess eight hours per day, Portisch said “Why are you asking? People also think you work eight hours a day.” To which Fischer replied, “Oh, yes, but they think I’m crazy.” Soltis repeats a Larry Evans story that Fischer, after years of hesitation, finally consented to publish *My 60 Memorable Games* because “the world’s coming to an end anyway.”

An interesting aside: Fischer once claimed to have found a line “that absolutely equalizes against the Ruy López” (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5), but never revealed his secret. Soltis mentions this and opines that it was 3...a6 4.Ba4 b5 5.Bb3 Na5, which would explain why Fischer became partial to the

Exchange Variation (4.Bxc6). This runs counter to Evans, who in the February 1999 *Chess Life* speculated that Fischer's refutation began with 3...Bc5. Will we ever know for sure? Perhaps if Fischer again thinks the world is about to end he'll tell us.

There is the usual assortment of typos and mistakes typical for a Soltis book. The opening 1.e4 e6 2.d3 c5 3.Nf3 Nc6 is described as a Caro-Kann. Diacritical marks are inconsistent, appearing on east European names (e.g. Szabó, Ni•evski) but not on Spanish (Jiménez, Bolbochán). A move is described as giving White a "miserably position." A confusing game intro says to watch for Fischer's move "11.f5!", when the eleventh move is actually 11.Qd3. A score shows "7.Nge2" when White has knights at c3 and d4. Soltis attributes to Euwe annotations actually written by Timman in *Fischer World Champion!*. He quotes Robert Byrne's 1972 prediction that Fischer would beat Spassky and "remain world champion for 15 years." Byrne actually said 12 years. With all the books Soltis has written, you'd think he'd get a good proofreader at least once, but we have yet to see it.

Proofreading aside, *Bobby Fischer Rediscovered* is a pretty good book, though a more apt title might be *Fischer Recompiled*. By combining a wide variety of out-of-print sources with his own annotations and the lessons of hindsight, Soltis provides an interesting, many-sided, well written look at the chess of a great player, and manages to bring some freshness to a very well-worn subject. Younger readers unfamiliar with Fischer will find this a good introduction to his chess, while long-time Fischer fans should also find it worthwhile, and certainly more edifying than the news about him from recent years.

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by Andrew Soltis

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