

JACOBUS DE CESSOLIS, *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium sive super ludum scaccorum* [Book of the customs of men and the duties of nobles or the Book of Chess]  
In Latin, illuminated manuscript on paper  
Northeastern Italy, probably Venice, c. 1425-1450

iii +65 + i leaves, on paper, apparently complete (collation: i<sup>9</sup> (last a singleton), ii<sup>10</sup>, iii<sup>6</sup>, iv-v<sup>10</sup>, vi<sup>8</sup>, vii<sup>12</sup>), long catchwords in lower margins, gatherings strengthened with strips from an early musical manuscript with neumes (probably tenth-century), 24 lines in black ink in a rounded gothico-antiqua script, rubrics in faded red, paragraph marks in red or blue, 2-line initials in red or blue with scrolling penwork, large historiated initial "M" (opening "Multorum fratrem ordinis nostri ..."), 11-lines high, in pink acanthus leaves heightened with bands of white penwork, enclosing two players seated on a bench either side of a chessboard, on burnished gold grounds, colored foliate sprays in border terminating in gold bezants, lower margin f. 22 cut away and replaced with more modern paper, hole in colophon on last leaf repaired similarly, some small smudges and ink stains, else in good clean condition with unusually wide margins and good quality paper. Bound in seventeenth- or eighteenth-century limp vellum. Dimensions 254 x 185 mm.

This is a nicely written and finely illuminated manuscript of one of the great classics of late medieval literature, Jacobus of Cessolis's Game of Chess, using chess as a framework for a moral allegory of society. The present copy is signed by a Venetian scribe, preserves wide clean margins, and is introduced by an enchanting miniature of two elegant courtiers playing chess. Although manuscripts of the text are by no means rare, there exists no critical edition of the text, and only a handful of copies are illuminated.

## PROVENANCE

1. Written in the second quarter of the fifteenth century by the scribe Johannes de Magno, whose partly overwritten inscription is at the end of the text (f. 65): "Ego Johannes de magnis fecit istum libellum." He was most probably the scribe who signs two manuscripts now in Cividale (dated 1425 and 1445), as "Iohannes Magno de Veneciis" (Bénédictins du Bouveret, *Colophons*, III, 1973, nos. 10387-88); the evidence of the script and decoration also support an origin in Northeastern Italy, probably Venice.
2. The library of the Florentine Ranuzzi family: eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century printed armorial frontispiece; perhaps given to a member of this family or an associate named "Giosepe pelegri" or "Antonio Maria Monti": contemporary scribbles in red on ff. 25v, 32r-42r, and 64r.
3. The Conte de Marescalchi, most probably Ferdinando Marescalchi (1754-1830), bibliophile and author, appointed ambassador to France by Napoleon in 1804: his nineteenth-century armorial bookplate on front pastedown.

## TEXT

f.1, rubric, *Incipit liber super ludo schacorom*, ; incipit, "Multorum fratrum nostri ordinis et diversorum secularum precibus persuasus...";  
Bute, ed., 1957, pp. 3-5.

f. 1-4v, rubric, [Book I] *Tractatus primus de causa inventionis ludi schacorum*; incipit, "Capitulum primum sub quo rege est inventus ludus..."; explicit, *Explicit tractatus primus incipit secundus*; Bute, ed., 1957, pp. 5-12.

ff. 4v-28, [Book II], incipit, "Tractatus secundus de formis scacorum et nobilium," Capitula primum de forma regis et de hiis que ad regem ..."; explicit, *Explicit tractatus secundus incipit tercius* ...; Bute, ed., 1957, pp. 13-72.

ff. 28-52, [Book III], incipit, "Tractatus tercius de formis et officiis nobilium popularium"; incipit, "Capitulum primum de agricultura ..."; Bute, ed., 1957, pp. 73-134.

ff. 52-65, [Book IV], rubric, *Incipit tractatus quartus de informs et officiis popularium*, incipit, "Tractatus quartus de progressu et motu scachorum capitulum primum ..."; explicit, "... et in perpetuo possumus cum ipso vivere et regnare. Hunc autem libellum in honorem et solatium nobilium et maxime ludum scientium. / [in larger letters] Ego frater Jacobus de cessolis ordine praedicatorum composui et ad hunc finem perduxì donante altissimo illo a quo descendit omne datum optimum et perfectum. Deo igitur altissimo sit honor et Gloria in secula seculorum amen/ *Ego Johannes de Magnis fecit istum libellum* [partially overwritten]." Bute, ed., 1957, pp. 135-165.

This is a copy of the Latin text written by Jacobus de Cessolis, a Dominican friar. Using the game of chess as an analogy for contemporary society, the text is designed to teach morals. The author names himself in the Prologue and in the Epilogue, and a good many of the Latin manuscripts include his name and mention his Order (the Dominicans). Little else, however, is known about the author. Although surely Italian, there is no agreement as to what part of Italy he comes from; Lombardy and Piedmont both emerge as possible origins. There are near-contemporary references to him as a Doctor of Theology but no actual documents survive mentioning someone of this name in the schools. The author does tell us how he had used the subject matter of the work in his sermons for some time before members of his Order and of the nobility persuaded him to write it down. The *Libellus* – his only writing – cannot date before 1240 nor after about 1320, and c. 1300 is generally given as the accepted date of composition.

The text of the *Libellus* consists of four main sections or books (called tracts) and is divided into twenty-four chapters: 1) Background of the Game; 2) The Noble Figures; 3) The Commoners; 4) Openings and Moves. Book One recounts the beginning of chess, the inventors, and the circumstances under which the game originated. Books Two and Three develop the chess analogy to contemporary life and describe the chess pieces as representative of different classes in medieval society. Figures of the court come first – the king, the queen, the royal counselor, etc. – followed by the pawns – the farmer, tailor, merchant, shipman, doctor, lawyer, thief, and gambler, etc. – who are seen as capable of playing a vital and important role in society. Book Four represents the chessboard as the ancient city of Babylon and concludes with an Epilogue tying together the framework of the Babylonian legend with the ideal medieval commonwealth pictured in the author's chess allegory.

There is still no modern critical edition of the text, one that would take into account all the surviving manuscripts. This is doubtless because the number of manuscripts is so large (in 1957, Bute cited some 300 manuscripts, cautioning that even this number was likely inaccurate and too low; Kaeppli lists approximately 270 manuscripts). The frequently cited edition of Köpke (1879) was based on a transcription of a single manuscript, and Bute's edition (1957) relied on only four manuscripts. However daunting the project, a systematic study of the surviving manuscripts, their countries of origins and their dates, would likely be informative about the transmission of the text as well as providing information on its reception by readers. For example, over time how and where did the work become more associated with actual game-playing and less with the milieu of itinerant preachers? The recent magisterial study of the origins and use of the text based on approximately one hundred and twenty-seven Latin manuscripts originating in German-speaking countries (as well as related texts and vernacular versions), is ample evidence of the importance of such a study (Plessow, 2007). In any event, there is no question that the *Libellus* was hugely popular; Bute argues that only the Bible was more widely read in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Over the two centuries following its composition, the *Libellus* was translated into many European languages, including German (four separate translations), Gaelic, English, French (four separate translations), Dutch, Spanish, Catalan, and Swedish. The first printed edition of the Latin text was in Utrecht in 1473 (Nicholas Ketelaer and Gerard de Leempt), and it was the second book printed in the English language by William Caxton in 1474/75 in Bruges as *The Game and Play of Chess*.

The Schoenberg Database lists 162 transactions between 1600 and 2012 of the *Libellus*, of which ninety-one of these are Latin copies of the text. Illuminated copies are, however, clearly in the minority.

## ILLUSTRATION

f. 1, historiated initial M, the initial composed in red on a highly burnished goldleaf surround, showing two seated courtly "Pisanello-esque" figures playing chess, the chessboard placed on the central bar of the initial.

The costume of the figures, wearing rose colored short jackets over green tights, helps circumscribe a date in the second quarter of the fifteenth century. Of considerable charm, the initial merits further study in order to identify the artist (Venetian? Ferrarese?).

## LITERATURE

Burt, Marie Anita, ed. "Jacobus de Cessolis: *Libellus de moribus hominum et officiis nobelium ac popularium super ludo scachorum*." Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 1957.

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Kaeppli, Thomas. "Pour la biographie de Jacques de Cessole," *Archivum fratrum praedicatorum* 30 (1960), pp. 149-162.

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Köpke, E. ed. *Jacobus de Cessolis*. Mitteilungen aus den Handschriften der Ritter-Akademie zu Brandenburg an der Havel, 1879.

Mehl, Jean-Michel. "L'exemplum chez Jacques de Cessoles," *Le Moyen Âge* 84 (1978), pp. 227-246.

Plessow, Oliver. *Mittelalterliche Schachzabelbücher zwischen Spielsymbolik und Wertevermittlung – Der Schachtraktat des Jacobus de Cessolis im Kontext seiner spätmittelalterlichen Rezeption*. Rhema-Verlag, Münster 2007.

Williams, H. L., trans. and ed. *The Book of Chess Jacob of Cessolis*, New York, Italica Press, 2008.

#### ONLINE RESOURCES

Archives de littérature du Moyen Age: Jacopo da Cessolis  
[www.arlima.net/il/iacopo\\_da\\_cessolis.html](http://www.arlima.net/il/iacopo_da_cessolis.html)

Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Typ 154 (14c Bologna)  
<http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/3684068>

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