



COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree



Re-writing Chess History

Nowadays to attract the attention of the general public a chessplayer has to jump through hoops and so in the frivolous spirit of the modern age Vladimir Kramnik recently played a blitz game for German television against the boxing champion Vitali Klitschko. Kramnik got one minute, Klitschko got five.

The Ukrainian brothers Vitali and Vladimir Klitschko are boxing champions who miss no opportunity to publicise the fact that they play chess, even if they do not play it very well. On the other hand, Kramnik could show that he can move his hands very quickly and that he is not above cowering to the real world. It was a symbiosis with profit for all.

Kramnik won the game, which was not published, probably to protect the innocent. The strength of Klitschko's opposition might be deduced from another game, played in Leipzig 2001 by the two brothers in consultation against the young German champion Elisabeth Pähtz, who played without seeing the board.

White: Pähtz Black: The Klitschko Brothers

1. e2-e4 b7-b6 2. d2-d4 Bc8-a6 3. Bf1xa6 Nb8xa6 4. Nb1-c3 Ra8-b8 5. Ng1-f3 Ng8-f6 6. e4-e5 Nf6-h5 7. g2-g4 Nh5-f6 8. e5xf6 g7xf6 9. Qd1-e2 Bf8-g7 10. Qe2xa6 Qd8-c8 11. Qa6-e2 c7-c5 12. d4xc5 Qc8xc5 13. Nf3-h4 d7-d6 14. Nh4-f5 Bg7-f8 15. Bc1-h6 Bf8xh6 16. Qe2xe7 mate

What the public enjoyed from this game must be the fact that a girl beat a collective mass of about six times her weight.

Maybe archaeologists too nowadays feel forced to put on a false nose for jollity. At the end of last July many media reported that a British team had found during excavations in the city Butrint, in



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the South of what now is Albania, a small ivory chess piece that was dated from the fifth or sixth century (accounts differ) and thereby would be by far the oldest chess piece found in Europe.

According to members of the archaeological team, chess in Europe turns out to have a much longer history than we assumed until now. The history of chess will have to be re-written.

Can this be true? About the early history of chess there are few hard facts known and consequently the field provides rich opportunities for controversy and speculation. Most historians consider India to be the birthplace of chess, others point to China and an intrepid adventurer has even indicated Babylon in the second millennium BC as the cradle of chess. Nevertheless there exists something that can be called "mainstream chess history". In Whyld and Hooper's *The Oxford Companion to Chess* it is summed up thus: "The earliest evidence of a recognizable form of chess, chaturanga, is around AD 600. Before that, all is speculation."

This firm statement, not present in the first edition, was added to the second edition of 1992, probably as a warning against too adventurous historians.

From India the game goes to Persia and from there to the Arabs, who bring it to Europe during the ninth century. Around the same time there is a Northern route by which chess is brought to Europe via Russia.

This is the familiar tale that indeed will have to be strongly revised if the British archaeologists are right, for not only do they claim to have found the earliest European chess piece, they date it from a period (in one account the year 465 is mentioned) of which no firm evidence exists that chess was played anywhere in the world at all.

As far as I know, dating a man-made object is not an easy task. It is not enough to date the material (ivory in this case) but what needs to be fixed is the period when the artisan made it into the thing it is now. Not only the established history of chess, but also methods of dating provide room for controversy.

But even more difficult, I think, is to decide if the object is really

a chess piece. It would be nice if we found 32 little objects of different sizes, reflecting the hierarchy of the pieces, but this is not the case here. Only one "piece" has been found.

I look at the picture. What can it tell us?

(<http://www.chessbase.com/newsdetail.asp?newsid=448>)

A piece of ivory, four centimeters high, that looks a bit like a miniature Eastern-European church tower, with a little crown or cross on top. Yes, it has some resemblance to European chess pieces of a much later age, but chess pieces have come in many forms.

It might have been a chess piece and it might have been a lot of other things. To name only one possibility, it might have been made for purely decorative reasons, with no function at all except to be pretty.

The English archaeologist John Mitchell declared that the team had excluded the possibility that the object had anything to do with other board games such as backgammon or the Roman game *tabula*. It would have to be a chess King or Queen, because of the crown on top.

A Queen? That would force us to re-write the history of chess even more drastically, as until now we had been convinced that the Queen was invented in Western Europe during the 15th century.

Maybe what Mitchell meant was the *Firzan*, the Queen's early precursor, but that doesn't sound logical either, for why would a mere councilor of the King wear a crown?

I doubt if the team of archaeologists had a detailed knowledge of the history of chess. But they knew enough to realise that their find, if it were really a chess piece, would force a re-writing of a small but substantial part of cultural history. Quite a big consequence of the find of a tiny piece of ivory.

Sometimes it happens indeed that history has to be re-written, but for that the new facts have to be at least as firmly based as old theory. You can never be sure, of course. But to me it seems that the British archaeologists found an object that could have been

anything. Only if it were a chess piece would it have such an impact on general history. So a chess piece it had to be.

Not only chess champions but also scientists and cultural scholars have to jump through hoops to get the media attention that nowadays is indispensable to the funding of their work. The team that did the excavations in Butrint got plenty of media attention after finding their "chess piece". As I said, you cannot be sure. The thing might be what they claim it to be. I certainly do not want to pass as an expert on chess history, but it seems to me that chess has been taken for a ride.



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