

How the chess queen rose to a place of power

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Chess, as any devoted reader of Vladimir Nabokov has known, is a superb metaphor for life. But as Marilyn Yalom illustrates in her fascinating new book, the metaphor works the other way as well.

In "Birth of the Chess Queen," Yalom, a senior scholar at the Institute for Women and Gender at Stanford and the author "A History of the Wife" and "A History of the Breast," has written the rare book that illuminates something that always has been dimly perceived but never articulated, in this case that the power of the chess queen reflects the evolution of female power in the Western world.

In India, where the game began, probably in the fifth century, there was no female game piece. For centuries, none existed in Persia and Arab countries.

The chess queen got her first written notice in the West in the 990s in a Latin poem by a Swiss monk, though the queen had not yet evolved into the mighty force that would come to dominate chessboards.

By the 12th century, Yalom writes, she was ushered into the Spanish game by both Christians and Jews, replacing the vizier, who had begun as the king's chief counselor in Eastern chess (apparently Spaniards were taking notice of who got the most attention when they whispered in the king's ear).

From Spain, chess moved to the south of France where Eleanor of Aquitaine duchess of Aquitaine, countess of Poitou, queen of France, queen of England, to list just a few of her credits gave the chess queen her first superstar role model. Eleanor, writes Yalom, "epitomized the trappings of queen-ship that worked their way into the symbolic system on the chessboard."

By the end of Eleanor's reign in 1189, the only vizier that remained on European chess boards were to be found in parts of Spain where Muslim traditions dominated.

The rise in the power of the chess queen reflected an increase in men's passion about chess. According to English legal documents, in 1251 and 1256, there were at least two "chess homicides"; and in 1291, the Archbishop Peckham condemned a prior and canon to three days and nights on bread and water for "being led astray by an evilly disposed person . . . who had actually taught them to play chess."

But thanks in large part to the popularity of the medieval best seller, "The Book of Chess," there was no stopping the girl. The chess queen finally reached the summit of her power in the late 15th century under the rule of Isabella of Castille, the most powerful of all Spanish queens.

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