

**7th Gaetano Cozzi Prize for studies on the history of games, 2023**

MAXIME KAMIN

*Une condamnation du jeu d'échecs au XIII^e siècle:
l'exemple original du "Speculum prelatorum"*24th November 2023 **Citation**

The study submitted by Maxime Kamin, *A denunciation of chess in the 13th century: the unusual case of the "Speculum prelatorum"*, analyses the censure of chess contained in a work by an anonymous 13th century author. Only one example of this work exists, conserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The *Speculum prelatorum* must have originated in a religious milieu, given its author – probably a Cistercian monk (Henricus) – and its target readers – ecclesiastics, whose immorality is deplored by the anonymous author and whose guilty indulgence in the profane activity of chess was the more reprehensible because they were 'ministers' of the church. Kamin draws attention to the almost universally positive judgement of the pastime by contemporaries, who in effect held it to be an expression of *honestas morum*.

This indulgent attitude towards chess was also common in church circles and any criticisms were sporadic, so the *Speculum* is of special interest in that it confirms the enduring acceptance of chess in the ecclesiastical sphere. As regards the genre (by no means obvious) of the work, Kamin suggests that it may be a satirical text, to be seen in the tradition of 'mirror' compositions and probably also of goliardic literature (especially because of the plays on words and the mock etymologies it contains), all of which leads to the suspicion that the criticisms expressed might be ironical.

The *Speculum* describes chess as a pastime of demoniacal origin, the cause of many ills, the worst of which is clerical idolatry of the game. The purpose of the work is therefore to convince churchmen of their guilt.

The anonymous author also makes use of a series of allegorical references (to the chessmen, the chessboard, the game's moves...) to warn of the tangible threat the Devil presents to God and the faithful. Despite his harsh condemnation, the author nevertheless acknowledges "a certain merit", albeit unspecified, in the game. Adhering therefore to the distinctions made by contemporary moralists and theologians, chess is not reprehensible in itself but by *accidens*, because of the excesses for which it is responsible: so prior to its corruption through use, chess was, in fact, a praiseworthy pastime.



Kamin underlines the importance of such statements in that they clarify the ambivalent nature of chess. The originality of the text under consideration lies above all in its provision of context for the occasional criticisms of chess (with images and concepts that were also used to denounce dice and gambling) and why the work can be attributed to clerical authorship (remembering, as previously mentioned, that chess was for the most part one of the few pastimes permitted to the clergy).

In terms of a more general appraisal, concludes Kamin, the *Speculum* provides evidence of the *acculturation problématique* of chess in the mediaeval mentality and also reveals the game to be “of paradoxical prosperity in a tradition that was hostile to enjoyment of leisure”. The study leaves the author of the *Speculum* partly in the shade, as are its context and the reasons that led to its writing, its reception, the genre to which it should be assigned, the textual and cultural references and the relationship of the part devoted to chess and the rest of the work.

Maxime Kamin must be credited with considerable merit for having focused attention on a little-known text and for providing a preliminary analysis, carried out with a well-grounded and correct methodological approach and with interpretative acumen, a base from which further research should certainly proceed. For these reasons the Selection Commission for the 2023 *Gaetano Cozzi Prize for studies on the history of games* has decided to award a special mention to Maxime Kamin and to recommend that the study be published in the forthcoming issue no. 29 of the journal *Ludica. Annali di storia e civiltà del gioco*.

The Selection Board, comprising members of the Scientific Committee
of *Ludica. Annali di storia e civiltà del gioco*:
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