

The history of chess

[From The history of Chess*]

Did you know that chess is the oldest skill game in the world? But chess is more than just a game of skill, it can tell you much about the way people lived in medieval times. If you look at the way a chess board is set up, then study the pieces and how they are used, you will realize that chess is a history of medieval times in miniature. The six different chess pieces on the board represent a cross-section of medieval life with its many ceremonies, grandeur, and wars.

Chess was played many centuries ago in China, India, and Persia. No one really knows for sure in which country it originated. Then, in the eighth century, armies of Arabs known as Moors invaded Persia. The Moors learned chess from the Persians. When the Moors later invaded Spain, the soldiers brought the game of chess with them. Soon the Spanish were playing chess, too. From Spain, chess quickly spread throughout all of Europe.

Europeans gave chess pieces the names we know today; they probably had trouble pronouncing and spelling the Persian names, so they modernized them to reflect the way they lived. Today, the names certainly aren't modern but a thousand years ago they represented the very way in which both ordinary people and persons of rank lived their lives.

The pawns on the chess board represent serfs, or laborers. In medieval times, serfs were considered no more than property of landowners, or chattel. Life was brutally hard for serfs during this era of history.

The castle piece on a chess board is the home, or the refuge, just as it was a home in medieval times. In chess, each side has two castles, or rooks, as they are sometimes called.

The knight on a chess board represents the professional soldier of medieval times whose job it was to protect persons of rank, and there are two of them per each side in a game of chess. Knights in a game of chess are more important than pawns, but less important than bishops, kings, or queens.

There is a bishop in the game of chess, who represents the church. The church was a rich and mighty force in medieval times, and religion played a large part in every person's life. A bishop was the name for a priest in the Catholic church who had risen through the ranks to a more powerful position.

The queen is the only piece on the board during a chess game that represents a woman, and she is the most powerful piece of the game. In the game of chess, there is only one queen for each side. Many people do not realize that queens in medieval times often held a powerful, yet precarious, position. The king was often guided by her advice, and in many cases the queen played games of intrigue at court.

The king is the tallest piece on the board, and is as well defended on the chessboard as in medieval life. In medieval times, the surrender of the king would mean the loss of the kingdom to invading armies and that could mean change for the worse. It was to everyone's advantage, from the lowest serf to the highest-ranking official, to keep the king safe from harm. The king is the most important, but not the most powerful piece in chess. If you do not protect your king, you lose the game.

The next time you set up your chessboard and get ready to play a friendly game or two, think of chess as a history lesson. The pieces on the board represent a way of life that is no more, and the real life dramas that occurred in medieval times are now only a game.

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