Of CROWNS and FOUNTAINS:
How the SELENUS CHESS PIECES Got Their Shape

By Tom Gallegos
The Absentminded Antiquary

INTRODUCTION – ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ORIGINAL SOURCES

AD FONTES! Ad Fontes, I tell you. *Ad Fontes, Ad Fontes, Ad Fontes!* What on Earth is he talking about? And what does it have to do with chess? Well, I'll tell you. The reason I love chess, the reason I collect chess, is because the game of chess is very important to the history of ideas. The history of ideas is the history of Western Civilization itself. This is what I really love, and this is what I really, ultimately collect. Chess has been there, throughout most of the history of ideas, and the history of Western Civ. It is ideas, and not just ideas, but *complexes* of ideas, that motivate my collecting. Hopefully, by the end of this talk, you will have some idea of what I mean by this.

Back in my university days in Boulder, Colorado, several lifetimes ago (the late '70s), my philosophy professors always used to make a big deal out of the importance of reading original sources. If you want to get at the truth, you need to read original sources, in the original languages, and not rely on later translations, summaries and synopses. Translations and summaries are always going to be full of mistakes and misinterpretations. (Never mind that if you even say a word like *synopses*, you are already speaking Greek.) But if you want to really, truly understand Plato, or Homer, you need to read them in the original Greek. If you want to understand Virgil, or Seneca, you need to read them in the original Latin. If you want to really understand the Bible, well, I guess you'd better start brushing up on your Aramaic, Hebrew, and other Semitic languages. This was something my philosophy professors felt very strongly about, and they'd apparently been telling this to generations of students for a very long time. I can only assume they're still saying it today. Here we are in Oxford, England, and I can guarantee that the professors at Oxford also stress to their students the importance of reading things in the original. Original sources, in their original languages. Professors at Oxford, and indeed, all over the world, have been saying this to their students for centuries.

There is a huge language component to philosophy as a discipline. If you want to pursue an advanced degree in philosophy, at CU in Boulder anyway, you really need to achieve fluency in Greek or Latin, or French or German. Preferably in more than one. And this helps to explain why I never earned an advanced degree in philosophy. Oh sure, I can understand a few words in any of those languages, and lots of others. I've even studied linguistics, a bit. But I never really achieved fluency in any language other than English. English is a relatively young language, barely a thousand years old. So that's obviously not going to help you understand much of anything, according to my professors, at least.

But when did they *start* saying this? When did professors the world over first begin to harangue their students about the importance of reading things in the original? I've looked into this a bit, and it turns out it was during the Renaissance. It was even earlier, really, in the Middle Ages. But by the Renaissance it really began to catch on. Renaissance is a word that means "rebirth" as most of you know. But what did they mean by "rebirth"? They meant, you should read things in the original. Remember that the very definition of Renaissance is that it was a time of – not discovery exactly, but *rediscovery* – of the long-lost classical knowledge of the Greeks and Romans. In the Renaissance, beginning arguably with Petrarch, people began to collect ancient manuscripts, and not just collect them, but actually *read* them, and they began to discuss and debate the ideas of the ancients, as if they were new. The Latin term for this notion was, and is, AD FONTES, which literally means, "go back to the sources, to the fountains, check the originals." They stressed the importance of this, just as professors still do today. You could even argue that AD FONTES is almost a synonym for the word *Renaissance* itself.

AD FONTES became a sort of rallying cry for the Renaissance. As we learned back in 2020 in Saint Louis (during the pandemic) the Latin phrase SAPERE AUDE, or *Dare to Know*, as in, dare to think for yourself, became the rallying cry of the Enlightenment. SAPERE AUDE is a phrase from the Latin poet Horace originally, but after Immanuel Kant used it in an essay in 1784, it became the unofficial motto of the Enlightenment. And this was the theme of our show in Saint Louis several years ago, which was called *Dare to Know: Chess in the Age of Reason*. Well, the same thing was true of the term AD FONTES a few centuries earlier. Go back to the original sources.

Hard on the heels of the Italian Renaissance came the German Renaissance, often called the Northern Renaissance. And in the north of Germany, toward the end of the Northern Renaissance, and the dawn of the Baroque, there lived a man, a Renaissance man to be sure, named Augustus II, Duke of Braunschweig and Lüneburg. As chess collectors, we know him better under his pen name, Gustavus Selenus, who lived from 1579-1666. ("Gustavus" is an anagram of Augustus, and "Selenus" is just taking the name of the Greek goddess of the moon, Selene, of course.) We'll talk more about Duke August in a few minutes.

So, as the German CCI meeting was going on last fall, as our group was walking to dinner in Wernigerode one night, we passed by a fountain. And I thought, gosh, that kind of looks like a chess piece. And then it hit me: *That looks a lot like a Selenus chess piece*. And that's how I first got the idea for this talk. Here's the picture I took of it that night, as we were walking to dinner. And here's a much better picture someone else took of it in the daylight, from Wikipedia or someplace.

But why would a fountain look like a chess piece, or *vice versa*, for that matter? So, I've looked into this a bit, and it turns out it makes sense. Fountains, and I later had to add crowns, and chess pieces, have a long and thickly-tangled, intertwined history that goes back many centuries. So, today's talk will be an exercise in resurrecting forgotten history.

And as we go through this exercise, I want you to keep this question in mind: Is "KING" a good or bad word? Oh sure, as chess collectors we talk a lot about the kings in our sets. But, good or bad? Well, you have your white king and your black king; there's your good versus evil. But

no, I don't mean as chess collectors. I mean, out there in the world. As a system of government, is monarchy a good or bad thing? After all, Julius Caesar was assassinated because of the fear that he would try to make himself a king. Napoleon may have been a military genius, but he was also the rat bastard who betrayed the ideals of the French Revolution to make it all about himself, and his own ego. Instead of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, it became, *Napoleon, Napoleon, Napoleon*. We still have people trying to do this today, even in the United States, which was founded on the idea of rejecting such people.

Napoleon thought, "Oh, I'll just avoid that hated word, *king*, bypass it entirely, and simply crown myself emperor." I have to shake my head. Oh Napoleon, Napoleon, *mon ami*, history teaches us that you only make things worse when you pull that kind of crap.

So today, among other things, we're going to investigate this question at some length, are kings good or bad, and apply our hard-won historical knowledge to the game of chess. Some of you will agree with me that it's obvious what these shapes represent. And that we must use historical analysis, inference, and common sense to interpret whatever slender evidence is available to us. Others will remain skeptical until I can produce a signed affidavit from King Charlemagne that, yes indeed, we originally began to make chess pieces look like fountains to remind people of my royal crown, back in the year 800. And there will be every opinion in between. I don't have to convince everyone. This is just a new theory I am throwing out there.

What will we call them? Obviously, we're not going to stop calling them Selenus sets. And that's a great name. But along the way, we will suggest a few other names, just to help these ideas sink in a bit. But we should stop calling them things like tulip sets or garden sets. Those names come from people who didn't understand the ideas these sets contain. Moon sets, fountain sets, yes, even crown sets, but not tulip sets or garden sets, please.

WATER IS LIFE – REMEMBER TO THANK YOUR KING

Few people alive today remember what a miracle it was once considered, to have a fountain in the middle of a town. Water is life, and for millennia, we used to have to walk all the way to the river or lake to fetch it. Water from a fountain, right in the middle of town, is a great convenience, brought to you by the government. Just as in the past, the Roman aqueducts, those engineering marvels, brought water from the hills around Rome, from dozens of miles away; just as today *we all still get our municipal water supplies from the government*. So it's no surprise to realize that a fountain in the middle of town was a visible symbol of the king's presence. Water was something he provided, and that's why the earliest and most common form of a fountain is a tiered crown. A symbol of civic authority. This is why we pay taxes. Look at the benefit we get. Water is a largesse that flows directly from the king. Or, in the case of the Roman aqueducts, from the government, since Rome was still a Republic when most of them were built. But the point is, municipal water comes from the government.

Water also has religious and mystical connotations. This is an incredibly complex subject. History is full of folklore about magical and miraculous springs, fonts and fountains with healing or redemptive powers, not just water for cleaning or thirst-quenching, but also for transforming,

improving, or even restoring life to the dead. Or water that is full of knowledge or wisdom, or that confers religious grace. Water that has the power to wash away not just dirt, but sin.

Wells, on the other hand, are relatively easy; all you need to do is dig down to the water table, then install a bucket and pulley to get the water up. A fountain is a much bigger deal, since the water must be flowing from uphill somewhere to provide the water pressure needed for the fountain to flow. In other words, you basically have to construct an underground river, flowing at a carefully determined rate, just like a Roman aqueduct, to charge a fountain. Or, at least you need a pipe that points downward. And, you need to have a source of water, a lake or a river, at a higher elevation than your fountain. Or, you need to build pumps to get the water up high, before feeding it into the downpipe. Wells are necessities, but a fountain is a kind of miracle. Or at least, an engineering marvel. Only the king and his men could manage it, usually.

Now, we're not even going to talk about the Fountain of Youth; that idea is simply too well-known. You don't need me to tell you about the Fountain of Youth. But the Fountain of Life is an old Christian symbol, that comes from the Book of Revelation. Here is the Fountain of Life as depicted in the famous Ghent Altarpiece. (And that Lamb of God right above it is actually considered a fountain of blood, if I understand correctly.) And here is one from an old painting of the Biblical story of David and Bathsheba. King David can just be seen in the window at the upper left, leering down at Bathsheba. But the fountain, a perfect Selenus chess piece, is an obvious symbol of his royal authority, his kingship. It means that she lives at his house, under his authority. Bathsheba is one of David's subjects, and he is about to abuse his authority over her.

And in the idea of Old Germanic kingship, we can see the idea of three tiers beginning to form. Now, we have to be careful, because this is actually a more modern theory from the 19th century, one that has come under some criticism, but here goes: Supposedly, ancient Germanic kings had three main functions: To serve as judge, priest, and military leader. Could this have anything to do with the reason so many fountains have three tiers? It's just a question. But notice this scepter that Charles V is holding. Even IT has a kind of crown, or fountain shape. (But why his hat looks like a fish is beyond me.) Now, women didn't serve as military leaders quite as often as men, so subtract one tier from the king, and you have two tiers for the queen. And in fact, this is what we see on a lot of early Selenus sets.

But more about tiers: In the Middle Ages, society was organized into three groups, called the Three Estates, as seen here: Those who pray, those who fight, and those who do all the work. Priests, Soldiers and Peasants, in other words. All under the command of a king, or in this image at least, Jesus Christ. This social order would last until it was overthrown by nothing less than the French Revolution of 1789.

By the way, as you may have noticed in one of the earlier slides, the Papal Tiara, as they call that crown the Pope wears, also has three tiers. What do those three tiers represent? I always assumed that they stood for the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost. But when I went to look it up I found out that no, there's no agreement, and scholars are constantly arguing, but they seem to stand for all sorts of other, much more obscure, ecclesiastical trinities, which we won't go into.

So tell me again, how is a king like a fountain? Well, in heraldry – uhhh, scratch that, it's not just heraldry. In *monarchy*, it is a less well-known fact that the king is something called the "Fount of Honour". What this means is that the king is literally a fountain of nobility. And what *this* means is that only the legitimate ruler of a nation can legally grant you a noble title, a knighthood, a dukedom, or whatever. Or, let you keep one, if you fall from grace. The king is the source, the wellspring, or the fount, of your aristocratic title. In German lands, the Fount of Honour would have been the Holy Roman Emperor, but with the hundreds of smaller principalities and political entities that existed before unification, I'm guessing this responsibility would have been delegated, in most cases. So the big fountain had lots of little fountains to help him out, I would assume.

And on a more religious note, here's an old woodcut by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Here we see a representation of *all three* miraculous fluids: Water, wine and blood. (What's called the Most Precious Blood of Christ.) Because with a fountain shape like this, the water is kind of implied or assumed (there's probably a baptismal font or holy water stoup somewhere nearby), but this fountain is flowing with wine and blood, which are the same thing during the Eucharist. The wine is indicated by the grapevines, and the blood is indicated by the fact that in the crucifix at the top, Christ's Most Precious Blood is flowing freely from all five of his wounds. So again, this is a fountain of water, wine, and blood.

With all this background in mind, is it too obvious to point out that, for a thousand years or more, when they wanted to make abstract, or non-figural chess pieces, the fountain shape was the obvious choice to stand in for the king?

Hopefully by now I've convinced you that the fountain shape is important, that it has meaning, and that it is closely bound up with the idea of kingship, and even with divinity, and the ancient doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings. How and when did this shape ever make its way to the chess board? Well, I don't know how. But I can tell you a little bit about when. We do have examples of the fountain shape used as chess pieces from well before Duke August wrote his book in 1616. Exactly how far back it goes is anybody's guess, but in Dr. Isaac Linder's book *The Art of Chess Pieces*, there is a series of at least four king pieces from Russian and Ukrainian lands, dating from the 12th through the 15th centuries. Also, similarly-shaped pieces are shown in *Échecs amoureux*, a French illuminated medieval manuscript from the late 15th century, now in the *Bibliothèque nationale*. Here's the close-up. So it's at least Medieval, and it's certainly possible it goes back even further than that.

It will turn out later in the talk that many early Selenus sets have watery or liquid themes that we have forgotten how to see. Fountain-like kings and queens; bishops that are cups, chalices or even ewers; and finials that are based on the idea of a water drop caught in mid-air. Try not to get too thirsty.

DUKE AUGUST, HIS LIFE AND TIMES, AND HIS LIBRARY

But with this background, let's get back to Duke August, and get better acquainted, as if we were getting to know him at one of these meetings. He certainly looks like he would have been a CCI member. Certainly a Ken Whyld member at least, because he was quite a book collector, and

amassed one of the most important libraries in all of northern Europe, which you can still visit today.

You can see in this bookplate on the right that his personal motto was ALLES MITT BEDACHT (German for, "Everything with consideration, everything with careful thought.) In the USA we have the National Public Radio show called, "All Things Considered" a title which means we talk about all subjects. I think Duke August's motto carries both meanings, "We think through everything carefully," and "We apply this method to every known subject." Because Duke August was a voracious collector of knowledge in all fields.

Here's his statue in the market square of Wolfenbüttel. Notice that it's highly significant that this statue is also a fountain. Not the chess piece-shaped type of fountain, obviously, but a font, or spring, flowing out of the ground. I'm sure Duke August would like to think that his statue represents a wellspring, or font, of knowledge. So when you look at this water flowing from his statue, just remember, in his case, the water represents knowledge and wisdom.

I'm not trying to argue that Duke August invented the chess piece shaped as a fountain. He did not. We've just seen that this shape goes back much earlier in the history of chess sets. I'm only saying that Duke August lived at a time when he and people like him would have understood what that shape meant. And why it was so appropriate for the king and queen pieces in a chess set. This was the old pro-monarchist argument that the king was the "font" or the source, of all things good and noble. Most modern people, including chess collectors, have completely forgotten this notion ever existed. And they would never think to look for it in a chess piece, of all things.

Here is Duke August giving us a tour of his library. He is extremely proud of it, obviously, and with good reason. I've loosely translated this bit of Latin here:

"When all are randomly talking here and opining there, the best advice comes from the mute and the dead. Even if people are silent, they will find a voice in books, and what no one will say, prudent antiquity suggests."

So yes, that is a ringing endorsement for book collecting, if ever there was one. Duke August would have been a huge proponent of the whole idea of *Ad Fontes*, of going back to the original sources, this much we know. Notice also these grapevines. They are an important symbol, again, of knowledge. But, you may object, I thought you said that WATER was the symbol for knowledge. It is. Don't be so literal. Water, wine, and even blood can be symbols of knowledge in different senses, from the mundane to the divine.

As a book collector, and as someone who took the pen name of Selenus, after the moon goddess, I think it's safe to assume that Duke August was a night owl. Many bibliophiles are night owls, if not most of us. He was not really a heavy-hitter in the power politics of his time, but kept a small court and spent his entire lifetime in the pursuit of all forms of knowledge. Today we would call him a scientist, but no one used that word in those days. The commonly-used term for a scientist was "natural philosopher" and that is what he was, but in those days, this sort of science was heavily bound up with esotericism and the occult. There was no firm dividing line

between science and the occult, as people delude themselves into thinking there is today. Duke August was an alchemist, among other things, trying to turn base metals into gold. Today we think of that as mere charlatanism, but in those days it was considered a legitimate scientific pursuit. All the most literate princes of Europe, just like Duke August, were trying to turn lead into gold as a way of delving into the mysteries of nature, exactly as particle physicists today will tell you they are trying to understand the basic laws of nature by studying the behavior of subatomic particles. Alchemy today has a bad reputation as a kind of money-grubbing affair, but that's no different from the way some particle physicists today dream of getting rich off of their patents.

Duke August also corresponded heavily with leading Rosicrucians, another field that today gets lumped in with occultism, but centuries ago was just another way of seeking after knowledge. Deeper knowledge. Truer knowledge, in their minds.

On a more hypocritical note, Duke August was also a witch-burner. Well, he and his contemporaries would not have thought of this as hypocritical. This was the time in Germany and throughout Europe, when tens of thousands of people, mostly women, mostly poor people, were burned at the stake on charges of witchcraft. Duke August lived at the height of the witch-burnings in Europe. As an aristocrat, he was part of the system of courts and administration of justice, such that around 40 or so accused witches would die by fire under his reign. And at the same time, here he is in his library studying alchemy and Rosicrucianism and all sort of things we now associate with wizards. In fact, Duke August was an absolutely classic example of a Renaissance wizard, or magus, as they were once called. (I don't know if he was quite this athletic.) But wizarding was a hobby best left to wealthy male aristocrats, not poor peasant women. So there was a bit of a double-standard there, which we modern people can see, with the benefit of historical hindsight, to which Duke August and men like him were completely oblivious. It was just the world they were living in.

Oh, and on top of all this, Duke August, like all aristocrats, considered himself a good Christian.

Duke August collected thousands of books, but he only wrote two books in his lifetime, as far as I can tell: The chess book from 1616, which we've all at least heard of, and, eight years later, in 1624, he wrote a book on cryptography, which was also called steganography. But he didn't really write these books. He translated, adapted, and expanded on the works of others. The chess book was mostly based on the text of Ruy Lopez, and the cryptography book was based on earlier works by a much more famous cryptographer named Trithemius. Cryptography was considered very important as a military and political art, as it still is, but also had numerous applications in the occult, Rosicrucianism, and other things we would now consider more wizardy than scientific. And Trithemius's books on cryptography were explicitly magical Or were they? It's a whole issue that we can't really go into. The main point is that as we study the frontispieces from Das Schach, please keep in mind that this was the era of emblem books and searching for knowledge through arcane symbolism. Don't be surprised if a few things here and there have double meanings, or hidden meanings. Throughout the Renaissance, people loved that. And Duke August was no exception.

And I should just quickly mention Rithmomachy, a game of Pythagorean number theory which has a treatise describing it appended to Das Schach. This is a completely separate topic, which we can't go into here, but Rithmomachy is a kind of battle of numbers, where you have to be able to do quite a lot of math in your head to play. If you're familiar with Wizard's Chess from the Harry Potter novels, well, historically speaking, the real Wizard's Chess was Rithmomachy. It was called in Latin, *Ludus Philosophorum*, or the Philosopher's Game. "Philosopher" was another word they used when they meant what we would call a wizard.

Once again we find, although the formal academics will never tell you this in so many words, since it's just not academically respectable to talk in these terms, and yet: Duke August was someone we absolutely must classify as a Renaissance wizard. There's no getting around it.

And as for the chess set that Duke August himself owned and probably played on at least a bit, here it is. It's on permanent display at the Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum in Braunschweig. As we can see, Gustavus Selenus's own chess set – was not a Selenus set. It's figural. But that doesn't mean we can't stop to take a moment and admire these. Here are a few shots the curator took for me from the permanent exhibition. And here are some close-ups from an exhibition catalogue of theirs. And here's another shot of that board. I don't know how well you can see this, but trust me, there is plenty of allegorical and esoteric symbolism in that board, both on the squares and on the rim.

But for purposes of this talk, we're really more interested in *these* pieces, the pieces that come from that famous image in Das Schach. Das Schach does have figural pieces illustrated in it, but I've never seen or heard of examples of these being known to exist. Somebody please correct me if I'm wrong. No, we're really more interested in *these* pieces. The ones that look like little fountains.

And by the way, going back up to the larger image, please notice the campaign bed in the upper left corner. It's not just a normal four-poster bed from that era. It's a bed in the style of a military campaign tent, again subtly underscoring the fact that chess is a war game. And notice all the drinking vessels and ewers in the upper right corner. We would expect those to be there, of course, and they *are* typical of the era, but we can't help pointing out any liquid motifs or references in these images.

AND HIS FOUNTAINS

I argue that a Renaissance man like Duke August was almost certainly well aware that these common chess pieces that all his friends and neighbors used were shaped like fountains because fountains were instantly recognizable as kings and queens. Fountains were a common symbol that meant *king*. Because if there was one thing that every good German of that era knew and could appreciate, it was what a fine thing it was, to have a fountain in the center of town.

We can basically prove this part of the theory. After all, Duke August certainly had fountains in the center of *his* towns. They are still there to this day, or copies of them, at least, and they just happen to look exactly like chess pieces. Remember, he was the Herzog (or Duke) of *Braunschweig* and *Lüneburg*.

First, Braunschweig. Or Brunswick, in English. This is the fountain in Braunschweig. It is called the Marienbrunnen, because it has a small statue of Mary and her baby ensconced inside this crown at the top. (And because the German word for fountain is brunnen.) It was built in 1408, so it was definitely there during the Duke's entire life. He would have seen this fountain every single time he passed through the center of town. *His* town. Here is a later drawing of the same fountain, from 1753, proving that these fountains are not merely ornamental. People used them to do their laundry, other kinds of washing, and to carry drinking water to their homes. But on a sad note, this fountain was cast from *lead*. They probably didn't worry too much about toxic lead leaching into their drinking water. I have no idea if the fountain was lined with anything safer, but I doubt it. On an even sadder note, the Marienbrunnen was destroyed in World War II. It was reconstructed around 1945-51 (and a couple of times since then), with the remnants of the earlier fountain relegated to a museum in the Old Town Hall nearby.

Now on to Lüneburg. Or as we might call it in English, *MOON*-town. The town of Lüneburg is almost surely one of the reasons that Duke August took the pen name of Selenus. I speculated earlier that he was probably a night owl, and not a morning person, as we would say. It would be interesting to know whether he ever pulled any all-nighters while sleeping (sorry, I meant *not* sleeping) in the town of Lüneburg. But it's town fountain is called the Lunabrunnen.

The Lunabrunnen was built in 1532, so once again, it was in existence for *all* of Duke August's lifetime. Once again, he would have seen it every time he passed through the center of *his* town. This fountain has a statue of Luna, the moon goddess, at the top. (Technically, the statue is of Artemis, or the Roman Diana, but these are all moon goddesses, and the three names are often used interchangeably.) They moved the original indoors to a museum to get it out of the weather, and you can see that part here. The fountain outside on the square today is a copy. The Lunabrunnen I am fairly certain, was made out of bronze and not lead, so, much safer to drink from.

But it looks just like a Selenus chess piece, don't you think?

By the way, the town motto of Lüneburg, in Latin, is, *Mons, Pons, Fons*. A charming little rhyme! It means "Hill, bridge, spring", so once again, the importance of a spring or source of water is emphasized. It's part of the town's own version of a trinity. I don't know if Braunschweig has a town motto.

A little while later, I will mention the ancient Greek myth of Cadmus sowing the dragons teeth. When I do, I want you to remember that there are dragons in the ornamentation of many, many fountains throughout Germany. (And churches, and cathedrals, and rathauses, and on and on.) Including the two we've just been discussing, the two that Duke August was certainly very familiar with. I'm sure there were dozens of fountains that he was familiar with, from the various towns in his domains of Braunschweig and Lüneburg. And lots of those fountains probably had dragons cast somewhere into the metalwork, or carved into the stonework. But certainly at least, we know that these two did: The Marienbrunnen and the Lunabrunnen.

So now let's turn back to the Duke's famous chess book, and talk about other chess-related matters for a bit.

AND HIS FRONTISPIECES

Well, I can't really read the Old German too well, but like children, we can at least look at the pictures, and try to make sense out a few of the symbols and clues Duke August has left for us. The main text of Das Schach, excluding Rithmomachy, is organized into four books, and they each have essentially the same frontispiece. The two allegorical figures on the sides refer to that old Babylonian legend about the origin of chess, that it was invented by the wise and good counselor, Xerxes Philomater, to keep his king, the evil Evilmerodoch, out of trouble. And we know this was a really evil king, because his name is literally *Evilmerodoch*. It's hard to notice, but it looks like he is crushing a small bird in his left hand, just for fun. And it's worth noting that Evilmerodoch is depicted as a turbaned Oriental on the right, while Xerxes is depicted as an enlightened Greek philosopher, a very old trope contrasting good and evil as Western Civilization versus Eastern. By inventing the game of chess, Xerxes tried to keep his king occupied, and thereby reduce the amount of evil he could do in the real world. I don't know whether it worked. Suffice it to say, modern scholars are not too keen on this legendary origin for the game. In the First Book, Duke August does a very scholarly job of parsing through the various legends for the origin of chess. And even he doubts this particular legend. But it's interesting to note this one lone example of the idea of kingship as a bad thing – a very bad thing – in this otherwise pro-monarchy book.

Up in the corners we have these elaborate prosceniums, or picture frames, if you will, that have the classic Selenus chess pieces depicted as finials. Classic fountain-shaped kings and queens, with three tiers for the king and two for the queen. The cloven bishops and the double-headed knights are different from what is shown elsewhere in the book, of course, but we're mainly interested in these fountain pieces. There are even a few pawns and things scattered about down below. And in a detail I've always found charming, not only are these cherubs holding the chess board, but they're even holding the *box* the pieces came in; the guy on the left has the box, and the guy on the right is holding the lid. And it's a round box, not rectangular, as we think of with most chess sets for the past 200 years. If this box were found on the market today, and you do find boxes like this from centuries past, most antique dealers would mistake it for a tobacco box.

But the main frontispiece of the book, the one that comes before these four identical frontispieces, is certainly the most famous image from the book (except for the larger image of the actual chess players that we have seen, of course.)

Around the title and description of the book, there are several vignettes. At the top left corner we can just make out a tiny Trojan horse, standing on a bridge, surrounded by a mob of even tinier soldiers. So right away Duke August is referring to the Trojan War, that most famous of all wars, and immediately classifying chess as a war game. In the top center we see soldiers on campaign, but they are in their tents, playing games. There are two tents, one smaller, with soldiers playing dice, and low games like that, and a larger tent, where Duke August himself is playing chess. The chess tent is higher and larger than the dice tent, implying that dice is for common soldiers, while chess is the more important game, more suitable for officers. And

officers, in those days, referred mainly to the nobility. The tents look just like the bed that we saw a few slides ago, in the famous image of the chess players. Here it is again. It's not just any bed, it's a soldier's campaign bed, because it looks just like a campaign tent, I said. Well, here are the campaign tents. And you will see these little echoes everywhere.

At the bottom we see Duke August presiding over a feast, probably the night before a battle. (Though in real life he was no military man.) Notice that the floor is a chess board. Or at least, it's chequered. Duke August is in the center at the back, gesturing to the egg of Columbus on his plate, referring to himself as a kind of Columbus. Christopher Columbus, over a century earlier, shut the mouths of his many detractors who were hectoring him about his planned voyage, by challenging them to stand an egg up on its end. The table is littered with the failed attempts of his rivals, but Duke August's egg stands up perfectly on its end. This is a short-hand way of saying that difficult knowledge becomes easy, if only you know, there's a trick to it. This was Columbus's way of saying, "Why should I tell you my secrets? You'd only steal them. Watch and learn how I plan to sail."

The fish on the table is possibly an ichthys, an esoteric Christian reference to the Eucharist. It's near enough to this round cake that we might take it for a reference to the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, feeding the multitudes with, in this case, knowledge.

The fellow on the right is just the know-it-all braggart who is too busy talking to listen and pay attention to what Columbus, or rather Duke August, has just demonstrated. Either that or he's in charge of planning their upcoming military campaign.

But I don't think anyone has yet commented about this fellow on the left, the servant or valet who is pouring wine from a pitcher, or ewer, into a cup. You'll find there are all sorts of watery, or liquid things to pay attention to, when you are looking at Selenus chess sets. The early ones, at any rate. Before these ideas were all forgotten. Pay attention to that cup and ewer. You'll see them again, later.

But on the left and right sides, we have the two most important vignettes, which give us a very different legendary origin for the game of chess, and that is the story of Palamedes. Palamedes is a fairly important figure who is historically given credit for the invention of dice and other gaming pieces. (NOT chess pieces, usually. But certainly dice.) He also invented part of the Greek alphabet. So he was a pretty smart guy. When the Trojan War started, people had to travel around Greece to collect soldiers, reminding them of their duty to King Menelaus, from whom Helen had been stolen by the Trojan named Paris. But Odysseus, clever Odysseus, didn't want to go to war, as most people don't. He feigned madness to try and evade the draft. He hitched a horse and an ox together, side-by-side, and began to plow his field, and you can see that here on the left. With two such different animals yoked to the plow, it careened and lurched from side to side. Wouldn't plow straight. That's why you're supposed to use a pair of the same animal. But Palamedes, who'd been sent to fetch Odysseus, could tell he was only faking. To prove it, Palamedes picked up Telemachus, the infant son of Odysseus, and put him down right in front of the plow, which forced Odysseus to stop the plow and admit his deception. He had to go to war, after all.

At some point during the war, Odysseus took his revenge on Palamedes. He forged letters from the Trojan king Priam to Palamedes, and planted them in the tent of Palamedes, along with gold and jewels that would look like a bribe. When these things were discovered by the Greeks, they took Palamedes for a spy, and stoned him to death without so much as a trial. That's the kind of thing that happens to you when someone like Odysseus is holding a grudge. And we can see Palamedes being stoned to death on the right.

But, there are things wrong with this drawing on the left. Deliberately wrong. Lots of things, in fact. Things that don't follow the story. Who are these two guys in the foreground? They're not doing anything. They're not part of the legend. They are dressed in Western headgear versus an Eastern turban, implying that the conversation they are having is in fact taking place over a great distance, not up close, face-to-face. The turbaned figure holds a staff, which just might be a reference to cryptography, eight years before Duke August published his book on the subject. The Scytale was the earliest sort of decoder ring known to history. It was just a rounded staff, or stick, like the one seen here. If you wanted to write a secret message, all you did was wrap a strip of cloth around your skytale, and write across the spirals. When you unwrap the strip, it just looks like a meaningless jumble of letters. No one can read it. You give that strip to the messenger, and off he goes. The intended recipient of the message is someone who just happens to have a wooden staff of the exact same thickness. All he does is wrap the cloth around his own skytale, and he can read your message as clear as daylight. This is why military leaders are so often depicted in old artworks as holding a short round staff.

And another thing, there are palm trees in this left-hand picture, three in the background and one darkened one in the foreground, sticking up next to what is probably a grave stele of some kind. Ithaca, the home of Odysseus, is not known for its palm trees. Olive trees, yes. But not palms. So this could be a coded reference to the idea that there may be something else going on here. The fact that you've got this ungainly shape in the foreground, darkened, and off to one side, is a perfect example of the ways that Renaissance maguses used to try and signal other smart people like themselves to look deeper, for a hidden meaning. Palm trees aren't Greek, and they're not Trojan. They are however, Egyptian. This is a coded reference to Thebes. (There are at least two different places called Thebes, one in Egypt and one in Greece, but there was a lot of confusion between the two in the early 17th century. And you could use one to suggest the other.)

Why Thebes? Well, between the skytale and the possible Theban reference, there are subtle hints that we are being invited to look deeper. And it turns out there is a second ancient myth which is vaguely, esoterically linked to the story of Palamedes, and that is the story of Cadmus, and the sowing of the dragon's teeth, and the founding of the city of Thebes. (The one in Greece.) And the pair of drawings we're looking at, well, the more you look at them, the more they seem to fit the story of Cadmus every bit as well as the story of Palamedes.

So, just like Palamedes invented *part* of the alphabet, Cadmus is also said to have invented *part* of the alphabet. This is how these two stories are linked. Did the two parts go together and form a complete alphabet? I don't know, it's complicated.

Cadmus sent some of his men to fetch water from the Ismenian spring (note the watery connection here), but the spring had a guardian, a water dragon, who killed them. Cadmus in turn, slew this dragon. The dragon was sacred to Ares, who would later punish him for eight years, but in the meantime, Athena, goddess of war, instructed him to plant the teeth, which he did. The teeth immediately sprang up into a race of soldiers, called the Spartoi, which literally means the "sown men".

It sounds like a cheap way to raise an army, but Cadmus was terrified and unnerved by this. So, he timidly threw a rock amongst the soldiers. "Who threw that rock?" someone cried, and all the soldiers immediately fell to fighting and killing each other. The battle raged until almost everyone was dead, except for the last five soldiers, who were exhausted and bloody. These five soldiers stopped fighting and eventually helped Cadmus build the Cadmeia, the citadel of Thebes (the equivalent of the Acropolis in Athens). And they went on to become the founding fathers of Thebes. The patriarchs of the five most noble families. It was quite significant that there were five people remaining alive, and there just happen to be five men still alive here, in the right-hand drawing, after they kill this last guy in the middle. (And is he kneeling or actually sprouting out of the ground like a dragon's tooth? The drawing is cleverly designed to be interpreted either way.) The men in the background are not merely discovering the planted evidence in Palamedes tent, they are clearly looting the tent, a reference to the spoils of war. (There are no spoils of war in chess, unless you're playing for a prize or wager of some sort.)

So as we look at this pair of drawings, we have to argue back and forth about a lot of things. Is this guy in the background on the left Odysseus, sowing his field with salt? (A modern addition to his story.) Or is it Cadmus, sowing the dragon's teeth? Is the baby on the ground Telemachus, who stopped his father's plow by being placed in front of it? Or, since this baby is actually behind the plow and looks like he's just been run over, is he more of a Cadmean soldier sprouting up from the ground? And most importantly, is the man being stoned to death on the right Palamedes? Or just the the last dragon's tooth to be slain? And are his murderers just ordinary Greek soldiers during the Trojan War? Or are they the founding fathers of Thebes?

So, those are the frontispieces. But why this obscure story about Palamedes exposing the feigned madness of Odysseus, and ending up getting stoned to death in revenge? What on earth does any that have to do with chess? Why didn't Selenus just make a vignette showing Palamedes *inventing* chess? Wouldn't that have been simpler, and a lot clearer? Isn't the story of Palamedes cleverness and his unjust death just a meaningless digression?

The answer is that there is most likely some sort of esoteric symbolism going on here.

In fact, this has *all* been quite a lengthy digression, about matters which seem to have little to do with chess. But keep in mind, we are still looking at the frontispiece of the most important chess book of the early 17th century. This frontispiece was made to order by the artist, for Duke August. Duke August would have been the one to tell the engraver what scenes to put into it. And what we think is relevant to chess may be very different from what Duke August thought was relevant to chess. At least you have some idea of what kinds of ideas were swirling around the game at that time. And if you've never thought about chess pieces as fountains before today, I'm guessing you *really* have never thought about chess pieces as *dragon's teeth* before today.

This is a dragon's skull; a real, non-mythical dragon – I mean, these things actually exist. What I don't know is whether any of these teeth have ever been made into chess pieces. And I really don't know whether if you planted them, they would grow up to become soldiers. I guess we might need some further research on this question.

But I've given it some careful thought, and the closest thing I can show you to a chess set made of dragon's teeth is this: A 19th century whaler's scrimshaw set. Each and every piece is carved from the tooth of a sperm whale, which may not be a dragon exactly, but in the early 17th century, was considered a sea monster, at least. So, this is the most *Cadmean* set I can show you, even though it's not exactly a Selenus design. This set is currently on display at the World Chess Hall of Fame in St. Louis, as part of the Donna Dodson exhibit. Here's a close-up.

And here is an image of a sperm whale as they were seen and understood in the 17th century. See what I mean? They were sea monsters. And this image came from Duke August's library.

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

But to return to these watery motifs we've been looking at, I just want to show you a few drops of water. Because I am going to argue that, even though they didn't have stop-motion photography, people in the 17th century knew perfectly well what a drop of water looked like in motion. And we can see that, sometimes, when we are looking at Selenus chess sets. Here are just a few examples, that mostly look like pawns. But, it's worth noting, that a drop of water can also look like a crown.

I have tried to give you a brand new vocabulary to use, when talking about Selenus sets. Let's try it out, shall we? Let's look at a few more examples of sets. Many early Selenus sets have watery or liquid themes that we have forgotten how to see. But I'm betting that after this talk, you won't be able to avoid noticing them.

This is a great little wooden set, last seen in the collection of Thomas Thomsen, that of course has perfect little fountains as kings and queens. But it also has these perfect little cups, or chalices, atop the bishops. Remember the servant with the ewer and chalice from the frontispiece? The one pouring the wine in the bottom vignette, the dining scene? Remember when I said you'd see that ewer and chalice again? Well, here's the chalice. Lots of Selenus sets have a bishop with some type of cup at the top, but it's usually cut or slashed open on the side, to some degree. I don't know why. Here is a comparatively rare example of a full cup bishop. You could actually drink out of these bishops, if you wanted to. But this set also has a row of tiny water-drop finials on the pawns, and I would say, also on the rooks. Even the knight's head is sitting in a rounded basin that looks like it could hold water. I've *never* seen that before. I think this might be a rather early set. Sometime in the 18th century, I would guess.

The second set is perhaps a bit later, perhaps early 19th century. Please try to ignore that gorgeous Merrifield set it's sharing the board with. We are talking about the smaller, earlier Selenus set in the middle of the board. Sorry, some of these pictures I took are not the best I could've done.

This set is a fairly typical fountain set, I would say, but the basins are lobed, so it might be better to call this a crown set. It has water-drop finials on all 16 pawns, but not many other watery motifs except one: The bishops look like ewers! I think so, at least. Here, I've cut one out of the pack so you can take a closer look. So finally, here is the ewer from the dining vignette. And you see quite a few Selenus sets with this ewer bishop. I would say this is not a rare feature. And there are water-drop finials on the kings, queens, bishops, rooks and all the pawns. So, you decide: Fountain set, or crown set?

The next set has the same issue: Fountain or crown set? There are water-drop finials on the kings and queens here, but it's a downward falling drop, not splashing upwards. Those round balls on the pawns, with even smaller round knobs on top, might be called water drop finials, but I don't think that term applies here. This set does not have an abundance of watery motifs, but I just liked it because it's such a fine and early-looking example. Those inverted balusters on the posts of most pieces give this set an architectural, Baroque look and feel. The Roman-maned knights and the bishops wearing Ajax-styled helmets are certainly not watery, but are classic examples of fine Germanic craftsmanship on sets like these. And it came from an auction house in the city of Plauen. It's also got pieces that don't vary too much in height, which along with the very fine carving strikes me as a clue that this set just might be early. It seems to me that the height variations were often exaggerated by the 19th century. I would like to hear other opinions on this point. So, how old is this set? It could be 19th century; it could be 17th century. I really have no idea. And by the way, don't assume any particular set here is ivory. This one looks like ivory, but is in fact, bone.

This next set is an absolutely classic, and very early, Selenus-fountain set. I think this set is early 18th century at the very latest. I think it's more likely this is a 17th century set. One of the earliest. And one of the best-looking, to my eye. I was absolutely thrilled the day Thomas finally sold it to me. It has classic royal fountains as the kings and queens. It has a cup-headed bishop, but as I mentioned earlier, the cups have been opened at the side. In this case, they've been almost completely shaved away, leaving just over half of what the cup would have been, if it were complete. I have no idea what this means. But I'd sure like to, because you see a lot of Selenus sets with this open-sided feature on the bishop. It means something Germanic, I'm guessing. But I have no idea. If anyone can tell me, please do. This set has water-drop finials on the kings, queens, rooks and pawns. But it's that downward-falling drop, not the up-splashing one. And that is an incredible, 17th century knight if ever I saw one. Not exactly wet, but certainly wild! The fluted bases are Baroque, and the entire set simply screams that it's from the 17th century, from the time of Duke August himself.

This next is an evocative picture I found online, of the chess set once owned by the great composer and violinist, Niccolò Paganini. It's in a museum in Genoa, naturally. Given the time Paganini lived, if this set was new when he acquired it, this is most likely an early 19th century set. But I can't help thinking it looks much earlier to me. It looks like a 17th century set. Or at least an 18th century set. Perhaps Paganini bought it used? At a flea market, perhaps? The kings are fountains, but with only two tiers, the bottom tier having been replaced by a kind of fat baluster, once again invoking the Baroque. The queen only has one tier. But the tiers have tiny sharp teeth on the king, and notches on the queen. I'm looking at the white side here. They look

more like crowns than fountain basins, to me. There are, however, tiny water-drop finials on 28 of the pieces, all except the 4 knights. They're difficult to see because the picture is a bit blurry, but they're there. Oh wait, make that 26. If you look at the black side's rook pawns, you can see that they're both replacements from other sets. Yep, no doubt about it. This was once a flea market set. Just might therefore be early.

And the last set we'll look at, before moving on to one more topic, is this one. This is a fantastic, very early, Italian set. Even earlier than Paganini's set, if that's possible. It almost looks Medieval. Again, I was thrilled down to my socks the day Thomas Thomsen finally sold me this set. Here it is displayed as part of a museum exhibit from four years ago which you may have heard of, called *Dare to Know: Chess in the Age of Reason*, which somehow took place at the World Chess Hall of Fame, at the height of the pandemic in 2020. I will always be grateful for the courage of the curators, Shannon Bailey and Emily Allred. I really don't think we got anybody sick or killed by not cancelling the show completely, as museums all over the world had to do with hundreds or thousands of shows, but I can't prove that. But we got very few visitors, for one of the Hall of Fame's shows, unfortunately. The opening got delayed for two months due to the closure of the Hall of Fame, and it ended up being only about a four-month show. But it was a successful show in other ways. And this particular set we touted as being possibly the earliest set in the entire show. A pre-Enlightenment set, in fact, depending on exactly when you think the Enlightenment began. Historians disagree.

As fantastic as this set is, it's not very watery, in my opinion. Is it even really a Selenus set, or a fountain set? Well sure, I think so. But it depends on how far we want to stretch this new vocabulary we've learned today. We could argue about whether these are water-drop finials, on all 28 pieces, barring the knights. Or are those really more onion-dome finials on the kings, queens, bishops and rooks? The pawns look more like acorns, a motif more German than Italian. Or maybe they're eggs, sitting in their egg cups. We have strayed very far from the language of watery fountains here. The tiers on the kings and queens don't look like either crowns or fountains, really. Yet they do resemble the tiers on the Paganini set. If one of these two sets is Italian, surely the other must be also. But to me the killer feature of this set is, these incredible, Medieval-looking, question-mark knights. I don't know why I think those knights look Medieval. It's not like I went and found evidence in Caxton, or King Alfonso's *Libro de los juegos*, or something like that. I just do. Maybe someday I'll find out for sure.

And those are the Selenus sets I wanted to show you.

A FOUNTAIN OF GAMES

Before we finish, let's briefly turn to this wonderful piece of stained glass, from the collection of Dr. Thomas Thomsen. You may recall, this object graced the cover of CCI's Berlin program in 2006.

There's a lot going on here, so let's break it down. The arms of Nürnberg are at the center, so that's where we are. Nürnberg, by the way, has a great fountain, the Schöner Brunnen, built in the late 14th century. Does it look like a chess piece? Yeah, sure, whatever. They don't always. But it IS a magnificent emblem of the Holy Roman Empire, with some 40 historical statues. I'm

not stopping to show them to you, but you've got figures that represent Philosophy, the Seven Liberal Arts, the Four Evangelists, the Four Church Fathers, the Seven Prince Electors, the Nine Worthies, Moses, and Seven Biblical Prophets. So this fountain perfectly represents the worldview of the Holy Roman Empire. Also, it does have these nifty brass rings attached, that you can spin for good luck.

But let's move on to the games. In four scenes around the outside of this roundel, we see three games, at least, that we immediately recognize; chess (Schach), backgammon (also called tables, or Wurfzabel or Puffspiel are words for closely-related games), and playing cards (Spielkarten). But what's this at the top? It's clearly also a game, but not one we've ever seen. The gameboard looks like … a Selenus chess piece, yes, but even more like a small fountain. The German word is *brunnen*, so it's clearly some sort of *brunnenspiel*, or fountain game. The couple is holding playing pieces, leaving no doubt that it's some type of game. A lot of people have tried to identify this game, but my theory is this: It's not a real game from 500 years ago. We probably won't ever find it. I could be wrong, but in my opinion, someone looking at this over 500 years ago would have immediately understood: They are playing a tiny fountain as if it were a game. But a fountain is not a game. Oh, I get it. It's only a *metaphorical* game, and so the entire roundel is to be understood as a *fountain of games*.

This type of thing is known as a rebus, or a pictogram, or a visual pun. Germans loved rebuses. I'm not sure the Germans didn't *invent* the rebus. Here's a German rebus from around 1620. Now you can see what I'm talking about. We've all seen this type of puzzle. I think we can prove that this top vignette is a metaphorical rebus by realizing that, if it were a real game, it was comparatively unknown, and they would not have put the most obscure game of all at the top of this roundel. Probably the best thing to call it is a visual pun.

So we have a fountain of games, and what's more, the three games, the three *real* games, are all *courtship* games. Every pair of players is a male-female couple, all roughly the same age, which is to say, young. It is well known that games such as chess were one of the few excuses eligible men and women could use to spend time alone together, and this is exactly what the roundel depicts. Courtship, or in modern terms, dating. I think this roundel is basically recommending the playing of games as dating advice. Each man wears a sword as a male symbol, and men actually did wear swords in those days, even for playing games with women, apparently. In two cases, the sword actually rests between the man's legs, making the sexual connotation unavoidable.

(In esoteric symbolism, masculinity has always been associated with the right-hand side of things, and femininity with the left, and that holds true in three out of four cases here, where the man is on the right and the woman on the left. I don't know if the artist was implying that there is something slightly effeminate about the game of chess, compared to the other games, or compared to actual battle.)

And by the way, notice that the fountain gameboard is echoed in the finial of the woman's chair, implying that *she* is the ultimate source. She may even represent Paidia, (Παιδία), one of the Charities or Graces, a minor Greek deity of play and amusement. She must at least be an allegorical figure of some sort, given that her gown is actually the simplest of any of the ladies,

despite her position at the top of the roundel. Note also that some of these people have comets in their hair. Both the fountain-playing man and the chess-playing woman have plumes in their hats that bear a striking resemblance to comets. The Great Comet of 1472 was depicted in the Nürnberg Chronicle of 1493, right around the time this stained glass panel was being made, in the same city. Apparently, there was quite a fashion for comets in late 15th century Nürnberg. And comets were thought of as akin to fireworks, and we all know what fireworks fountains are. By the time we get to the late 17th century, Louis XIV of France is combining water fountains, and fireworks, and music, to create grand spectacles at the Palace of Versailles. Well, we can see the seeds of that idea here. And in the 16th century Mannerist gardens of France and Italy, there was something known as *jeux d'eau*, or *giochi d'acqua*, essentially water games. So for the true games collector, this is something you need to put in your display case; water games was all about what kind of tricks you could make water do, like cascade up and down stairs, or flow through sculptures in elaborate ways, or squirt unsuspecting passers-by. Fountains as games, or *brunnnenspiel*, once again. And if it were possible to make water act like chess pieces and actually play a game, I'm sure some fountain designer or engineer somewhere has at least dreamed of it.

There is clearly a social hierarchy of games shown here, with chess and backgammon depicted as higher-class, and playing cards as low. Not only is their clothing less rich, but these card players are literally sitting on the ground, while most of the other players get to sit at tables. (The chess players stand, and their playing surface is not just a table, but a pedestal. The reason for their standing may be that chess is a game which teaches military readiness.) Not only are the card players sitting on the ground, but they're actually sitting on a low place, a hollow or depression in the ground, whereas the other players are on hills or at least level ground.

Also we are reminded of the Three Estates print: Those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. Cards as the lowest of games is obviously the proper amusement for those who work, but we could argue which game should belong to the knightly class and which to the clergy. It seems obvious that chess should belong to the knightly class, but that leaves us with backgammon as the game of the clergy, and backgammon (along with all dice games in general, was usually more associated with taverns than with monasteries).

In keeping with the courtship theme, one of the earliest known and most popular card games happens to be a German game called Mariage, or Mariage-Spiel. The earliest rules we have date only from 1715, but the game may go back much earlier than that, of course. The goal of Mariage is to pair kings and queens, or in the case of most German decks of that time, a king with an ober, or high official. Or an ober with an unter, or an ace with a ten, something like that. German card decks only rarely had queens.

So overall, it may be that there is a very rough joke being told here about dating and courtship: If you play too many games with women, you will eventually be brought to a very low condition known as *Mariage*.

And that I think, is a comprehensive and completely original theory which helps us to finally understand the mysteries of this beautiful stained glass roundel. And it ties right into our theme.

CONCLUSION – THE ENLIGHTENMENT, THE *ENCYCLOPÉDIE*, AND THE FORGETTING OF THE OLD WAYS

We know that all this analysis, all these ideas from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and what historians call the Early Modern Period, were completely forgotten by the mid-18th century, and instead of fountains, wood and ivory turners simply saw challenging shapes to create on the lathe. Some of these later sets are so slender and fragile they will break if you so much as look at them. That's just turners showing off their skills. I don't know the ages, but I would guess these three sets are all somewhere in the 19th century.

But let's back up a bit, timewise. Here is the famous *Encyclopédie* set, arguably the most famous set of the entire 18th century; the set which represents the French Enlightenment itself. It's still basically a fountain set, circa 1771. (Even though these down-sloping tiers wouldn't exactly hold water anymore.) The irony of this old royalist idea (a fountain set) appearing in the most anti-royalist document to appear up to this time, Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, cannot be missed. As we learned back in 2020, with *Dare to Know*, the *Encyclopédie* WAS the French Enlightenment. It was the document which, more than any other, introduced the modern idea that people can govern themselves, without the need for kings or popes. The *Encyclopédie* was explosive in its impact, and directly helped to cause the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and numerous other revolutions around the world. In the USA, it heavily influenced both our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. Many of our Founding Fathers were subscribers, and they took a lot of their ideas directly from the *Encyclopédie*. *The Encyclopédie* is where modern democracies come from. After the French Revolution, the Three Estates became known as the *Ancien Régime*, or the Old Rule, and that phrase was always derogatory. It was like saying, you know, those old crappy people who *used to be* in charge. God, how we hate them! We hate them so much, we cut off all their heads!

So what is this old pro-royalist chess set doing depicted in the *Encyclopédie*? I would argue that 1771 marks the point when we can officially say that all these old ideas about crowns and fountains as appropriate shapes for chess kings and queens were completely forgotten by most people. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm sure it was a gradual process of forgetting, one that happened slowly over time, more completely with some people and places than others. But as France was approaching the eve of revolution, the famous 1771 drawing in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* makes for a convenient reference point in the history of ideas. After that, wood and ivory turners still made Selenus sets, and as we just saw, they competed to make the most fanciful and fragile sets they possibly could. But they didn't *mean* anything anymore.

Thank you, and good night.