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ARTICLES

THE ORIGIN OF MORRIS AND DRAUGHTS BY ETYMOLOGY

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Abstract

The origin of a word gives us information on the world behind that word. Germanic people for instance knew how to make cheese and invented a word for their product. The Romans brought an unknown method of cheese preparation. We know it because the Germans borrowed the Roman word *caseus*, cf. Eng. cheese, which is only plausible if they borrowed the method too. For this reason the introduction of the etymological approach can yield useful information on board games.

For example on the reality behind the medieval Spanish word *alquerque*, that was supposed to be from Arabic origin. Linguistic research shows this was wrong: the word *alquerque* is from Roman provenance. We should seek, consequently, the origin of the game *alquerque* in a civilization under Roman influence.

Introduction

In this article, I demonstrate how a quest for the etymology, i.e. the origin, of a board game name enables us to pronounce upon the origin of the board game itself. The name in question is *alquerque*. *Alquerque* is the name for three board games that in 1284 were described for Alfonso, king of Castile and Len (Spain). *Alquerque de tres*, played with 2x3 pieces and the board of plate 1, is three men's morris. Our tic-tac-toe or whatever the name may be is a variant of this three men's morris. *Alquerque de nueve*, played with 2x9 pieces on the board of plate 2, is what we call nine men's morris. *Alquerque de doze* was played with 2x12 pieces on the board of plate 3. The nature of this board game is controversial. Our etymological search leads us to some civilizations in the Roman sphere of influence in the early Middle Ages. The Middle Ages are the period from c. 500 AD to c. 1500 AD.

*especially chess and draughts, from a for the board game world new point of view, namely linguistics



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Origin Rome or India?

Albeit obvious that the etymon must be a word with the sense ‘stone, gaming piece’, the first etymological proposal, by Murray (1913), went into another direction. For this reason it is questionable. There is an excuse: in 1913 the art of etymology was scarcely out of the egg. Alquerque, said Murray, is a word used by the Moors who invaded Spain, but the etymology of this word is unclear.

In 1973, the Italian linguist Alberto Zamboni lifted the study of alquerque to a scientific level. The etymon is the Latin word *calculus* = ‘stone, gaming piece’, he concluded. Which means that the three games originate from a region in a Roman sphere of influence.

Another study of the etymon of alquerque at a scientific level was carried out by the American Sonja Musser Golladay in 2007 within the scope of her doctoral investigation into the Alfonso ms. Like Zamboni (whose work she did not know), she sought an etymon with the sense ‘stone, gaming piece’, but unlike Zamboni she took alquerque as a Moorish word, that could originate from India (Golladay, 2007, pp. 613–4). If she is right, the alquerque games could be of Indian origin.

Origin Rome (1)

When Musser worked hard on her impressive book of 1441 pages, the author of this article worked as hard as she did to transfer the results

of his linguistic study to the board game field. This needs explanation.

Building on a study of the vocabulary of board games started in 1975, I wrote in 1986 the first paragraph of a doctoral inquiry into the etymology of the French game name *jeu de dames* = ‘draughts’. The work took me eleven years, for it appeared that without an overview of the entire board game terminology in a number of languages a well-founded etymology was impossible. Eventually, it was published in 1997 van der Stoep (1997).

This book was a purely etymological hunt. A hunt, however, with consequences for our perspective on for instance the three *alquerque* games. To bring these perspectives into the limelight, the etymological study had to be transformed into a study on board games. The result was published in 2005, enlarged edition van der Stoep (2007). In this publication, the etymology of *alquerque* has exhaustively been treated (van der Stoep, 2007, pp. 121–36; pp. 172–6). The study confirms Zamboni’s etymology of *alquerque*: the most plausible etymon is the Latin word *calculus*.¹²

A comparatative study

The approach in this study was comparative linguistic. In such kind of a study, the researcher compares phenomena in a language with phenomena in one or more other languages.

Well then. The *Alfonso* was written in the Spanish language. Spanish is a Romanic language, like French and Italian. These three languages are the continuation of Latin dialects. We seek the names for the three board games of figures 1–3 in medieval France and Italy. So we compare the linguistic situation in Spain with the linguistic situation in two sister languages.

In both French and Italian, we find equivalents of the three games under the name of Fr. *merelles* and It. *marella*. A late Italian reference:

¹For Musser’s thesis this etymology came too late, so that she could not comment it.

²It was not too late for Ulrich Schädler (Switzerland) and Ricardo Calvo (Spain) in their German translation of the *Alfonso*, incorporating van der Stoep (2007) in their *Auswahlbiografie* (selected biography) (Schädler and Calvo, 2009, p. 333). However, the comprehensive study in van der Stoep (2007) is lacking at the page where the duo pursued the etymology of *alquerque*, whereas Zamboni’s conspicuous contribution is only mentioned in a footnote (Schädler and Calvo, 2009, p. 301). By starting with the sentence “Der Name *alquerque* wird von arabisch *qirq*, *qirqa* mit dem vorangestellten arabischen Artikel *al* abgeleitet” (The common etymology of the name *alquerque* is the Arabic word *qirq*, *qirqa*), the two authors suggest that Murray’s proposal from hundred years ago has still relevance, and this whereas the expert Zamboni dismissed it as a myth. Schädler & Calvo’s book promises to become a standard work, and just for this reason it seems necessary to complete page 301 by this summary.

Marredda di novi (...), marella, o morella, in Roma filo, of filetto (...) (It. novi = ‘nine’)

Marredda di dudici (...), in Roma si dice a Dama (It. dudici = twelve)

(Pasqualino, 1789, III)

Because Spanish is as said like French and Italian the continuation of a Latin dialect, we may pose the question whether we find in Spain this game name too. Yes, we do: the Spanish form is marro. And had it the same senses ‘morris’ and ‘draughts’? Certainly: it meant ‘morris’ (Brunet and Bellet, 1890, p. 204) and ‘draughts’. In the late 16th c., we find the word marro in the title of a Spanish draughts book:

Libro del juego de las damas, por otro nombre el marro (...) (The book of the game of damas, with another name marro)

(Valls (1597))

We find in the three Romanic languages three different forms:

It. maredda/marella, Fr. merelles, Sp. marro. These differences mean that these game names derive from one older Latin name. The etymon of this game name is the word marrus, meaning ‘stone, gaming piece’ (van der Stoep, 2007, p. 174).

Results for our knowledge of morris and draughts

The language reveals us hitherto two new insights into the past of morris and draughts.

- One: In Italy the present-day name for draughts is dama, in France dames. The language tells us that the older name for draughts in Italy was marella/marredda, in France merelles. From this we may conclude that in Italy as well as in France draughts was played in the Middle Ages. In Spain we see a comparable situation: the present-day for draughts is damas, an older name was marro. A sound conclusion is, that also Spanish people played draughts in the Middle Ages.
- Two: The transformation of Italian, French, and Spanish from Latin dialect to language is considered to have taken place about 800 AD. Probably, these dialects had a game name meaning three men’s morris, nine men’s morris and draughts. This allows us to conclude that these three games were played in regions in the Roman sphere of influence before 800 AD.

Spain: two words for morris and draughts

The situation in Spain was complex: medieval Spanish had not only the indigenous game name marro, meaning morris and draughts, but a second name, imported by the Moors, we may assume, for morris

and for and a game where the pieces move and take like in draughts, namely alquerque. Since (Murray, 1952, p. 65) this game is considered as a game without promotion. I shall substantiate now that alquerque was a second Latin name for morris and draughts.

Let's regard the way we people use words. The language user strives for the ideal situation of one word with one sense.³ In the past, the speaker of a Latin dialect violated this rule by choosing one name for two different board games, namely draughts and morris. Such a choice is extremely unusual, because it goes against the principle of word creation. Therefore it is allowed to exclude the possibility that an Arab speaking person committed the same sin by creating one word for the same two board games.

So that a reasonable conclusion should be: the game name alquerque comes from a Latin word. A Latin word with the sense of 'stone, gaming piece'. It was Alberto Zamboni who suggested Lat. *calculus* as the etymon of alquerque.

We follow his reasoning. We remove the article *al* and try to find a Latin equivalent of *querque*. Without result. In European languages, however, we find a change of the two consonants *l* and *r*. When we go for instance to the Iberian seaside we enjoy the sun on the Spanish *playa*, but on the Portuguese *praia*. So we retry our search with the word *quelque*. And then we come across the Latin word *calcul(us)* = 'stone, gaming piece'.

Origin Rome (2)

We make a plausible reconstruction of the word evolution.

Before c. 800 AD, the time when some Latin dialects were promoted to a language, in a dialect in the Roman sphere of influence a game name meaning morris and draughts was formed based on the Latin word *marrus*. The name and its meanings were adopted in another Latin dialect, but the speakers of this dialect chose a synonym based on the Latin word *calculus*.

Evidently, an Arab tribe borrowed the Latin game name with the word *calcul*. In the Alfonso ms. we find this game name as *(al)querque*.

Did this Arab tribe borrow the games morris and draughts too? Impossible to answer this question.

Conclusion

What is the profit of this linguistic quest for our knowledge of board games?

³The great number of words in the European languages with more than one sense is the result of another process of language creation.

- One: The game alquerque de doze in the Alfonso ms. is draughts.
- Two: Morris and draughts were played in medieval Italy, France and Spain from c. 800AD onwards.
- Three: Morris and draughts were played in these regions before 800 AD. On the basis of records of the name alquerque in Arab sources, we may establish that draughts and morris were played there before the 7th c. AD. There are no earlier traces in the language, earlier references could have been lost (van der Stoep, 2007, pp. 172–6).

For draughts this claim is new. Also for nine men's morris? Origin, age and diffusion of nine men's morris are uncertain (Schädler and Calvo, 2009, p. 297). Three men's morris is an ancient game, was already played in Rome about 0 AD.

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Board Games Studies was first published in 1998, an initiative inspired by the colloquia on board games held at Leiden University, the Netherlands, in 1995 and 1997. Five institutions affiliated themselves with the journal: the Institut für Spielforschung und Spielpädagogik in Salzburg, the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, the Russian Chess Museum in Moscow, the British Museum in London, and the Department of Computer Science at the University of Maastricht. The journal, which was published by CNWS Publications in Leiden on a yearly basis, was partially funded through the assistance of patrons and boasted a modern layout, trilingual summaries and color plates. The broad ambition of this journal required a continuous commitment from the editors, who reviewed contributions in German, French and English, provided translations of summaries for each article and, in several cases, collaborated extensively with authors to develop manuscripts that were to the academic standards of the publication. The journal had a trial run of three years, after which the format, content and review process was evaluated. The authors of the articles integrated wide-ranging literature necessary for a comprehensive understanding of particular games. Contributions from different disciplines — including psychology, computer science, philology, classical archaeology and history — allowed for a better historical and systematic understanding of board games to emerge. Starting in 2000, a section with a translation of primary sources was added. Book reviews and research notes further complemented the multi-faceted contents. Its first ambition, to serve as a platform for the publication of board games research, was met quickly, while gradually the journal gained prominence among researchers by publishing seminal historical overviews. The colloquia continued from 1995 onwards, moving from a biennial to a yearly schedule. The host institution was expanded beyond Leiden to universities and museums throughout Europe as well as Jerusalem, Philadelphia and, in 2013, the Azores. The colloquia continue to gather an enthusiastic group of scholars, players and collectors. Despite the institutional affiliations and a group of patrons, the production of the journal became financially and logistically problematic with CNWS no longer able to serve as a publisher. Reluctantly, the paper version of the journal was discontinued after volume 7 was published in 2004. The possibility of an online version of the journal had been explored with the online publication of the first issues, a decision that greatly assisted the dissemination of knowledge accumulated in those early volumes. The next step, an online journal that operates again as a platform for recent board games research, was not far away but required the skills and enthusiasm of previous and new editors to materialize. In these last fifteen years, the study of board games has gained momentum and this journal will not only showcase new results but, most of all, will encourage and publicize the work of the dedicated researchers in this field.

Alex de Voogt



To the authors

Board Game Studies is an academic journal for historical and systematic research on board games. Its object is to provide a forum for board games research from all academic disciplines in order to further our understanding of the development and distribution of board games within an interdisciplinary academic context. Articles are accepted in English, French, and German and will be refereed by at least two editors under the final responsibility of the Editorial Board. Please send your contributions in any editable format (Word, L^AT_EX, rtf, ...) with a matching PDF file. Please send all the illustrations in separate files.

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