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5 Gambits

First, what *is* a gambit? In the broadest terms, it's the sacrifice of a pawn or two in the opening. Sometimes a piece sacrifice is also called a 'Gambit' (e.g., the Cochrane Gambit in the Petroff: 1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘f6 3 ♗xe5 d6 4 ♗xf7), but I think that it's most accurate to restrict the term to pawn sacrifices, and to ones that arise in the early stages of the opening. Of course, there's a hazy line here between 'early stages' and later ones. In the Marshall Attack of the Ruy Lopez, for example, Black doesn't give up a pawn until his 8th move. Some might consider that more of a pawn sacrifice than a gambit. The distinction isn't important in that case; however, if you look at a long list of named gambits, you'll see that they almost all sacrifice a pawn within the first five moves, and very often on the second or third move.

Up to this point in the series, we haven't dealt with a great many gambits. To some extent, that's because they tend to be lacking in the standard themes that I've emphasized throughout. For example, we usually won't see much similarity in pawn-structures between a particular gambit opening and the more conventional openings that we are used to. Nevertheless, when taken as a set, gambits share fundamental characteristics. We shall see, for instance, that almost every gambit emphasizes free piece-play. In addition, most gambits are designed to control the centre, whether by the influence of pieces or by a superior pawn presence. In gambits which depend upon early attacks, that central advantage is often cashed in for tactical gains; in positional gambits, it tends to persist for a while. Oddly enough, there are two fundamentally opposed techniques by which a gambiteer tries to take charge of the middle of the board. In some gambits, a flank pawn is sacrificed for the opponent's central pawn, thus establishing a central majority. In others, paradoxically, the gambiteer *sacrifices* his centre pawns for the sake of rapid piece development, and then uses those pieces to control the central

squares. Both approaches are perfectly legitimate; I'll talk further about this distinction below.

What about the person on the other side of the board, who is charged with defending against a gambit? What techniques are available to him? Broadly speaking, there are two basic approaches. Some players are happy to grab a pawn or two; they find that their extra material makes up for some temporary discomfort, and fully expect the pressure to abate after they play some accurate defensive moves. Other players, however, don't want the bother of defending against an attack, or of suffering under positional constraints, so they'll decline many or all gambits. Similarly, some will accept the gambit pawn(s), but then return them soon thereafter, in order to catch up in development or improve the central situation. In fact, there are gambits that have disappeared from ordinary practice because declining or returning the material proves so effective. In any case, all three of these methods of defence are justified in the appropriate situations.

How important are gambits? Because of their rarity at the highest levels, it's easy to underestimate their influence and utility. For each gambit mentioned in this chapter there corresponds one or more books, and/or sections of books, devoted to its investigation, along with articles and masses of master games. With a few exceptions, in fact, I can't possibly present a significant percentage of the theoretical details behind these openings because there is so much material. But I shall try to outline the most important variations and subvariations, along with what I think are the most critical defences. More importantly, I want to describe the basic ideas behind selected gambits, and point out their positive and negative qualities. It's true that some gambits are of dubious or marginal worth if the opponent knows how to defend precisely. But others are perfectly sound, and your chess education will be seriously lacking

without exposure to this unique opening form. In that context, the words of Grandmaster Alex Yermolinsky are enlightening:

“From the early days of my development as a chess-player I hated gambit play ... I just couldn’t accept this as chess ... All classic gambits seemed to lead to the same scenario: White (in most cases, but sometimes it can be Black – anyway, a gambiteer) has to rush things up, has to try to transform his short-lived initiative into an attack against the black king. If it works out, he wins a beautiful game ... if not – I don’t know, those games never seem to get published – maybe he loses?”

“Looking back I realize now, things were not so simple. My stubborn refusal to accept gambit play as an important part of chess strategy inevitably caused me to miss something. I missed a chance to learn how to play wide open positions, when your pieces seem to be hanging in the air, and there are maybe 2-3 moves given to you to create something, before they get exchanged or driven back. The hard work I had to put up to overcome this case of arrested development ... could have been easily avoided if I had given myself a little practice in my younger days.”

In what follows, I’ve looked at a few gambits in more detail than they would seem to merit from their frequency of use. That’s because, in contrast with positional openings, the precise move chosen in a gambit is often the difference between life and death. Interestingly, it’s sometimes easier to discover original ways of playing gambit openings, and defending against them, than it is to come up with new ideas in openings which are, at least superficially, under fewer constraints. I think that’s mainly because gambits haven’t undergone as thorough a reappraisal with the assistance of computers as have a number of the more mainstream openings. It turns out that there are numerous flaws in the analysis which has been handed down from author to author over the years, which is all the more reason to take an interest in this area.

Primitive Gambits

One large group of gambits consists of straightforward attacking enterprises. Here structural

issues and long-term gains are of considerably less concern than the immediate success of direct assault. Most of the time, this means that the gambiteer sacrifices a centre pawn for rapid development and open lines. I don’t use the word ‘primitive’ in a derogatory sense; after all, direct attack can be very effective. Let’s see some examples, starting with those classic gambits that Yermolinsky was referring to:

Danish and Göring Gambits

Many of the oldest gambits begin with 1 e4 e5, which is logical in view of the fact that 1 e4 is already the fastest developing move, and 1...e5 one of the most committal replies. The Danish Gambit is a fascinating attempt to jump all over Black from the outset, and you can certainly use it to play for a win, especially against opponents within your own rating range or somewhat higher. It’s not the kind of opening to play casually, however; without a fair amount of study, there a risk that you either won’t recover your material or that there will be an unfavourable simplification. Fortunately, the positional and tactical ideas are great fun to go over, so you’ll find yourself easily motivated.

Linden – Maczuski

Paris 1863

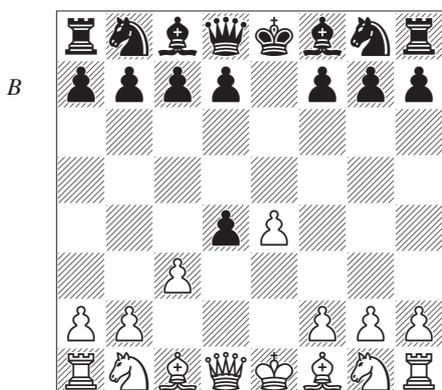
1 e4 e5 2 d4

This move-order doesn’t necessarily indicate that White wants to play a Danish Gambit, but it avoids the need to study openings beginning with 2 ♘f3 like 2...d6 and 2...♘f6. For example, the Göring Gambit begins 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 exd4 4 c3 dxc3 5 ♘xc3, yet 2 d4 exd4 3 c3 dxc3 4 ♘xc3 will often come to the same thing. See the note to 4 ♗c4 below.

2...exd4 3 c3 (D)

With this move White makes it a gambit. 3 ♘f3 ♘c6 (other moves could be investigated) 4 ♘xd4 is a Scotch Game where White has bypassed the main-line Petroff. 3 ♙xd4 (the Centre Game), while by no means bad, loses time after 3...♘c6. For the consequences, I’ll refer you to the standard theoretical sources.

After 3 c3, White plans to sacrifice pawns in return for open lines and a direct attack on Black’s king. Before getting into the details in

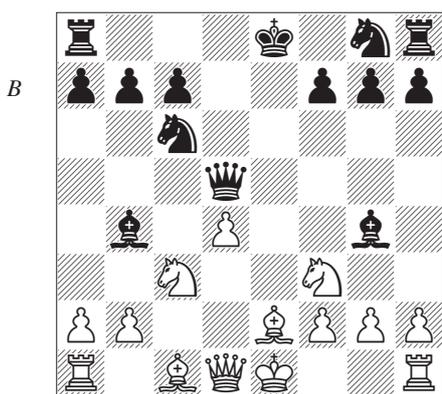


the next few notes, it's worth playing over the main game itself in order to get a feel for this fundamental idea.

3...dxc3

Most gambits can be declined, and at this juncture Black has several instructive ways to do so; for example:

a) 3...d5 4 exd5 ♖xd5 5 cxd4 ♗c6 6 ♗f3 (perhaps the best way to keep the queens on is 6 ♙e3, which Nigel Davies argues is more likely to produce complications; for example, an original piece placement arises after 6...♗f6 7 ♗c3 ♙b4 8 ♗e2!?, intending a3; then the most critical line is 8...♙g4!? 9 h3!?, introducing another pawn sacrifice: 9...♙xe2 10 ♙xe2 ♖xg2 11 ♙f3 ♖g6 12 ♖b3 followed by 0-0-0, as suggested by Voigt and Müller) 6...♙g4 7 ♗c3 ♙b4 8 ♙e2 (D).



This is a position that can arise from the Göring Gambit via 2 ♗f3 ♗c6 3 d4 exd4 4 c3 d5 5 exd5 ♖xd5 6 cxd4 ♙b4+ 7 ♗c3 ♙g4 8 ♙e2. Oddly enough, it can also come up in the

Chigorin Defence to the Queen's Gambit Declined! That is, from 1 d4 d5 2 c4 ♗c6 3 ♗f3 ♙g4 4 e3 e5 5 cxd5 ♖xd5 6 ♗c3 ♙b4 7 ♙e2 exd4 8 exd4.

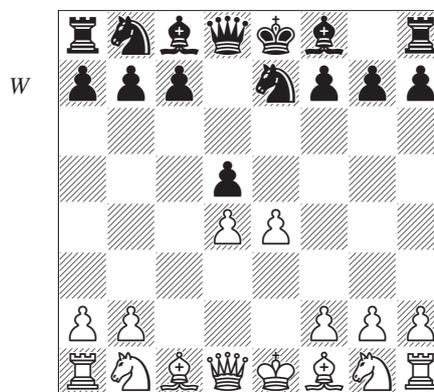
At any rate, the best-known solution was played by Capablanca: 8...♙xf3 9 ♙xf3 ♖c4, when White can't castle and c3 hangs, so he needs to commit:

a1) 10 ♖b3 ♖xb3 and now 11 ♙xc6+ bxc6 12 axb3 transposes to the 10 ♙xc6+ bxc6 11 ♖b3 line, while 11 axb3 ♗e7 has proven solid for Black in many games.

a2) Marshall-Capablanca, Lake Hopatcong 1926 went 10 ♙e3!? ♙xc3+ (Black can also play 10...0-0-0, when 11 ♖b3 is pretty much forced anyway) 11 bxc3 ♖xc3+ 12 ♙f1 ♖c4+ 13 ♙g1 ♗e7 14 ♖c1 ♖xa2 15 ♖a1 ♖c4 16 ♖c1 1/2-1/2.

a3) 10 ♙xc6+ bxc6 11 ♖e2+ (11 ♖b3 ♖xb3 12 axb3 ♗e7 is thought to be equal; maybe all the weak pawns even out! But either side can press on with ambitions of winning) 11...♖xe2+ 12 ♙xe2 ♗e7 13 ♙e3 ♗f5 14 ♖hd1 0-0-0 15 ♖d3 ♖he8 16 ♖ad1 with balanced play, Velimirović-Ziatdinov, Kusadasi 1990. It's hard for either side to make real progress. Nevertheless, several positions along the way can be played for a win with either colour.

b) 3...♗e7 isn't played much, because Black seems to be cutting off his own pieces (the queen and f8-bishop). However, he wants to continue ...d5 and gain access to key light squares after White advances the e-pawn. A knight on the more natural square f6 would be subject to tempo-gaining e5 attacks. After 4 cxd4 d5 (D), White has to decide what to do about his e-pawn.



One example out of many is 5 e5 (5 exd5 $\text{d}5$ leaves Black with the ideal blockade of White's isolated queen's pawn, and faster development to boot; 5 $\text{c}3$ dxe4 6 $\text{c}4$!? has been suggested, when 6... $\text{f}5$! 7 $\text{ge}2$ $\text{d}6$ looks like a good reply) 5... $\text{f}5$ (a well-posted knight; Black can also play 5...c5 6 $\text{f}3$ $\text{ec}6$ with pressure on White's centre) 6 $\text{c}3$ $\text{e}7$!? (6... $\text{b}4$ is more aggressive, with the idea of targeting White's d-pawn in a line like 7 $\text{f}3$ 0-0 8 $\text{e}2$ $\text{c}6$ 9 a3 $\text{a}5$ 10 0-0 $\text{b}6$ 11 $\text{e}3$ $\text{e}6$ and ...f6, with chances for both sides) 7 $\text{f}3$ 0-0 8 $\text{d}3$ $\text{c}6$ 9 $\text{e}2$ (here 9 $\text{c}2$! has kingside attacking designs) 9...f6 10 a3? (White tries to stop ... $\text{b}4$, but this is much too slow; 10 0-0 is correct) 10...fxe5 11 dxe5 $\text{h}4$! (a standard idea, eliminating the defender) 12 $\text{hx}4$ $\text{hx}4$ and White can't defend both his e-pawn and f-pawn in view of 13 $\text{f}4$ (13 g3 $\text{xe}5$ 14 $\text{gx}4$?? $\text{f}3$ + 15 $\text{f}1$ $\text{h}3$!) 13... $\text{xe}5$! 14 $\text{xe}5$ $\text{xf}2$ + 15 $\text{d}2$ $\text{g}5$ + 16 $\text{f}4$ $\text{xf}4$ 17 $\text{xf}4$ $\text{xf}4$ + 18 $\text{c}2$ $\text{g}4$ 19 $\text{f}1$ c5 with an overwhelming attack, Voigt-Hector, Hamburg 2000. Both sides have numerous ways to generate play in this line. Compare 2 $\text{f}3$ $\text{c}6$ 3 d4 exd4 4 c3 $\text{ge}7$ in the next game.

c) 3...d3 removes some of the dynamism from the position, but it's a bit passive and there's a whole game ahead after 4 $\text{xd}3$ $\text{c}6$ (4...d5 5 $\text{e}2$ dxe4 6 $\text{xe}4$ $\text{e}7$ 7 $\text{f}3$ $\text{f}6$ 8 $\text{c}2$ 0-0 9 0-0) 5 $\text{f}3$ d6 6 0-0 (or 6 $\text{c}4$!? $\text{f}6$ 7 0-0), when White has better central control.

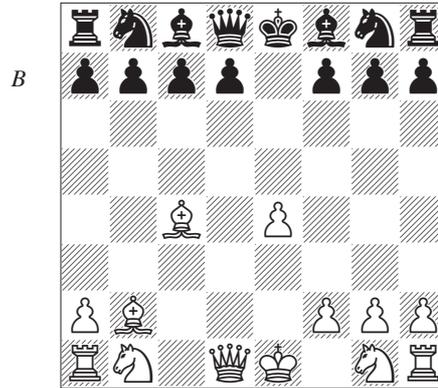
d) I should mention that 3... $\text{f}6$ 4 e5 $\text{e}4$ is very awkward for Black because of 5 $\text{e}2$!. Compare the gambit in the next game, in which White has the same configuration but has committed to $\text{f}3$, meaning that the move $\text{f}3$ isn't available.

4 $\text{c}4$

White gives up a second pawn for space and development. 4 $\text{xc}3$ is the important move-order mentioned above in the note to 2 d4, played by Alekhine and recommended by Nigel Davies. Then after 4... $\text{c}6$, 5 $\text{f}3$ is a Göring Gambit, of which the next game is an example. But White also has 5 $\text{c}4$ and can retain more flexibility by not committing his king's knight. After 4 $\text{xc}3$, Black won't want to continue 4... $\text{f}6$?! 5 e5! $\text{e}7$ 6 $\text{e}2$. Note also that after 4... $\text{b}4$ 5 $\text{c}4$ $\text{c}6$, 6 $\text{f}3$ is the main line of the Göring Gambit (see the next game), but 6

$\text{e}2$!? is a sensible alternative, protecting c3 and leaving White's f-pawn able to advance at a later time.

4... $\text{xb}2$ 5 $\text{xb}2$ (D)



5... $\text{b}4$ +

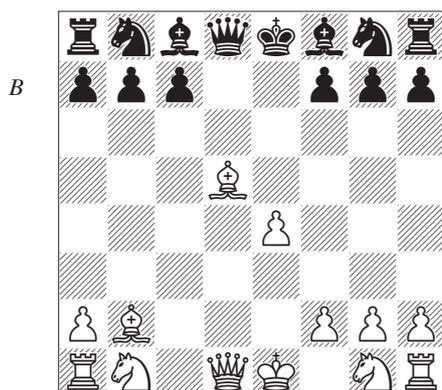
It is considered that the Danish is theoretically sound, and there's no way for Black to guarantee himself the better game. But there are a number of respectable alternatives that give satisfactory play, and some whose assessments are not established. Here is a selection:

a) A miserly solution that used to be talked about in older books is 5...c6 6 $\text{c}3$ d6 7 $\text{f}3$ $\text{d}7$!, with the idea of meeting 8 0-0 with 8... $\text{c}5$. I won't go into the details, but by means of ... $\text{e}6$, Black hopes to snuff out White's attack, while he is covering key squares such as d5 and b3. It's difficult to believe that Black can play so slowly, but the line illustrates how well pawns that cover central squares can serve as defenders; in that respect, you might compare the Sicilian Defence. The other move that goes with this sequence is 8... $\text{b}6$, to gain time on White's bishop, intending 9 $\text{b}3$ $\text{e}6$. Of course, White still has a dangerous attack, and also has many options on moves 6, 7 and 8; for example, he can try to combine $\text{c}3$ and $\text{e}2$ /c2 with 0-0-0, while $\text{d}5$ can be a sacrificial theme. Strange to say, although 5...c6 and 6...d6 used to be a standard recommendation, no modern source that I've seen mentions it.

b) 5...d6 can lead to all sorts of positions and transpositions. Since 6... $\text{e}6$ is a threat to break the attack, White often plays 6 $\text{b}3$ $\text{d}7$ (6... $\text{h}6$ is complex) 7 $\text{c}3$, intending 7... $\text{c}6$ 8 $\text{d}5$, and if 8... $\text{a}5$, then 9 $\text{g}3$!. This may

not be decisive, but it retains a strong attack for the two pawns.

c) 5...d5 is a very well-known idea. Black can either give back both pawns and seek equality, or try to hold on to one of them. Play continues 6 exd5 (D) (6 exd5 blocks off White's attacking bishop, allowing 6... f6 7 c3 d6 with a solid extra pawn).



There is extensive theory here, and I'll try to present just enough for you to work with:

c1) 6... f6 is tricky: 7 xf7+! ? (this seemingly devastating move only wins a pawn, but re-establishes a material balance; 7 $\text{c3!?$ xd5 8 xd5 is an ambitious way for White to retain more chances – then 8... d7! has the idea ...c6 and avoids the ancient trap 8...c6? 9 f6+! gxf6 10 xd8+ xd8 11 xf6+) 7... xf7 8 xd8 b4+ (Black's point) 9 d2 xd2+ 10 xd2 . This simplified position was once regarded as favourable for Black because of his queenside majority, but it is probably about equal (after all, White has a kingside majority!). Play can continue 10... e8 11 gf3 (or 11 xf6?! gxf6 12 gf3 a6 13 0-0 b6! intending ... b7 , ... ad8 and ... c5 ; 11 f3 is a consolidating option, although eventually White would like to get his kingside majority moving with f4) 11... c6 12 0-0 g4 13 fe1 ad8 14 h3 e6 with a balanced and unresolved position.

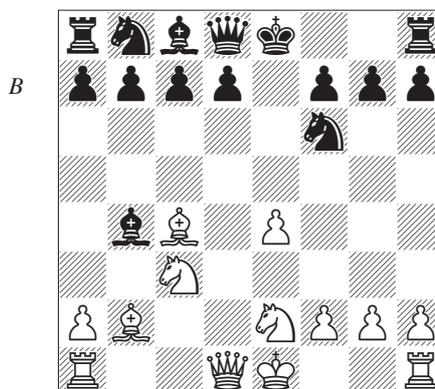
c2) 6... b4+ and now:

c21) 7 f1?! is well answered by 7... f6! , with the idea 8 a4+? c6 9 xc6+ bxc6 10 xb4?? (but after 10 e5 d3+ 11 e2 a6 12 xc6+ d7 Black wins at least a piece) 10... d1+ 11 e1 a6+ 12 e2 xe2+ 13 g1 xe1# .

c22) 7 c3 xc3+ 8 xc3 f6 , and once White has lost his attacking piece on d5, he may still have enough compensation for the pawn, but no more than that. His best line seems to be 9 f3 xd5 10 exd5 0-0 11 e2 , when in practice, the opposite-coloured bishops – favouring the attacker – have combined with prospects of g3-h5 or f4-h5 to produce balanced results.

c23) 7 d2 (this maintains a threat on g7) 7... xd2+ (after 7... e7 , White might play 8 xf7+ xf7 9 b3+ d5! 10 0-0! e7 11 exd5 and Black's king is exposed; 7... $\text{f8!?$ is a curious alternative, protecting g7 and dodging a4+ ; the Danish Gambit is by no means worked out) 8 xd2 f6 9 g5 (9 $\text{c3!?$ is an alternative: 9...c6 10 b3 0-0 11 f3 $\text{e6!?$ and here White might try 12 0-0 e7 13 $\text{d4!?$) 9...0-0 10 0-0 e7 11 e2 with some attacking prospects. Black has a material plus, however, and 'dynamically equal' seems a fair verdict.

6 c3 f6 7 e2 (D)



White develops calmly. Black has to be careful that e5 doesn't create big trouble, and simply b3 with 0-0-0 is also in the air.

7... xe4?

This is really too greedy. Black should try to develop something by 7... c6 or 7...0-0, or break in the centre with 7...d5. I've chosen this game to illustrate the most elementary gambit situation, in which rapid development and open lines triumph over material advantage.

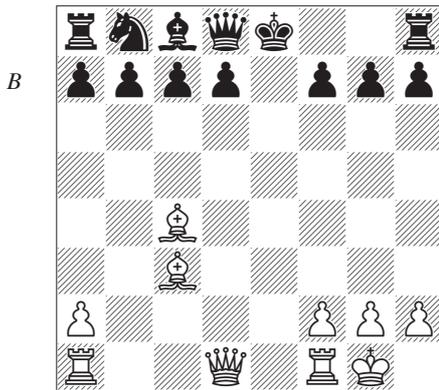
8 0-0!

Now every white piece is out, and xe4 is a threat, along with d5 .

8...♖xc3 9 ♗xc3 ♕xc3?!

This fails, but again, 9...0-0 allows 10 ♗d5!, hitting the b4-bishop and threatening ♖g4. Then Black can try to hold on by 10...♗h4, but this quickly becomes depressing; e.g., 11 ♖c2 ♕a5 12 ♖ad1 ♗c6 13 ♖d3 d6 14 ♖g3 ♗e5 15 f4 ♗g6 16 ♗f6+! with the idea 16...gxf6 17 ♖xg6+ hxg6 18 ♖xg6+ ♖h8 19 ♕xf6+.

10 ♕xc3 (D)



A pair of ideal bishops.

10...♗g5

What else? 10...0-0 loses to the fine manoeuvre 11 ♖g4 g6 12 ♖d4, forcing mate! A classic coordination of the bishop-pair: note the pin on the f-pawn. And 10...d5 loses for multiple reasons, one being 11 ♖e1+ ♕e6 12 ♕xd5 with the idea 12...♗c6 13 ♖xe6+! fxe6 14 ♖h5+ ♖d7 15 ♕xe6+! ♖xe6 16 ♖g4+ and the king can't escape.

11 ♖e1+ ♖d8

Or 11...♖f8 12 ♕b4+ d6 (12...c5 13 ♖d6+) 13 ♕xd6+.

12 f4!? ♖xf4

12...♖c5+ 13 ♕d4 ♖xc4 14 ♕xg7 is hopeless for Black.

13 ♕xg7 ♖g8

This allows White to play a queen pseudo-sacrifice. 13...♖e8 also loses, to 14 ♖xe8+ ♖xe8 15 ♖e2+ ♖d8 16 ♖e1 c6 17 ♖e7+ ♖c7 18 ♕e5+.

14 ♖g4! ♖d6

14...♖xg4 15 ♕f6#.

15 ♕f6+ 1-0

Chess in 1863! You can see the appeal of a gambit that is based upon development and line-clearance. In the 19th century, Black tended

to be a little more cooperative in allowing such attacks, but the Danish Gambit can still be fun to play today. Let's turn to its cousin, the Göring Gambit. I'm going to switch to heavier analytical mode, because it's so important to know precise moves if you're going to enter into either side of this opening.

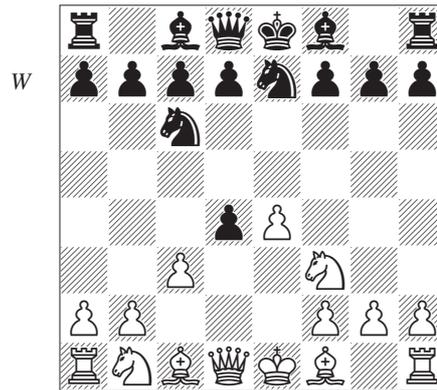
Ciocaltea – Karaklajić

Smederevska Palanka 1971

1 e4 e5 2 ♗f3 ♗c6 3 d4 exd4 4 c3 dxc3

Black may also decline the pawn. In the last game, we saw (by transposition) 4...d5 5 exd5 ♖xd5 6 cxd4 ♕g4 7 ♕e2 ♕b4+ 8 ♗c3. Here are two other ways:

a) 4...♗ge7 (D) closely resembles 3...♗e7 versus the Danish, and the ideas are the same.



I think that Black can get an objectively equal game by controlling the light squares, but both sides will be able to create a fighting imbalance:

a1) 5 ♗xd4!? ♗xd4! 6 cxd4 d5 7 e5 ♗f5 (trying to get ...c5 in) 8 ♗c3 c6! presents White with the problem of what to do about the threat of 9...♖b6, winning a pawn. There might follow 9 ♕e3 ♗xe3 10 fxe3 ♖h4+ 11 g3 ♖h6 12 ♖d2 ♕e7 with equality.

a2) 5 ♕c4 d5 6 exd5 ♗xd5 is the most tactical line. White has to be careful not to overextend: 7 0-0 (7 ♖b3 ♗a5! 8 ♖a4+, and Black can retreat with 8...♗c6, threatening ...♗b6, or try 8...c6!? 9 ♕xd5 ♖xd5 10 0-0 ♗c4) 7...♕e7 (or 7...♕g4!? 8 ♖b3 ♕xf3 9 gxf3! ♗a5 10 ♖a4+, when Black should play 10...♗c6!, when in view of ...♗b6, White will probably repeat