

## Medieval Nine-Men's Morris with Dice / Ulrich Schädler

**N**ine-men's morris played with dice is a nearly forgotten medieval variant of the merels games. A description of the game is given in the "Libro del Alquerque" (fol. 92r), a chapter of the magnificent treatise about board- and dice-games written on behalf of Alfonso X, king of Castile and Leon, and finished one year before the king's death in 1283. It is already mentioned in the pseudo-ovidian poem *De Vetula* written between 1222 and 1268 in France (Klopsch 1967: 217, verses I 636-646). After the description of dice games, tables and chess the anonymous author continues:

"Sunt alii ludi parvi, quos scire puellas  
esse decens dixi, sed parva monere pudebat;  
nuncque magis quam tunc pudet illa minore referre,  
quare pretereo ludos, ubi parva lapillos  
nunc bis sex, nunc vero novem capit una tabella.  
Ac ubi sunt bis sex, capit ex hostilibus illum,  
ultra quem salit alteruter, nec ibi deciorum  
exigitur iactus; ubi vero novem, bene ludunt  
cum decisi et eis sine quando volunt, capit autem  
unum quem mavult ex hostibus iste vel ille,  
quandocumque potest tres continuare suorum."

Having said that in his days one is even more ashamed to talk about these minor games than in former times and therefore wants to leave aside "games, where a small board collects twice six or nine gaming pieces", he continues:

"Where (one plays with) twice six (pieces), one captures the one of the enemy's pieces, over which another piece leaps, and here the throw of the dice is not applied; but where (one plays with) nine (pieces), they play well with dice or without if they want to, but one captures this piece or that of the enemy's, which one wants, when one manages to bring three of one's own pieces into a continuous line."

The game mentioned at first played without dice and with twelve (2 x 6) counters for each player where captures are made by a leap over an enemy piece is of course Alquerque, described under the name *Alquerque de doze* in Alfonso's book. Next Pseudo-Ovidius speaks about a game played with nine pieces, played with or without dice, where an enemy piece can be captured by aligning three pieces. This three-in-a-row game is of course the well-known nine-men's morris or "larger merels", called *Alquerque de nueve* in Alfonso's book and played until today in many parts of the world, but usually without dice. The version played with dice is described at some length in Alfonso's game book on folios 92r and 92v (Steiger 1941: 366-69; Crombach 1987: 379; Canettieri 1996: 152-154):

"El que ha la mano que lança los dados primero, si dixieren los puntos dellos, seys cinco e quatro, o ternas seys, o cinco e dos dos, o amas as e quatro por qual quiere

destas suertes que lançe, porna tres trebeios en az, e levara cada vez uno delos dell otro iogador. Et si lançare de guisa que faga dos feridos, levara dos trebeios, e este ferir es ponellos assi en az como dixiemos, e quantas vegadas los assi eguala, tantos trebeios levara. Et esso mis/mo fara ell otro iogador, cada que los assi pusier en az ...”.

“The player who is the first to roll the dice, if the points on these dice are 6, 5 & 4 or 3, 3 & 6 or 5 & 2, 2 or 1, 1 & 4, each time he throws one of these results places three pieces in a row and each time takes away one of the pieces of the other player. And if he throws in a way that he makes two lines of three he will take away two pieces, and this “making a line of three” means placing pieces in a row as we described, and as often as he joins them like this as many pieces will he take away. And the same (fol. 92v) does the other player each time he places them in a line...”

H.J.R. Murray gave the following interpretation of the text and the rules expressed in it (Murray 1952: 45-46): “The account is not very clear, but apparently three dice were used for the entry of men on the board, and throws of 6,5,4 or 6,3,3 or 5,2,2 or 4,1,1 gave the thrower the right to enter a row of three men and to capture one, or, if another row is produced with men already entered, two of the opponent’s men. Other throws only enter a single man. When all the men are entered, the dice are discarded, and the game is played in the usual way”. Most scholars accepted his version, as van der Stoep (van der Stoep 1984: 81-82), Calvo (Calvo 1987: 147), Canettieri (Canettieri 1996:64), who, as so often in his book, quotes Calvo’s text nearly word-for-word without citing him as his source, and most recently Parlett (Parlett 1999: 121). R.C. Bell gives a slightly different reconstruction instead (Bell 1979: 94): “During the entry phase throws of 6,5,4 or 6,3,3 or 5,2,2 or 4,1,1 gave the caster the right to break into an enemy mill and capture a piece, in addition to introducing one of his own pieces on to the board, and if a mill was formed with this piece he removed two of the opponent’s men. With any other throw a single piece was entered. At the end of the first phase the dice were discarded and the game continued in the usual way”.

Scholars agree therefore that dice were used in the starting phase of the game. According to Murray and his followers the expression “*poner tres trebeios en az*” is supposed to mean that one of the four special throws allowed the player to place at once three pieces in a row (*i.e.* to make a line of three or “mill”) and capture an enemy piece. With regard to the analogous expressions at the end of the paragraph, this translation of the expression in question is though not very plausible. There one reads for example that “*ferir es ponellos así en az como dixiemos*” – “to make a ‘mill’ means to put them [the pieces] in a straight line as described”. And on fol. 93r concerning the smaller merels with three pieces for each player (Steiger 1941: 370; Canettieri 1996: 154) there is written: “*el que mas ayna pusiere sus trebeios en az, gana*” – “[the player] who more quickly brings his pieces in a straight line wins”. In this last instance the author definitely does not imply that the pieces have to be aligned all at once, but of course one after the other in alternate turns. Bell understood these phrases correctly stating that only one piece could be placed on the board in case one of those four special throws has been made. But his suggestion that in this case a piece could be placed into an enemy’s “mill” capturing one of the three pieces does not find any support in the text.

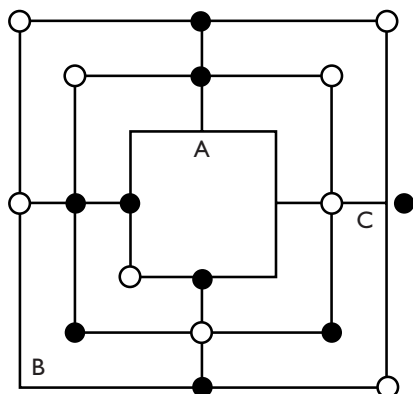


Fig. 1

Aiming at a better understanding of the rules given in Alfonso's text, it is worth to have a closer look at the accompanying illustration, which is, as most of the illustrations in the book, very carefully drawn. Hitherto the miniature has not excited too much interest, although Ricardo Calvo already pointed out (Calvo 1987: 131) that many of the illustrations in the chess part of Alfonso's treatise give important hints to the solution of the problem represented. As we shall see this is also true for the illustration added to the description of the nine men's morris with dice suggesting a different reconstruction of the rules. What is depicted is the transition from the first phase of the game, during which both players place their nine pieces alternately on the board, to the second phase, when the pieces are moved along the lines. The player with the black pieces sitting on the right is placing his last piece on the point in the middle of the outer row in front of him (C) and between the two white pieces thus avoiding that the white player can form a line of three in his next turn.

The question arises why he does not make a line himself by placing the piece on the point in the middle of the upper inner row (A). There seem to be two possible answers to this question: Or it was not allowed to form a row of three pieces during the first phase of the game (a rule frequently applied in our days) or this was only possible with one of the special throws. This last possibility can be ruled out by the fact that dice were used to accelerate the game. This is explicitly stated in Alfonso's codex not only with regard to the chess problems, which enjoyed great popularity because they would not take such a long time as a complete game does (fol.5r; Steiger 1941: 26s.). But also as far as the "*Grant Acedrex*" played on 12x12 squares (fol. 83r; Steiger 1941: 342s.; Canettieri 1996: 126s.) and the decimal chess played on 10x10 squares (fol. 84r; Steiger 1941: 344s.; Canettieri 1996: 130s.) are concerned we are told that they needed dice to be played more quickly. This preference for quicker and shorter games included not only chess and its variants but the merels games as well, where dice were introduced for the same reasons. This is indicated on fol. 92r (Steiger 1941: 366; Canettieri 1996: 152), where it is stated that merels "*iugasse con dados e sin ellos, segunt ell acedrex*" – "are played with or without dice, as chess". Therefore dice were used to have an additional but not the only possibility to form a row. So it seems that the player with the black pieces was

not allowed to do so during the first phase of the game and dice were introduced only in its second phase. The situation depicted in the illustration is exactly the first move of the white player after the first phase of placing the pieces on the board has ended. This seems to be an intentional choice to demonstrate the difference between the game without dice and the version played with dice. The player on the left has already placed all his nine pieces on the board and has now thrown the dice lying close to his left hand. Unfortunately the result is not clearly recognizable (maybe 4-1-1), but obviously it offers the possibility to place one of his pieces on the corner to the player's right (B), where he himself is pointing at, and make a line of three in the outer row. Therefore the rule ("*...porna tres trebeios en az...*") is not supposed to mean that one of the four special throws allowed the player to place a complete row of three pieces on the board, but that he could complete a row by placing the third piece in a special way. Instead of a normal move those four throws enabled a player to form a line of three by an otherwise not allowed leap of any of his pieces to the third point.

There are more reasons in favour of this interpretation: It is striking that in the illustration not one "mill" can be seen, although the first part of the game has already ended as both the players have placed all their pieces. If during the first phase dice were used and a throw of 6-5-4, 6-3-3, 5-2-2 or 4-1-1 would have allowed to place three pieces at once, one would expect that during eighteen moves at least one row of three should have been completed. But the right to place a single piece on any point makes sense only during the second phase when the pieces are moved from one point to the adjacent point only, whereas during the first phase of the game they can be placed on any unoccupied point without any need to leap. The rules for playing larger merels with dice given in Alfonso's "Libro del Alquerque" must therefore be understood in the following way:

Each of the two players has nine pieces, which during the first part of the game are placed alternately on any unoccupied point on the board. During this phase it is not allowed to place three pieces in a straight line, *i.e.* to form a row or "mill". When all the pieces are placed on the board, the second phase starts, where the pieces are moved from one point to an adjacent unoccupied point. The player whose turn it is may roll the dice first. If he throws 6-5-4, 6-3-3, 5-2-2 or 4-1-1 he is allowed to choose any of his pieces and leap to an unoccupied point, if by this leap he can make a line. With any other result he can only make a normal move, *i.e.* from one point to the adjacent unoccupied point. For any line of three created or by a normal move or by such a special move the player may take one of the opponent's pieces from the board.

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