

Chess in Italy

The game of chess reached Italy during the X century (1000 AD) when it was brought to the island of Sicily by the Arabs.

References to the game may be already found in the masterpiece of Italian and European literature Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (Paradise, XXVIII) and also in the works of the other greats of Italian Middle Ages literature such as Petrarca and Boccaccio.

Italy soon became the cradle of chess in Europe. It is also possible that cultural and political developments of Italian society (such as the expression of chivalrous ideal of courtly love and the role of women in the many regional kingdoms) had an influence in the evolution of the names and qualities of some pieces, such as the Queen (the *Vizir* in the original Persian *chattrang*) and the Bishop (the Elephant).

The end of the Sixteenth century and the beginning of the 17th were the periods of maximum splendor for Italian chess. Some of the most famous players of the time were Paolo Boi, from Syracuse (Sicily), Gioacchino Greco (known as "il Calabrese") and Giulio Cesare Polerio (known as "l'Abruzzese") taking their nicknames from their birth regions.

They raised the level of the game to new artistic heights with uncommon ability to create exciting and innovative combinations. They toured Europe and played – often successfully - with the best players of the time such as Ruy Lopez. Some of the names of famous openings still reflect the contributions given by Italy to the Royal Game: the Italian Opening, Gioco Piano, the Ponziani, just to name a few.

In the 17th century the dominance that Italy had enjoyed started to fade. One possible reason is that while chess rules were knowing a period of international consolidation and standardization Italian players insisted on adopting special local rules.

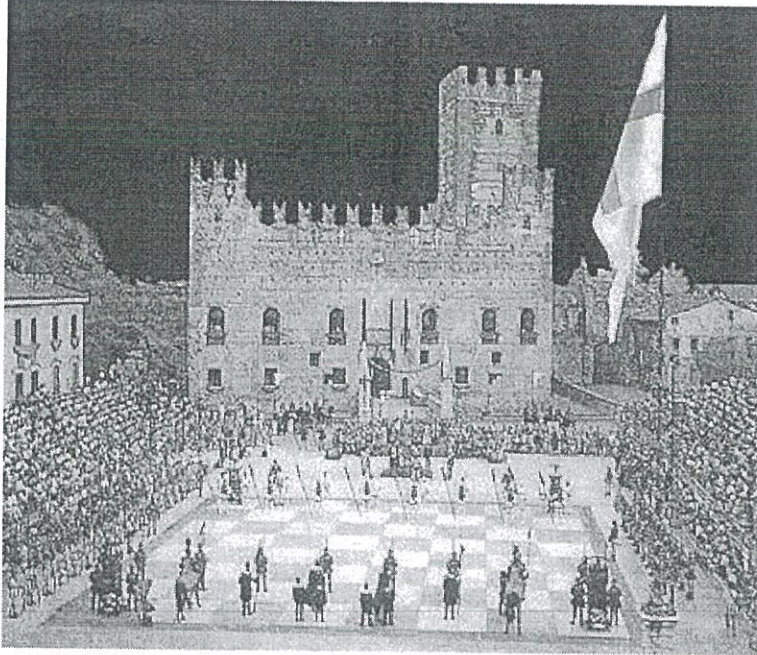
For instance the *en passant pawn* take was refused; pawns could be promoted only to pieces that had already been caught (multiple promotion therefore was not possible); castling was done in two moves rather than in one and the King and the Rook could be positioned on any of the squares on the kingside and/or the queenside.

This peculiar attitude isolated Italy from the ongoing international developments of the game and the country lost the position of privilege to other nations such as France, England, Germany and later Russia.

Only at the end of the 19th century Italy adhered to the then well established international rules. An Italian Chess federation was founded in 1920 in Milan where it is still currently based. Important events also helped put Italy back on the world chess map, such as the rematch for World Championship between Anatoly Karpov and Viktor Korchnoi played in Merano in 1981 and the yearly international tournament around the New Year in the city of Reggio Emilia near Bologna. The Chess Olympics were played in Turin in 2006, the first time that Italy ever hosted such event.

The ancient roots of the game in Italy are exemplified by the game using live pieces played in the city of Marostica, near Venice. For those interested in combining their chess interest with tourism, it is recommended to visit Marostica every even year, in September, to attend a game

where human chess pieces are dressed in ornate black or white 15th-century costume – complete with matching horses for the knights. It is a colorful festival in which each of the tiny town's 700 residents has a part to play.



Today chess has been enjoying a renaissance in Italy with a growing number of players (men and women) and clubs also thanks to the remarkable achievements of Top Five Fabiano Caruana of Italian mother and Italian-American father and who plays under the Italian flag.

The game is also finding an increasing role as a didactic tool in elementary and middle schools.