

THE HISTORY OF CHESS

Have you ever played chess? Did you know that chess is the oldest skill game in the world?

Chess can tell you a great deal about the way people lived in medieval times. If you look at the way a chessboard is set up and study the pieces and how they are used, you will realize that chess is a miniature history of medieval times. 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, but theories vary about its specific country of origin. Through a series of invasions, chess quickly spread throughout all of Europe. Europeans gave chess pieces the names we know today, to reflect the way they lived. The names represent the way in which both ordinary people and persons of rank lived their lives.



The pawns on the chessboard represent serfs, or laborers. There are more of them than any other piece on the board, and often they are sacrificed to save the more valuable pieces. 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. They worked hard and died young. They were often left unprotected while wars raged around them. They could be traded, used as a diversion, or even sacrificed to allow landowners to escape harm.

The castle piece on a chessboard 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.



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The knight on a chessboard 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 chess are more important than pawns but less important than bishops, kings, or queens. Their purpose in the game of chess is to protect the more important pieces, and they can be sacrificed to save those pieces just as pawns can.

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 daily life. It is no wonder that a figure that represented the concept of religion found its way into the game. A bishop was the title for a priest in the Catholic Church who had risen through the ranks to a more powerful position. In the game of chess, there are two bishops on each side.



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 chess, there is only one queen on 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.

Kings, however, could set their wives aside or even imprison them in nunneries with the approval of the church (and without the queen's approval), and many women schemed merely to hold their place at court. The machinations of queens working either for or against their kings are well noted in history throughout medieval times, and the queen often held more power than the king did.

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.

