CHESS AS A METAPHOR FOR MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

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One of the most important contributions of A. Ia. Gurevich’s creative legacy is his work on the subjective aspects of medieval social culture. In the early 1960s, while studying the social structure of the early Germans, Gurevich examined how social ties were reflected in barbarian consciousness as he explored the system of representation by which members of society recognized themselves. Henceforth, Gurevich was deeply interested in such themes as the symbolic representation of medieval social structure, idealized views of medieval people on modes of social stratification, and medieval models of social structure. Much of Gurevich’s research concentrated on aspects of medieval self-consciousness and popular culture; it also included essays on the German preacher Berthold of Regensburg, as well as original research on the “tri-partite model of feudalism.” In the present article, dedicated to the memory of this great medievalist, we will

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attempt to examine the interaction between imagination and social reality as well as to explain changes in medieval popular conceptions regarding social structure occurring during the difficult period of “interregnum” in 13th century Germany.

A miniature in a 13th century treatise found in the collections of the British Museum depicts Death playing chess with a human being. Chess became one of the most beloved allegories of the Middle Ages, which imagined the whole world as a chess board on which an all-powerful God moves the kings and pawns, enabling them to win or lose. Chess representations became quite common beginning in the mid-13th century when, in images of chess-playing, we see a kind of condensed universal formula for life. An essay ascribed to Pope Innocent III asserts, “The world is like a chess board, one square in white, and the other black. Just as life and death, fortune and misfortune replace one another.” In this treatise, the author attempts to connect the chess pieces to specific social groups, designating the pieces as *familia*, which, at least during the period of the game, were removed from of the *sacculo materno* (literally, the mother’s purse) in order to capture a particular place. When the game of life ends, Death arrives, piles up all the pieces, flings them into an ossuary, or the *sacculus maternus*, as in our treatise, and once again all the pieces find themselves in the same position, equal before death.

It was no accident that medieval preachers used chess representation in their sermons. Chess, as a game, possesses a wealth of semiotic meanings. A player sitting before a chess board moves his men in certain ways similar to battle; the chess match mimics the game of life, the player achieves victory and suffers defeat, concludes alliances and enters into conflicts, and then departs forever. M. M. Bakhtin

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7 “Mundus iste totus quoddam scaccarium est, cuius unus punctus albus est, alius vero niger, propter duplicem statum vite et mortis, gratie et culpe.” In some manuscripts this passage is attributed to Innocent III’s treatise, “Quaedam moralitas de scaccario.” However, other opinions attribute the authorship of these lines to the Franciscan monk John of Wales in his treatise “Cummuniloquium.” The full text of the passage and the corresponding debates on its provenance can be found in the following: H.J.R. Murray, *A History of Chess* (Oxford, 1913), 530-534, 559-561; L. Thorndyke, “All the World’s a Chess-Board,” *Speculum* 6 (1931), 219-224.