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Introduction

This book deals with the study of the Sicilian Defence; however, the theoretical development has been so significant in recent years, that trying to cover all the variations of such a popular defence is somehow a utopian dream. Therefore, this book is content to offer a repertoire for White based on 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 followed by 3.d4.

The Sicilian is the most widely used defence. According to different databases and different periods, percentages may vary, but will be around 20%; if we take into account only those games starting with 1.e4, the percentage of Sicilians may reach 40%. Furthermore, those figures have been increasing in recent years.

Therefore, my proposal is a repertoire based on the Open Variation, that starting with 2.♘f3 and virtually always followed by 3.d4. I think it only logical to devote our best studying efforts to a position that will probably arise quite frequently in our games, and to choose secondary lines against defences we won't face so often. Vast practical experience also indicates that, against the Sicilian, the prospects of an advantage with other moves than 2.♘f3 are not great. Flexibility and the surprise factor is one thing, and basing our repertoire on harmless lines is a quite different one.

My general philosophy for developing an opening repertoire is based on the following approach: against main lines, play main lines; against secondary lines, play secondary lines; against unsound lines, play the refutation. Some amateur

players have asked me why, and I will try to state my case now:

- Main lines are usually the best and the most frequent in practice. Being the most frequent, it is worth being well prepared against them; being the best, we are not likely to find a way to an edge in secondary lines.

- We won't face secondary lines so often therefore it is less profitable to spend a long time on them in our preparation. A further point is that we would run the risk of reaching a good position, but one in which our opponent has far clearer ideas. A secondary defence is much more likely to offer secondary lines with good prospects for an edge.

- Finally, it is worth searching and finding a refutation against a weak system, since it will work forever. Besides, these defences will usually take us by surprise and we need a convincing preparation against them.

Of course, this is a basic approach and must be adapted to each particular case. Quite frequently, main lines may become secondary and vice versa; even some unsound lines may be rehabilitated, though this is less likely to happen. A flexible approach is always necessary.

Our playing style must have its influence as well when it comes to building our repertoire. However, if our style does not involve an open game against the Sicilian, then we should consider whether 1.e4 is right as our first move after all.

Although this book recommends main lines, from the point of view of the cur-

rent state of chess theory, the repertoire we present also tries to fulfil the principles of economy and coherence, by choosing lines that can transpose into one another, whenever possible, or that share strategic ideas.

Thus, there is one set-up which constitutes the core of this repertoire. It can be used (obviously, with important adjustments) against a wide range of variations (Najdorf, Scheveningen, Classical, Taimanov, Dragon, Kupreichik and some secondary lines). This set-up is based on the moves $f2-f3$, $\text{♕}e3$, $\text{♖}d2$ and $0-0-0$.

I have always considered castling on the queenside in the open Sicilian to be rather logical: the rook immediately occupies the only open file (for White).

The position of the f-pawn allows some discussion. For many years, the general trend and almost a sacred rule was the idea that White cannot develop any active play against the Sicilian without the move $f2-f4$. Although well founded upon a wide experience, I have the feeling that this theory has been indiscriminately applied, thus leading White into trouble in several variations. The reason is that it fuels Black's counterplay along the a8-h1 diagonal, with pressure on e4 and, from that weak point, on White's position as a whole.

In the $f2-f3$ set-up, the point e4 has a solid defence. There is no need for White to worry about this square, and his plan is clear-cut and easy to carry out. This might be, if not a theoretical, at least a practical reason why White's results with this set-up have generally been so remarkable. Fischer's comment that the Sicilian Dragon was a weak defence because an amateur as White could easily defeat a Grandmaster with

the Rauzer Attack, can be applied to a certain extent to other lines.

About the structure of this book

I have decided to present the book as a collection of annotated games, because I think this way the material will appear less dull. The readers may use it as a reference book or read it from beginning to end, in order to become familiar with the most frequent tactical ideas, transpositions and strategic plans.

A division has been made in four main Sections. The first contains minor second moves for Black after $2.\text{♟}f3$, Section 2 deals with $4...e5$, $4...g6$ and $4...\text{♟}c6$ systems after the exchange on d4, and in Sections 3 and 4, respectively the systems with $2...e6$ and those with $2...d6$ are discussed. Almost all systems have an individual chapter, though some have far less material. In my view, the current preparation and competition methods (I'm thinking especially about open and rapid chess tournaments) force us to possess an accurate knowledge of some specific refutations and favour the use of surprise variations. Many of these surprise weapons, despite their theoretical weakness, pose almost insurmountable complications in over-the-board play.

Furthermore, my aim has been to provide the reader with a complete repertoire and therefore to answer clearly to the question of what to play in all reasonable positions.

At the beginning and at the end of each chapter I have included short sections intended to make the study easier, but not strictly necessary for an experienced player.

The chapters open with the title and the diagram reflecting the starting position

of our study. The stars (* to *****) are a subjective evaluation that can guide the not-so-expert readers on the importance of the variation. For most readers, the stars will show the author's respect towards each set-up. They are intended to evaluate the theoretical strength, the historical importance, the frequency of use and the practical virtues of a specific system; of course, every player could have his own evaluation. In my opinion, there are a lot of underrated variations in the Sicilian (and a few, overrated). I have the feeling, reinforced by writing this book, that many are playable and pose problems for White, if the first player intends to achieve an edge.

The introduction tries to guide the readers on the themes of the chosen line and its relationship with other variations.

The historical note is a small homage to those people who have contributed the most to the development of the variation. Due to obvious space constraints, a deep research on the issue is out of the question. Here I feel obliged to mention the real father of the Sicilian Defence, Louis Paulsen (1833-1891). He was born in Germany but developed as a chess player in the United States. Paulsen investigated most of the important variations and understood the spirit of counterplay inherent in this defence. If the Sicilian wasn't named after him, it was due to random circumstances.

A deeper analysis of the ideas contained in every variation would have been interesting, but the book is already rather thick, so I considered it more important to go deeply into certain lines.

This structure should altogether help black players to choose some lines for

their repertoires, though in this case they must complete their study with the attacking lines for White that we don't mention here.

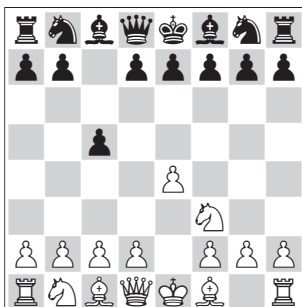
In some cases, transpositions are frequent and, for the sake of clarity, the first moves of a game are not always presented as they were actually played, but following the most frequent theoretical order. I think it is better to explain that here, rather than mention the exact order in every particular case.

We have tried to present the material in a very clear way, without complex trees and with move-by-move explanations, with the exception of the more often repeated moves. We considered it very important to understand the position and to know the purpose of every move, in order to fix our memory and prevent our opening study from becoming useless, if we forget the lines after a few days or weeks. However, in some cases it has been impossible to avoid presenting a potentially disturbing branch.

This book is a revised version of the Spanish original *Desmontando la Siciliana*. We can't talk about a second edition, as most of the material has been changed rather than merely updated. Furthermore, some chapters are completely new and, in those which keep recommending the same lines, many model games are more recent and recommended subvariations have quite often changed as well. Nevertheless, we cannot talk about a new book either, since the structure and base material are the same. In some cases, I have changed my recommendations because some new lines are clearly better or have cast doubts on the old ones; at other times, the previously recommended line is still

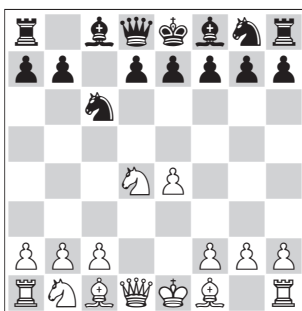
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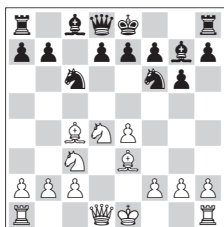
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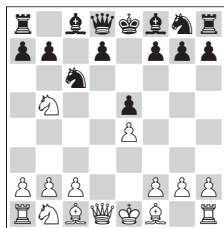
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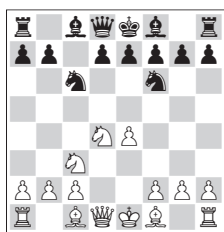
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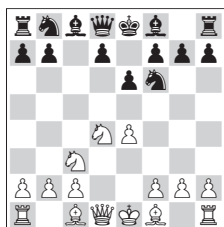
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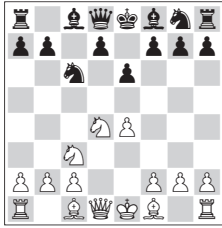
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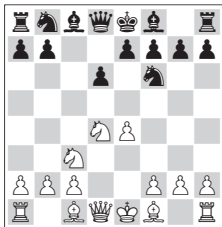
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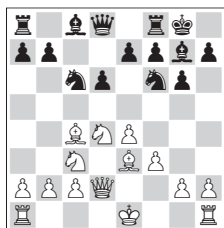
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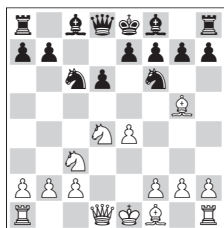
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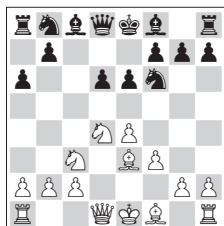
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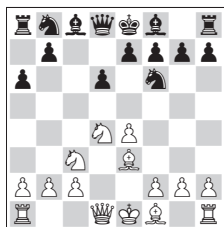


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Review: Dismantling the Sicilian

By Arne Moll (on ChessVibes)

As soon as I finished the first paragraph of the introduction to Jesus de la Villa's new book *Dismantling the Sicilian*, published by New in Chess - one of the most amazing first paragraphs I've ever read in a chess book - I thought: this book is either total crap, or it is absolutely brilliant. Let's see what's so amazing about this introduction right away.

Here's the first sentence of the book:

This book deals with the study of the Sicilian Defence; however, the theoretical development has been so significant in recent years, that trying to cover all the variations of such a popular defence is somehow a utopian dream.

Oh no! I thought, is this going to be another 'repertoire book' recommending dubious sidelines against the Sicilian to avoid having to 'cover all the variations' of the opening? One of those crappy books that are guaranteed to make some easy money but especially some very shaky opening play? How I've always hated this kind of books - they're so misleading. Promising innocent chess lovers point after point with the dulling 2.c3, or the hyper-aggressive Grand Prix Attack without telling you Black actually has a fine game in those lines, provided he knows just a little bit of theory. And in my head I was already going to write a crushing review, not sparing the author and the editor for publishing such a book - until I read the second sentence:

Therefore, this book is content to offer a repertoire for White based on 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 followed by 3.d4.

Now I couldn't help laughing out loud - out of sheer astonishment. Was the author joking? Playing 2.Nf3 and 3.d4 implies that we will actually see some Sicilian main lines - a difficult task for any author, no matter how many pages his publisher allows him to fill (Alexander Khalifman dedicates several volumes to it in his *Opening Repertoire* according to Anand series), let alone for someone who has just over 300 pages. But since this book's subtitle is 'A complete repertoire for White', does it mean Jesus de la Villa is really going to recommend all main lines against the Sicilian?!

Yes, that's precisely what he's going to do, as he confirms in the next few paragraphs:

My general philosophy for developing an opening repertoire is based on the following approach: against main lines, play main lines; against secondary

lines, play secondary lines; against unsound lines, play the refutation. (...) Our playing style must have its influence as well when it comes to building our repertoire. However, if our style does not involve an open game against the Sicilian, then we should consider whether 1.e4 is right as our first move after all.

Well, I think that's just splendid. Let me say that I agree with everything Jesus de la Villa writes here, especially the bit about considering 1.e4 at all! Here, finally, is someone who confirms what ChessVibes co-editor Merijn van Delft has been arguing for years - namely, that if you're going to play 1.e4, you've got to be prepared to go all the way. Otherwise, you might as well play 1.b3 (another great opening with another great advocate) or anything else for that matter. Jesus de la Villa is a man of principles and his book, consequently, is an total knockout.

Even within the enormous task the author has set for himself, Jesus de la Villa shows ambition, choosing as his 'basic setup' for White systems involving Be3, f3, Qd2 and 0-0-0. This means that he's recommending 'hardcore' main lines with 6.Be3 for the Najdorf, the Dragon and the Scheveningen. Against the Rauzer and the Sveshnikov, too, he analyzes all main lines (it's great to see a good overview of the sharp 9.Bxf6! in the Sveshnikov once again), as well as against the Paulsen and the Taimanov. After each chapter, he gives an extremely useful, up-to-date and objective overview of the discussed lines and his recommendations and evaluations. Here's his overview of the Dragon:

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Be3 Bg7 7.f3 and now:

- 7...a6: a modern treatment, reasonably sound, which opens a new field for research +=
- 7...0-0 8.Qd2 a6: with kingside castling included, Black's set-up is too risky +/-
- 7...Nc6 8.Qd2 Bd7: postponing castling may be useful, but it doesn't work against correct preparation +/-

7...Nc6 8.Qd2 0-0 9.Bc4 and now:

- 9...Nd7?: speculative and risky +/-
- 9...Na5!?: a quite unknown line and not so easy to refute +=
- 9...Nxd4 10.Bxd4 Be6: solid, but eventually passive +=

9...Bd7 10.0-0-0 and now:

- 10...Qc7: one of many attempts to get counterplay. Interesting but insufficient +=
- 10...Qb8: has given some results, but it is quite risky +=
- 10...Rb8: perhaps the most solid line at this moment +=/=
- 10...Na5: as at move 9, little used and not that bad +=
- 10...Rc8 11.Bb3 Nxd4: a modern line, dangerous for both players +=

10...Rc8 11.Bb3 Ne5 Main line years ago, but in serious trouble due to 12.Kb1, and now:

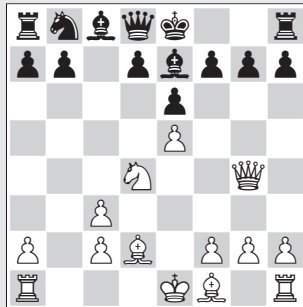
- 12...Nc4: White's attack runs smoothly +/-
- 12...Re8: relatively best, with room for research +=

10...Qa5 11.Bb3 Rfc8 Used to be a main line as well, but is in trouble too: 12.Kb1 Ne5 13.h4, and now:

- 13...Nc4: White's attack comes really easy +/-
- 13...b5: gives some counterplay, but not enough to equalize +=

Impressive, huh? Although the intended audience of this book seems to be players above the average club level, I bet this overview is even useful to grandmasters. And these are just the general conclusions. The book is also full of great details, relevant updates of current theory and references to other contemporary sources. An quite random example from the always tricky Pin variation:

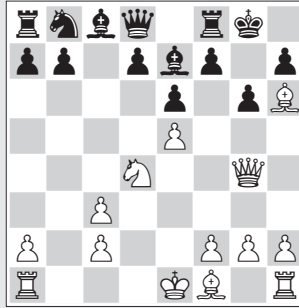
1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 Bb4 6.e5 Nd5 7.Bd2! Nxc3 8.bxc3 Be7 9.Qg4



9...0-0 Black insists on his thematic exchange offer, and White does better not to accept it. The alternatives to defend the g7-pawn aren't appealing either:

9...g6!? is a quite sensible alternative still lacking respect at top-level. Black can hope to castle queenside. 10.Nb5!? Recommended by Khalifman and Desmontando la Siciliana [the original Spanish edition of this book - AWM], is strategically logical, but wastes time and allows Black counterplay: 10.Bd3! Nc6 11.Nxc6 dxc6 12.0-0 Qa5 13.Rfe1 is by far the soundest option and my main suggestion. 10...0-0 10...Nc6!? 11.Nd6+ Bxd6 12.exd6 += with good attacking chances, though White has burned his bridges and is forced to take concrete action; 10...a6?! 11.Nd6+ Bxd6 12.exd6 Qb6 13.Qb4 +/- according to Khalifman. 11.h4! Nc6 12.Qg3 a6 13.Nd6 Qc7 14.Bf4 f6?! 15.h5! +/- (...)

10.Bh6 g6 11.h4!

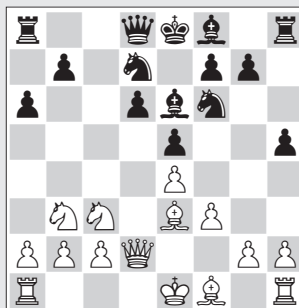


White utterly disdains the exchange offer and launches a brutal attack. Up to this day, and despite Black having tried almost everything, White's strategy has been a total success.

What I like about this fragment, apart from its theoretical relevance, is that Jesus de la Villa's style combines nuanced observations ('good attacking chances, though White has burned his bridges') with bold statements ('White's strategy has been a total success'). It makes the book a pleasure to read, even if you don't particularly care for the variations themselves.

Somehow, Jesus de la Villa succeeds in explaining opening systems which have always seemed completely random to me, in a straightforward and simple way, so that I can really imagine myself actually playing these lines with some confidence. Take this explanation of one of the most tricky lines in the Najdorf main line:

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.f3 e5 7.Nb3 Be6 8.Be3 Nbd7 9.Qd2 h5!?



This move has the simple idea of preventing (or at least hindering) g2-g4 and its popularity is growing more and more. This is not so strange, as the same move, with the same goal, has achieved a prominent position in the Saemisch Variation of the King's Indian defence, or the Rauzer Attack in the Dragon. White has tried very different plans, but so far we can't say that there is a clear

path to an advantage for the first player. For those familiar with Geller's or Karpov's games in the 6.Be2 variation, the plan involving 0-0 seems to have devastating logic. Let's see for instance this game: 6.Be2 e5 7.Nb3 Be6 8.0-0 Nbd7 9.a4 Be7 10.a5 0-0 11.Be3 Rc8 12.f3 Qc7 13.Qd2 Rfd8 14.Rfd1 (...) Geller-Ivkov, Palma de Mallorca 1970. What would have been Geller's face if his opponent had played ... h5 around the 12th or 13th move? And yet it would have simply led to the positions we are going to study. So I recommend the plan with 0-0: White will get at most a small positional edge, but I think it is the most logical approach to exploit the drawbacks of Black's move.

10.a4! If White is going to switch to 0-0, it is best to start with this move, which restricts Black's queenside play. (...)

In this quote, the author achieves several important things: he explains the very basics of Black's idea and why it is so topical; he connects the idea to other openings and shows that games from the past (even from different lines) can have relevancy also today; he gives a very objective general evaluation of the line; and he half-jokingly draws our attention to the fact that h7-h5 can also be regarded as a rather strange move when you think of it in a different context. And this Jesus de la Villa manages to do in just one paragraph. No wonder he easily succeeds in explaining all Sicilian main lines in just over 300 pages.

I have really tried to find something to complain about in *Dismantling the Sicilian*, but in the end I just couldn't. Well okay, two things are worth mentioning. First, as many readers will have noted, the concept of this book is not really original. The same was done for the first time in *Beating the Sicilian 1, 2 and 3* which were published between 1984 and 1995 and authored by John Nunn, the third edition together with Joe Gallagher. And there's of course the more recent *Experts vs. the Sicilian* (2004) by various authors, all experts of a certain Sicilian variation, choosing what they think is the most annoying setup for Black.

I do think Jesus de la Villa's book is the best and most principled of the three (for example, against the Dragon, *Experts* chose for 9.0-0-0 while Nunn & Gallagher bailed out with the 'simple' but slightly off-track 6.f4 against the Najdorf). As said, I think the overviews at the end of each chapter are a great advantage of *Dismantling the Sicilian*. Finally, I really like the 'thematic' approach of recommending one generic set-up (Be3, f3, Qd2) against as many Black systems as possible. The book is also, of course, simply much more up to date than the other titles: one of the most recent Dragon games is the theoretically important Dominguez-Carlsen, Linares 2009.

The second thing is a general recommendation to the *New in Chess* editors: add a bibliography to all your books by default! *Gambit* has been doing so for years, so why not copy this honest and useful tradition, which also adds an extra 'scientific' flavour to the books? Apart from this, I'll finish this review with a cliché, but a very sincere one: if you're going to buy one opening book this fall, make sure it's this one. You won't regret it.