

# THE HISTORY OF CHESS

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The true origin of chess is a controversial topic and cannot be accurately pinpointed. The first documented records of chess have been found in the East in Islam, Persia, India, and China. The oldest known chess books were written as early as 850 A.D., and with references to the game found in other documents it can be traced back to around the year 600. Before that there is only archaeology and conjecture.

Chess was introduced into Western Europe at an unknown date before 1000 A.D. The earliest references to the game in Europe are dated to around 1050, but they are short and ambiguous. Thusly, a definite route of introduction into Europe cannot be accurately traced. After the year 1100, chess had become a regular feature of noble life, and there were many stories explaining its origin in the west. The invention of chess was attributed indifferently to the court of Charlemagne, the court of King Arthur, and the siege of Troy. The latter was extremely popular among westerners as the date for the invention of chess.

During the Middle Ages there was much experimentation with the rules of chess. There were demands for new rules to be applied in order to speed the game up. Such rules included allowing pawns to move two spaces on their first move, and allowing the king and queen to jump squares in the opening turns so as to get them into play faster. Despite many modifications to the rules of chess during the Middle Ages, it was essentially the same game at the end of the period as the one taken from Islam 500 years before.

In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, chess was a part of noble culture; it was used to teach war strategy and was dubbed the "King's Game." Gentlemen are "to be meanly seene in the play at Chestes," says the overview at the beginning of *The Book of the Courtier*. The author explains it further: "And what say you to the game at chestes? It is truely an honest kynde of enterteynmente and wittie..."

Chess was often used as a basis of sermons on morality. Different chess pieces were used as metaphors for different classes of people, and human duties were derived from the rules of the game or from visual properties of the chess pieces: "The knyght ought to be made alle armed upon an hors in suche wyse that he haue an helme on his heed and a spere in his ryght hande/ and coueryd wyth his sheld/ a swerde and a mace on his lyft syde/ Cladd wyth an hawberk and plates to fore his breste/ legge harnoyes on his legges/ Spores on his heelis on his handes his gauntelettes/ his hors well broken and taught and apte to bataylle and couerid with his armes..."

Around the year 1500 there is evidence of a sudden reform in the rules, creating a game almost identical to chess played today. There were three major modifications to the rules of chess. Each pawn was allowed an extended move on its initial turn. Another change was in the extending of the range of the bishop, which made rethinking of strategies necessary. The final change was to the movement of the queen. The medieval queen was an extremely weak piece, even weaker than the king. The reformed queen, however, became the most powerful piece on the board with its ability to move as both a rook and bishop. It can be seen that from actions in Europe around the year 1500 that chess had become strongly engrained in western society and has remained so ever since.

