"Bonus Socius" French. XIII-XIV cent.

M 108 Eskiec; chess problems and other games.

Manuscript on heavy vellum, written and illuminated in N.E. France, late in the 13th or early in the 14th cent.

Decoration: The upper half of each page is occupied by the representation of a chess, or other game, board with the pieces in position to illustrate the problem explained in the text below. The chess boards consist of black and white squares, surrounded by a gold band. On fol. 1, the text is surrounded on three sides by a very good decorative border of somewhat delicate execution. The borders of other leaves are heavier and simpler. Grotesques are introduced into all of them.

Text: This is one of the 3 known MSS. of the enlarged and revised "Bonus Socius" text; the other two being in the National Library at Paris (MS. Lat. 10286) and a French (Picard dialect) text (Ms. French 1178). Of the earlier edition of "Bonus Socius", the best manuscript is in the National Library at Florence. Morgan MS. 108 is an amplified translation, in the Picard dialect, of that (Latin) manuscript. The text begins "Chil dor traient premiers"... (cf. Description of origin of Chess in Morgan MS. 691 - p. 131v.)

After fo. 145v, the chess problems are followed by 44 diagrams with rules for the playing of Piste, Barill, and Minoret, all three being varieties of Backgammon. This MS. is famous in the literature of
the history of the game, as the "Fountaine" manuscript, from having been in the collection of Sir Andrew Fountaine of Narford Hall, Norfolk.

182 leaves (9 5/8 x 7 inches) various numbers of lines up to 25 to a page. 4o.

Binding: Late XVIIth cent. French calf with tooled back in green mor. case lettered "Treatise on Chess, Backgammon, etc. French MS on vellum - saec. XIV."

History: From the collections of De Vaubouton (XVIIth cent. signature on fo. 148v); Sir Andrew Fountaine (1676-1753) of Narford Hall, Norfolk (sale London, 1902, no. 202 to Quaritch); Richard Bennett, Manchester, England.

Note (1) cf. Morgan Cat. MSS 1906 - pp. 170-172.
Note (2) cf. Magee, James F. Good Companion (Bonus Socius) Florence, 1911.

For full description, see Morgan Cat. MSS, 1906 no. 110, ff. 170-172.


Add. Cards
Mss. Illum. - French. XIII-XIV cent.

" Picard " " "

Chess. " Game of

Problems.

Tieote. " Game of

Barill. " Game of

Minoret. " Game of

Backgammon. " Game of

Provenance - Vaubouton, de

" " Fountaine, Sir Andrew (sale London, 1902, no. 202)

MSS. Illum. Silver " " Normand - French.
Add. Cards (cont'd)

'Good Companion'
see
Bonus Socius

blue) Fountaine Chess MS
see

V Bonus Socius. French. XIII-XIV cent.
5 M
C 108

BG: MPH, 1933
110. CHESS. A REMARKABLE MANUSCRIPT treating of the Game of Chess in the Middle Ages, which passed through the hands of Mr. Bernard Quaritch, August, 1902. Vellum, 9½ x 7, ff. 182; various numbers of lines to a page up to 25; cent. xiii; in a very good clear hand. Binding: xvii cent., with gold tooling on back. Formerly in the collection of Sir Andrew Fountaine, of Narford Hall, Norfolk. This library was sold at Sotheby's in 1902 (June 11-14). The present volume was Lot 202. On a flyleaf is the old number 64. On f. 146b is the name: De Vaubouton (xvii).

Collation: 14, 212 (11, 12 canc.), 38-188, 194, 208 (wants 1), 218-238, 248 (6 canc.).

The following account by an expert gives a better idea of the contents and value of the manuscript than anything that I could write. Special attention may be called to the decorative work on f. 14, 134b, 135a, 170, etc., as being of very good quality.

CONTENTS
Chill dor traient premiers & uellevt matter les rouges a deus traies ne plus ne maius preng le ruges a defendre car il ne le puient faire se chius ki trait de celles dor trait sen aufin en. A. prent sen pannet de ten roc se il donne eskiec si est defendu.

Enf f. 145B: auoeu laufun au darains eskiec et mat dou paonnet.

Leaf 147 (Tables): Cis giust est de le tiestre & souvaidens en. iij, des & dient celtes dor q elles sesueuront toutes deuant que les rouges soient hors cest en A. & traient chilles dor primiers.

Leaf 170A (Merrels): Celles q sut rouges traient primiers & toutes ses toutes les rondes auoec lestoile ne se remeuent nient.

Enf. Leaf 182A: Mals au coumencer il establir dor fut mise en. A. & les autres soient ensi que menterant adont nus ne pora uoincre se cascuns lue bien & soutumet.

This work has been known to chess historians and bibliographers for more than twenty years as the Fountaine MS. [See Van der Linde, "Quellenstudien zur Geschichte des Schachspiels" (1881), p. 186, No. IX; ibid., "Das erste Jartausend der Schachliteratur" (1881), No. 1873; Von der Lasa, "Zur Geschichte und Literatur des Schachspiels" (1897), pp. 133-150.] It is at once one of the most important and one of the most complete mediaeval works on the game of chess, and is almost the only manuscript of problems that has not yet found a permanent home in a National library.

The chess literature of the Middle Ages falls roughly into three classes of works: firstly, treatises dealing with the movements of the pieces, and the rules of the game, for the most part comparatively short Latin poems preserved in manuscripts of more or less miscellaneous contents; secondly, moralizing and religious treatises giving an allegorical interpretation to chess, of which the most important work is that of the Lombard monk Jacobus de Cessolis; and thirdly, collections of problems.

The game of chess appears to have been first practised in Christian Western Europe in the course of the eleventh century, and to have spread with a rapidity that would be considered surprising if the social conditions of the time did not supply a satisfactory explanation. Contemporary writers afford abundant testimony as to the absence of serious occupations for the upper feudal classes. Cut off by social considerations from the ranks below, with no political activities possible, time hung heavily on lord and lady alike. This made the minstrel's profession profitable, and led also to the necessity for indoor games. In the absence of cards, chess, and tables, (the precursor of backgammon), and, to a lesser degree, merrels, and possibly draughts, became the regular amusements for the long evenings, and furnished opportunities for the gambling, which was one of the necessities of a monotonous existence. Early European chess, however, differed very considerably from our modern game, the powers of movement of the pieces were smaller, and the game as a whole was tamer and longer. As the addiction to gambling extended, these proved serious drawbacks, for the settlement of a wager was too protracted, and attempts were made to shorten the game. These attempts are seen in tentative and gradual changes in the powers of movement of the pieces, and in the rules of the game, but still more in the sudden spring into popularity of the chess problem. In its simplest form the problem represented the ending of a game in which victory could be obtained within definite limits of time or a definite number of moves, a consideration that appealed to the impatience of the gambler. Although the problem art was already highly developed among the Arabs at an earlier date than the introduction of chess into Europe, there is little to show that early European players paid much attention to problems. Neither Neckam (about 1180) nor Cessolius (about 1260) refer to problems, but the use of their technical name focus partitas in a derived sense in Bracton (about 1235) is indirect evidence for an earlier acquaintance with them. The earliest existing MS. collections of problems belong to the last quarter of the thirteenth century and form a well-defined group which has for convenience been designated the Anglo-Norman, from the fact that the two chief MSS., both in the British Museum, are of English origin, and written in Norman-French. The MSS. of this group contain problems in chess alone, and show striking traces of Arabic influence. They represent the condition of the problem art in Europe before the requirements of gamblers began to modify it.

It would appear that a knowledge of the chief problems soon became common, and rendered them unsuitable for purposes of gambling. Instead of composing new positions, the energy of chess players was devoted to the task of modifying known positions in such a way, that while preserving a general resemblance to the original problem, the solution might be entirely different. Trickery and deceit took the place of a trial of skill. These modifications consist in the insertion of new pieces, the shifting of other pieces from their proper squares, the introduction of conditions such as forbidding the capture of certain pieces, or the movement of others, all resulting in the problem being impossible or unsound. Two new collections of problems on these lines were current in the early part of the fourteenth century, and are known from the respective introductions to the Latin texts as the Bonus Socius group, and the Civis Bononiae group. The Civ. Bon. group appears to be slightly later in date, and to have been mainly confined to Italy. The British Museum possesses a fairly good MS. (Add. 9351) of this group. The Bonus Socius group exists in two editions; one of the earlier the best MS. is in the National Library, at Florence (Banco dei Rari, B 16, p. 2, Nos. 1-7), and contains problems in chess, tables, and merrels. The introduction tells how "I a good companion (bonus socius) falling in with the wishes of my companions, have taken the trouble to collect into a book all the problems (partitas) which I have seen or have discovered in chess, dice and merrels (scaccorum, alearam quam etiam marrellorum), etc." From this larger collection many smaller texts were extracted, and seven or eight of these shorter MSS. are known; the shortest and most defective of these is Sloane 3281—the only MS. of this group in the British Museum. The Bonus Socius text was also amplified, and the Fountaine MS. is one of the three known MSS. of the enlarged and revised text, the other two being in the National Library at Paris, viz. a Latin text, Lat. 10286, and a French (Picard dialect) text, French 1173. All three texts are splendidly executed on vellum, the diagrams exhibit actual
pieces upon the chessboard, and show the shape of the chessmen at the time. In all three the two sides are coloured gold and red. Both Paris texts have an introduction somewhat similar to the original prologue in the Florence text, but in the place of the words Bonus Socius the Latin text has substituted V de V, and the Picard text has "Nicholas de St. Nicholaï, cleris." The obvious conclusion that here we have the names of the scribes who wrote these copies was overlooked by Sir Fredk. Madden and V. d. Linde, and Nicholas has been promoted to the authorship of the original Bonus Socius text. The Picard text has also a brief introduction on the rules of chess as exemplified in these three MSS., in which we are told that the problems are according to the Lombardy rules, and that the MS. teaches how the game may be shortened by problems. The latter statement admirably illustrates the genesis of this collection of problems, while the former, connecting the work with Lombardy, brings the Bonus Socius collection into intimate connection with Jacobus de Cessolis. The wording of the Latin prologue to the problem collection closely follows the wording of Cessolis' introduction, and the two books may be considered as companion works illustrating all sides of the mediaeval game of chess.

The present text lacks the introduction, but otherwise it appears to be complete. The problems have, however, been numbered, probably by the compiler, at the foot of each page, and the numbers proceed regularly to No. 300 on leaf 1008. There are no numbers now until leaf 1166, which is numbered No. 271 instead of No. 231 as we should expect, and the numbers proceed regularly to No. 330 (actually 290) on leaf 1456. From a comparison with the Paris MSS., it would appear that the discrepancy is due, not to a gap in the MS., but to an error in the compiler's counting, for both Paris texts appear complete, and neither fill any such gap as would be caused by the omission of 40 problems.

The problems, which are orderly arranged in accordance with the length of the solution are played according to the following rules. The King called roi moves one square in any direction; the queen called royine and occasionally forge (7a, etc.) moves one square in the diagonal directions only, and can never play to squares of a different colour. For its first move the queen may leap (sauter), i.e., make two such moves in succession, and a promoted pawn has the same privilege (see 107a, 116b, etc.); the bishop called avouf moves diagonally and can only play to the second square, leaping over the intervening square whether it is occupied or not; the knight called couailier, the rook called roc, plural ros; and the pawn called pannon or panmet, move as in modern chess, but the pawn can only be promoted to a queen.

Each problem occupies one page of the text. The conditions of the problem are first stated, and the soundness or unsoundness is indicated. The solution then follows at length, and is explained by the help of letters which are written on the problem diagram. In the few cases in which a solution runs beyond a page in length, the conclusion appears at the foot of some other neighbouring page which has not been entirely filled by its own text. Leaf 1382 contains an example of the Knight's tour over half the chessboard, and leaf 1416 a situation which is applicable to a game of draughts. Leaf 146 (a) and (b) contain blank chessboards. The boards are chequered black and white, but the modern rule that each player's right-hand corner square shall be white is only observed in the diagrams on the front of each leaf. In the diagrams on the reverse, the corresponding square is uniformly black, a condition of things postulated by the transparency of the parchment.

After the chess problems follow 44 diagrams of tables, which are divided between three games, tiste, barill, and minoret, all played upon the ordinary backgammon board with fifteen men (taule) a side, red and gold. The rules of play of these games are not known, but they appear to have differed but little from backgammon. From the numbers at the foot of the pages it is evident that a leaf is missing between 146 and 147, which contained two problems. The third game in the MS. is merrels, formerly called ninemen's morris or fivespenny morris (see Strutt's "Sports and Pastimes," 416), a game still extant, and played in precisely the same manner as is illustrated in this MS. It is referred to by Shakespeare in "The Midsummer Night's Dream," II, i, 98: "The nine men's morris is fild vp with mud."

The MS. is plainly a translation from a Latin original, for in many cases the scribe has in error copied the Latin text, e.g., 47a, apries differential le ges; 72b, il se coperiant se de leur roc (see 58a, 92a, 119a, 136b, 161b, 176a, and probably also elsewhere). He has also left lacunae in many places where he has failed to understand his original. The MS. is almost certainly of French workmanship, and would appear to have belonged to a French family of the name of De Vaubouton at least as late as the seventeenth century. Probably the Fountain family bought it abroad. It has suffered a certain amount of mutilation in the fact that one large initial (170a) and several smaller decorative figures have been cut out. The different groups of chess problems are begun with pages with very fine strap and scroll illuminated ornamental initials, and the marginal decorations comprise many grotesque figures and animals, birds, and spiked foliage of excellent workmanship.
For printed text or notices of this MS. see:


