

COURIER CHESS

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One of the great chapters in the development of modern European chess is the story of courier chess. A “great chess” variant – with an enlarged 12 x 8 board and three novel pieces – courier chess thrived for some six centuries, making it possibly the world’s longest-lived enlarged chess variant. Even the modern chess we play today has been around just a little over five centuries, after being modified from the Persian/Arabic game which had already existed for about a thousand years. While most chess variants proved to be passing fads, courier chess held its own, passed down through some twenty generations of players.



One of the few remaining relics of courier chess: a *schleich* (jester) from Ströbeck, Germany.

But when we seek out the record of courier chess, reports and details are scant, mostly scattered through centuries as brief mentions in longer travel logs and larger treatises on the more common chess forms. Courier chess is first mentioned in the great Arthurian romance, *Wigalois*, (Wirnt von Gravenberg, 1202). It appears again in the great chess poem of

Shachbuch (Heinrich von Beringen, 1300); again in a travel account (Kunrat von Ammenhausen, 1337); in greater detail in *Das Schack- oder König-Spiel* (Gustav Selenus, 1616); and finally in a later travel account (H.G. Albers, 1821). It is thanks to Selenus’s detailed description that we have the rules and a block print of some elaborate figurative pieces. But it is a 16th century painting that captivates our imaginations.

LUCAS VAN LEYDEN



Lucan Van Leyden’s famous painting, *The Chess Players*, Leiden, Holland, 1508

No historic image has riveted our attention to chess more than the famous painting, *The Chess Players*, painted by the great Dutch renaissance painter and engraver Lucas van Leyden in 1508. It is remarkable enough that van Leyden created this great work at the tender age of 14, and noteworthy that this southern German variant, courier chess, was being so precisely depicted in the far-off lowlands of coastal Holland. But what a drama! We have a lady of substantial refinement, in calm, calculating focus, an anxious advisor at her side, held in check by another gentleman at his shoulder. Her opponent, possibly of Mongolian descent, somewhat

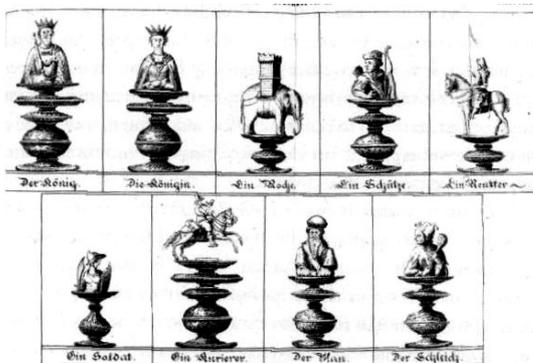
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disturbed, is also contending with layers of kibitzers ... the whole room is alive in hushed, dramatic tones. One is tempted to ascribe to these characters the names of the chess pieces – a queen, a king, an advisor, bishop, a fool – and is that a knight in the corner?... But we, centuries later, can only speculate on the convoluted drama – the possible loss of wagers and esteem hanging on the movement of those delicate pieces.

This picture has been reproduced so often – no comprehensive chess history is complete without it! It now resides in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, drawing generation after generations of chess enthusiasts into the deep recesses of chess gone by. But the painting is of importance well beyond its mystery and intrigue. A careful analysis of the pieces on the board draw us into the game itself.

BRIDGE TO MODERN CHESS



Courier chessmen from Gustav Selenus's *Das Schach- Oder König-Spiel*. Depicted are the *König* (king), *Königin* (queen), *Roche* (rook), *Schütze* (archer/bishop), *Reutter* (knight), *Soldat* (soldier/pawn), *Kurierer* (courier), *Man* (sage) and *Schleich* (jester).

To understand the advent of courier chess, we must put ourselves back into the mindset of the medieval chess player.

European chess players had learned the game, beginning around the year 1000, from contact with the Arabian Empire. The original pieces were a king, his advisor, two elephants, two horses, two chariots and eight foot soldiers. The abstract Arabic pieces were not entirely familiar to the European eye, so the advisor was immediately replaced by a queen; the elephants were replaced by various figures (a fool, a sneak, a sage, an archer, finally a bishop); and the rook, after a few identity changes, became a castle turret. The board, which had been a plain 8 x 8 grid for centuries, became checkered in Europe, making the diagonals more apparent. But still, the rules of the Arabic game persisted: Unlike modern chess, the bishop figure moved only two spaces diagonally – a very limiting move which accesses only eight squares on the entire board, and the queen moved only one square diagonally. The game developed more slowly than our modern chess, calling for a longer opening period of positioning and strategizing, without the sudden invasions of modern queens and bishops.

When courier chess came on the scene, around 1200, it introduced a board of 12 x 8 squares, adding four pawns to each side, and three novel pieces: the sage, moving just like the king (but able to be captured), the jester, moving one square forward, back or sideways (a complement of the queen's one-step-diagonal move), two couriers, moving any number of unencumbered squares diagonally. Among these three novel pieces, it was the courier who stood out. He was taller than most pieces, was said to be the most powerful piece (though modern theorists would disagree), and of course, the game itself, *Kurierspiel*, was named after him. One can only imagine the power this new piece offered to the little old game of chess, cruising

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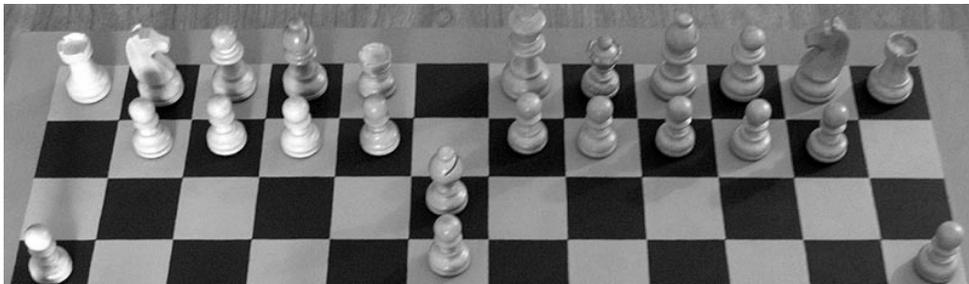
easily through pawn walls, waiting in the wings to attack far across the board, and zigzagging easily to all parts of the playing field (on one color of square, of course). Although actual accounts are limited, chess historians often postulate that familiarity with courier chess paved the way for modern chess, with its powerful queen and bishop both commanding long diagonals. When modern chess first appeared, at the end of the 15th century, it spread like wildfire through Europe, eclipsing the medieval style of chess play almost entirely within two generations. Even then, courier chess lingered for three more centuries, being played in pockets of southern Germany, as an alternative to the modern chess.

MODERN VERSIONS

There are two ways courier chess has been modernized, to make it more accessible to modern players. The simplest approach is to keep the game exactly as it was played long ago, but to use modern pieces, some of them cleverly altered, to indicate the ancient pieces' moves to the modern eye. A fine example is shown here: The king, rook, knight and pawns are all shown in their modern form, since the modern piece move the same as the medieval equivalent. The courier is represented by a modern bishop (since it has the modern bishop's

move). The queen is represented by a *truncated* modern bishop (since it moves only *one space* diagonally); the sage is shown as a *truncated* modern queen (since it moves only *one space* like a modern queen); and the jester is a *truncated* rook (and moves *ones space* like a rook). The medieval bishop, which moves only two spaces diagonally, is given an alternate round-headed form – the only unfamiliar piece which can't use the system of truncation. You can see, looking with modern eyes, that it would be easy to begin playing the game keeping these small alterations in mind.

Another approach to updating courier chess has been to begin with all of the modern pieces (as the old courier chess began with all of the medieval pieces) and add new pieces to fill out the 12-piece line-up. In one example, credited to the chess variant expert Paul Byway, the entirely modern king, queen, bishop, knight, rook and pawns are all present. The added pieces are two "ferses" (moving one space diagonally like the ancient queen), and two new "couriers" which move exactly two spaces either diagonally, forward, backward, left or right (an entirely new sort of piece). This new variant, known as *modern courier chess* (MCC), has recently been generating interest among chess variant enthusiasts.

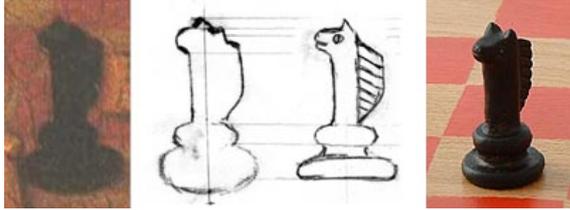


Modern pieces adapted to playing the old courier game, arranged here in the prescribed opening. Note that truncated bishop, rook and queen help suggest the moves of the old pieces (queen, jester and sage, respectively). Photo from the collection of Alexander Trotter.

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A RECREATION



Pulling a piece out of the shadows of van Leyden's painting: the piece as it appears in the painting, the outline of the form, the piece re-defined and a new three-dimensional model of the piece

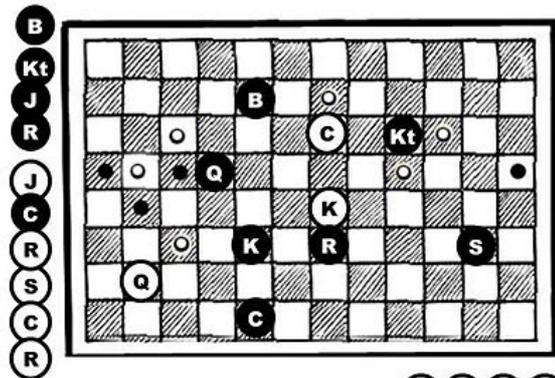
Now here's a question. How close can we get to the original courier chess set, shown in van Leyden's famous painting? Portraits of chess games are notoriously inaccurate. A survey of several paintings over the centuries shows participants playing improbable, absurd or completely impossible chess positions. Alas, the game itself is a mere backdrop for the painter's visual composition. Is van Leyden's chess game also just a meaningless arrangement to set off his dramatic faces and compositional prowess?



Close-up of van Leyden's painting, focusing on the game being played

Not at all! Combining the written evidence of the original courier game with some knowledge of conventional chess pieces of

the 15th and 16th centuries, we can determine with near certainty the identities of the pieces in van Leyden's painting, as well as the drama on the chessboard. It happens that the woman is giving check with a round-headed rook, protected by a courier, and is taking full advantage of her seemingly drunken and distraught opponent. The diagram here shows the position, as seen from the side of black (played by the woman in the painting). It is clear that the poor fellow playing white has very little play remaining, before he faces an inevitable checkmate.



Not shown in painting: **B B Kt Kt**

The position shown in van Leyden's painting, seen from the side of Black.

K = King, Q = Queen, S = Sage, J = Jester, C = Courier, B = Bishop, Kt = Knight, R = Rook, and the round dots are Pawns. Black is giving check with the rook. Note that the medieval King is a three-tiered pedestal, whereas the queen's figure is a royal crown.



Courier chess pieces and board, newly created based on van Leyden's painting: Sage, King, Queen, Jester, Courier, Bishop, Knight, Rook, Pawn

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Once we have identified all of the pieces, it is quite possible to make a recreation of the set itself – and that is just what we have done. By examining each piece and visualizing it in three-dimensional form, the entire set has been defined and made anew, to be as similar to van Leyden's long lost subject as possible. (See picture above) So here, after a 500 year absence, we have the conventional playing pieces of courier chess.

CONCLUSION

Most of us were first introduced to chess in its modern western form: the all-powerful queen, the complementary moves of rook and bishop, the double step of the pawn, the great literature of openings and strategies. In the minds of most players in the western world, that remains the sum of what "chess" is. But if we merely scratch the surface of history and travel a wee bit Eastward, the face of chess changes with every century and on every continent. The great game of courier chess, deeply imbedded in the evolution of the chess we know and love, deserves at least a pause of respect – and quite possibly a spell of utter fascination.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

For general information on courier chess, visit www.CourierChess.com
Download a free courier chess rule booklet at <http://ancientchess.com/page/free-downloads.htm>

For in-depth reading in Courier chess, see H.J.R Murray, *A History of Chess* (1913), Oxford Press, pp. 483-85

R.C. Bell, *Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations* (1979), Dover, pp. 62-65

Jean-Louis Cadeaux, *Guide des Échecs Exotiques & Isolites* (2000), Chiron, Paris, pp. 38-40