

Sicilian Dragon – History and Analysis

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Part I - History

Early Explorations:

In the mid-1800's, a line of the Sicilian Defense appeared that was characterized by the development of a Black Bishop to g7. At first it was referred to as the Sicilian Fianchetto Defense. Some club games with it can be found as far back as the 1840's. It broke into the big leagues with Wilhelm Steinitz-Louis Paulsen, London 1862, which Paulsen won. That game began **1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 g6**.

We now narrow the focus to the Open Sicilian lines where White plays an early d4. Over the course of decades, the best lines for each side began to be worked out. In the 1880's both Henry Bird of England and the Scottish-born American George Mackenzie were playing it. Some sidelines of what is known as the Classical Variation (**1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cd4 4 Nd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 g6 6 Be2**) were explored by them, although with a different move order. In 1900 the American Harry Nelson Pillsbury adopted it.

In 1901, the account goes, the Ukrainian master Fedor Duz-Khotimirsky, who was an amateur astronomer, noticed the similarity of Black's pawn structure with the stars in the constellation of Draco the Dragon. He gave the line a new name, and the Sicilian Fianchetto Defense gradually became known as the Sicilian Dragon.

Getting Established:

The main line of the Classical Variation took shape. After **6 Be2 Bg7 7 Be3 Nc6 8 O-O O-O 9 Nb3 Be6 10 f4**, one of Black's defenses, **10 ... Na5**, was seen in Georg Marco-Geza Maroczy, Monte Carlo 1903. Another defense, **10 ... Qc8**, was played in Richard Reti-Savielly Tartakower, New York 1924.

Around 1936, the Ukrainian master Vsevolod Rauzer had a string of opening innovations. In the Classical Sicilian, **1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 d4 cd4 4 Nd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 d6**, he had suggested that the correct follow-up to German master Kurt Richter's **6 Bg5** was **7 Qd2**, and the Richter-Rauzer Attack was born. He tried the same system against the Dragon, **5 ... g6 6 Bg5**, but it was not to his taste. He then modified the system with **5 ... g6 6 f3 Bg7 7 Be3**, and what was at first called the Rauzer Attack came into being. The Levenfish Attack, **5 ... g6 6 f4**, was recommended by Russian GM Grigory Levenfish in 1937. White had other ways to counter the Dragon, but the

Classical, Rauzer, and Levenfish systems remained the most popular. The Rauzer Attack is the most dangerous, but its strength was not immediately recognized.

The 1940's saw the merits of the Dragon being debated. In the United States, Reuben Fine did not think highly of it. His perennial rival for the U.S. Championship, Samuel Reshevsky, continued to play it. On the international scene, so did Miguel Najdorf, Alexander Kotov, and Isaac Boleslavsky. The Dragon was used in the 1950's World Championship matches between Mikhail Botvinnik and Vassily Smyslov. During the 1950's, the Rauzer Attack was extensively analyzed by IM Vladimir Vukovic and other Yugoslav analysts. This led it to be known as the Yugoslav Attack in the West.

The Crisis Years:

We now narrow the focus to the Yugoslav Attack, as this is where the critical lines are. The main line during the 1950's was **1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cd4 4 Nd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 g6 6 Be3 Bg7 7 f3 Nc6 8 Qd2 O-O 9 Bc4 Nd4**. By the late 1950's the strength of White's attack was recognized. Around 1958-1961 the Black players suffered a number of defeats in this variation, and it was almost completely abandoned. There was still the **line 9 ... Bd7 10 O-O-O Rc8 11 Bb3 Ne5 12 h4 Nc4**, and this became Black's main line during the early and mid-1960's. However, this line requires a lot of tactical tightrope-walking, and Black's correct lines had not yet been worked out. As a result, few people would play the Dragon, and among those who did White won far more than Black. Robert Fischer had commented that he had a system: Pry open the king rook file, sac, sac, mate. It refers to these times.

The Dragon was on life-support but managed to stay alive. A group of players at Oxford University in England, consisting of IM Andrew J. Whiteley, FM Peter Lee, and correspondence GM Adrian Hollis, continued to analyze and play it. Improved defenses for Black were found. In the late 1960's the variation **9 ... Bd7 10 O-O-O Qa5 11 Bb3 Rfc8** became Black's main try. This improved Black's chances in a still perilous situation.

Rebound:

American GM Andrew Soltis had analyzed the line **9 ... Bd7 10 O-O-O Rc8 11 Bb3 Ne5 12 h4 h5**, and around the mid-1970's it took over as the main try for Black. The Soltis variation proved to be incredibly resilient. White tried one attacking plan after another, but the line seemed indestructible. White players who viewed the Dragon as unplayable were now losing to it. This went on for about twenty years, and then Black's game was strengthened still more. In the mid 1990's Bulgarian GM Veselin Topalov introduced **9 ... Bd7 10 O-O-O Rc8 11 Bb3 Nd4 12 Bd4 b5**, and the Topalov variation has also held up well. The older lines still had their adherents. British GM Chris Ward continued to prefer **9 ... Bd7 10 O-O-O Qa5 11 Bb3 Rfc8**, and Bulgarian GM Kiril

Georgiev still played **9 ... Bd7 10 O-O-O Rc8 11 Bb3 Ne5 12 h4 Nc4**. The Dragon was used in the 1995 World Championship match between Garry Kasparov and Viswanathan Anand.

Recent Developments:

Unable to refute the Soltis variation, White players did the next best thing: They found a way to avoid it. In the late 1990's the Modern variation, **9 ... Bd7 10 O-O-O Rc8 11 Bb3 Ne5 12 Kb1**, was found to be strong. This came close to creating a second crisis. With the Soltis variation out of reach, and with the two old lines from the 1960's only borderline playable, Black's game depended on the Topalov variation. That line continued to work.

The Black players now responded with quite a collection of new variations. In 2002 FM Luc Henris, a Belgian player then living in China, wrote about **9 ... Bd7 10 O-O-O Rb8**, which became known as the Chinese Dragon. In 2004 a book by British GM Simon Williams popularized both **5 ... g6 6 Be3 a6**, the Accelerated Dragendorf, and **5 ... g6 6 Be3 Bg7 7 f3 a6**, the Dragendorf. The variation **9 Bc4 Nd4**, which had been nearly extinct for half a century, was rehabilitated by the mid-2010's by Russian GM Vadim Zvjagintsev and American GM Hikaru Nakamura. In 2021 **5 ... g6 6 Be3 Nc6 7 f3 h5 8 Qd2 Nd4 9 Bd4 Bh6**, the Hungarian Dragon, was introduced by GM Richard Rapport of Hungary. In early 2025 **5 ... g6 6 Be3 a6 7 f3 e5 8 Nb3 Be6**, the Vietnamese Dragon, began to be played by teen prodigy IM Dau Khuong Duy of Vietnam. In the Modern variation, considered to be very dangerous, computer analysis indicated that Black could survive with **12 Kb1 Re8**, although both strong nerves and strong defensive technique were needed. All of this gave Black multiple playable lines against **9 Bc4**, so attention turned to the alternatives **9 O-O-O** and **9 g4**. Recently, after seventy years, **9 O-O-O** finally replaced **9 Bc4** as White's main try.

Part II – Analysis

Introduction:

A detailed discussion of Sicilian Dragon lines would take hundreds of hours. To save time we will focus on the Yugoslav Attack where White plays **Be3, f3, Qd2** (sometimes **Bc4** and **Qe2**), and usually **O-O-O**. The different variations will be shown, some observations made regarding move order, and critical lines pointed out. The Sicilian Dragon arises after **1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cd4 4 Nd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 g6**.

6 Be3

The Yugoslav Attack can also be entered by **6 f3**, which was Rauzer's original move order. It makes a difference. Among strong players, **6 Be3** is the choice over 90% of the time. The main reason is flexibility. Instead of committing to a definite line, it is more accurate to keep open the possibility of playing any one of several systems. Then, when the opponent commits to a definite line, the most effective of those systems against that line is chosen. The more options one has, the better.

With **6 Be3** White keeps open the option of **7 Be2**, transposing into the complicated Classical variation. Playing **6 f3** keeps the option of playing the old Rauzer attack **6 ... Bg7 7 Bg5 Nc6 8 Nb3**, an infrequently played sideline. White thus retains more options with **6 Be3**.

With **6 f3** Black is permitted more options, specifically the moves **6 ... Qb6** and **6 ... h5**. We now take a quick look at how these moves work against both **6 f3** and **6 Be3**.

The variation **6 f3 Qb6** was once thought to favor Black. Around 1969 this was found not to be true, but the resulting variations are unclear and complicated. One line is **6 f3 Qb6 7 Be3 a6 (7 ... e5** is also complicated, but not **7 ... Qb2 8 Ndb5** [threat **Rb1**] **Qb4 9 Nc7+** [**9 e5** is even stronger] **Kd8 10 Bd2** when **10 ... Kc7 11 Nb5+** wins the Q) **8 Qd2 Qb2 9 Nb3 Nc6 (9 ... Qa3 10 e5** is a winning attack) **10 a4 Na5 11 Rb1 Nb3 12 Qd3 Qb1+ 13 Nb1 Na5 14 Qd2 Nc6** with an odd position where the Stockfish program thinks White is better but keeps reaching a drawn position when the game is played out. On **6 Be3 Qb6**, White comes out much better after **7 Ndb5 Qd8 8 e5 de5 9 Qd8+ Kd8 10 Ba7**.

As for **6 f3 h5**, this can transpose into lines examined later, such as the Dragadorf or Hungarian Dragon. With **6 Be3 h5** White obtains the advantage by not continuing with **7 f3**, but with **7 Be2, 8 O-O**, and **9 f4**, when Black's **h5** looks like a wasted tempo. Thus, **6 Be3** reduces Black's options.

Another reason to choose **6 Be3** is that it sets the trap **6 ... Ng4 7 Bb5+ Bd7** (better but still losing is **7 ... Nc6) 8 Qxg4**, when Black's best move is to start setting up the pieces for the next game. This is a comparatively trivial reason, as among IMs and GMs anyone not under the influence would be expected to see this.

Thus, **6 Be3** gives more options to White, fewer options to Black, and sets a trap for Black to fall into. Despite that, **6 f3** is still occasionally played. In those cases White might be trying to lure Black into the **6 ... Qb6** or **6 ... h5** systems, intending to transpose back to the main line if Black does not take the bait. Or, White might be intending the old Rauzer attack **7 Bg5**. Russian GM Gennadi Kuzmin tried this in the 1980's.

6 ... Bg7

This seems the most natural, but Black has alternatives here.

6 ... Nc6 7 f3 h5 8 Qd2 Nd4 9 Bd4 Bh6 is the Hungarian Dragon, which has scored well for Black recently.

6 ... a6 7 f3 and now **7 ... b5** is the Accelerated Dragadorf main line, while **7 ... e5 8 Nb3 Be6** is the Vietnamese Dragon. Both are risky, but both may be playable.

7 f3

This stops **7 ... Ng4**, fortifies the e4 pawn, and prepares g4.

7 ... Nc6

This seems to be the most flexible, but there are alternatives.

7 ... a6 is the Dragadorf. After **8 Qd2** the older move was **8 ... Nbd7**, the newer one is **8 ... h5**. Risky but playable seems a good description.

7 ... O-O is the main alternative. Its advantages are that it avoids the pesky **7 ... Nc6 8 Nc6 bc6 9 e5** variation and keeps open the possibility of transposing into Dragadorf lines where the move **... Nbd7** is played. Its disadvantages are that it rules out some important variations where Black delays castling and immediately lets White know where the Black king lives.

8 Qd2

There are a couple of important alternatives.

8 Nc6 bc6 9 e5 gives Black a choice. He can accept the pawn with **9 ... de5 10 Qd8+ Kd8** and suffer the displacement of his king, or he can sacrifice a pawn of his own with **9 ... Nd7 10 ed6 O-O** for an attack on the White king. The Stockfish program thinks both lines are about equal.

8 Bc4 O-O 9 Qe2 is a line used by Swedish GM Jonny Hector. It leads to a positional battle for the c4 square and is tricky to play for both sides.

8 ... O-O

Two major alternatives are:

8 ... Bd7, the Delayed Castling variation, was once a favorite of Russian GM Sergei Tiviakov. It is now thought to favor White.

8 ... h5 is a favorite of Latvian GM Ilmars Starostits, who has had reasonable results with it. Black impedes **9 g4** and waits to see how White will proceed.

9 Bc4

We are now at a major crossroads. There are two other systems.

9 g4 is usually answered by **9 ... Be6**. White can play **10 Ne6 fe6**, but is left with a backward pawn on **f3**, and advancing it weakens the **g4** and **e4** pawns. White also is stopped from playing the key move **Nd5**. **11 O-O-O Ne5 12 Be2 Qc8** is the usual continuation, and Black does fairly well here.

9 O-O-O has recently become White's main choice. Black normally chooses the **9 ... d5** pawn sacrifice. Best play seems to lead to a game where White has persistent pressure but Black can hold. An advanced version of the Komodo Dragon program, with a 3800+ rating, recommended **9 ... h5** here. This has been tried by Dutch IM Arthur Pijpers with reasonable results. Other systems such as **9 ... Qa5** and **9 ... Bd7** may still have life in them. A lot here needs to be more deeply explored.

The other main defense, **9 ... Nd4 10 Bd4 Be6 11 Kb1 Qc7 (11 ... Qa5 12 Nd5 Qd2 13 Ne7+) 12 h4 Rfc8 13 h5 Qa5 (13 ... Nh5 loses) 14 hg6** leaves Black struggling. The **14 ... hg6** recapture leads to a pawn down ending after **15 a3 Rab8 16 Bd3 Bc4 17 Bc4 Rc4 18 Qc1 e6 19 g4 Rbc8 20 g5 Nh5 21 Bg7 Kg7 22 Rd6 Rc3 23 bc3 Ng3 24 Re1 Ne2+ 25 Re2 Qe2 26 c4+ Kg8**. Black may have a theoretical draw due to White's broken pawn structure, but it isn't much fun. The **14 ... fg6** recapture, followed by **15 ... Bf7**, might be an improvement, but Black is still under heavy pressure.

Another try is **9 ... Be6**, although this is also thought to favor White. One line goes **10 Kb1 Rc8 12 h4 Ne5 13 g4 Bc4 14 g5 Nfd7**.

9 ... Bd7

The main alternative is **9 ... Nd4 10 Bd4 Be6**. This was the main line in the 1950's, discredited in the early 1960's, then rehabilitated fifty years later. It seems quite playable but tends to lead to rook and pawn endings. These are notoriously drawish, and Dragon players typically play to win.

9 ... Qa5 often transposes to **9 ... Bd7 10 O-O-O Qa5**.

10 O-O-O

10 h4 should be met with **10 ... h5**, heading for a Soltis variation, or perhaps **10 ... Qa5** for those who enjoy risk taking. It is dangerous to answer **10 h4** with a Topalov system, **10 ... Rc8 11 Bb3 Nd4 12 Bd4 b5**, or with a Chinese Dragon, **10 ... Rb8**, as these are designed for when White has already committed his king with **O-O-O**.

10 ... Rc8

10 ... Rb8 is the Chinese Dragon. White gets serious pressure with a quick **Bh6**, but it may hold up.

10 ... Qa5 11 Bb3 Rfc8 was once the main line, but Black is now having difficulties here. After **12 Kb1 Ne5 13 h4 Nc4 14 Bc4 Rc4 15 Nb3 Qc7 16 g4 (16 Bd4 is also strong) Rc8 17 e5 Ne8 18 Nd5 Qd8** Black is under serious pressure. A possible improvement is **13 ... h5 14 Bg5 Kf8** as in Sergey Karjakin - Loek van Wely, Wijk aan Zee 2016, which was drawn.

11 Bb3

11 ... Ne5

11 ... Nd4 12 Bd4 b5 is the Topalov variation, which has been holding up well for Black.

12 Kb1

This is known as the Modern variation and is a serious challenge for Black. The older try was **12 h4**, when Black has two main answers. At first **12 ... Nc4** was played, but after **13 Bc4 Rc4 14 h5 Nh5 15 g4 Nf6** White has several dangerous moves: **16 Bh6, 16 Nde2, 16 Nb3, 16 Kb1, 16 Nd5, and 16 e5**. Black seems to survive, just barely. Then the Soltis variation **12 ... h5** took over, and Black has done very well.

12 ... Re8

Recent analysis by strong computer programs (Stockfish vs. Leela Chess Zero) indicates that Black can survive with this move and very careful defense. There are two other main tries. Magnus Carlsen played **12 ... a6** for a while, then stopped. Then there is the Burnett variation, named after FM Andrew Burnett of Scotland, **12 ... Nc4 13 Bc4 Rc4 14 g4 b5 15 b3 b4 16 bc4 bc3 17 Qc3**, where Black gets a strong attack at the cost of an exchange plus a pawn. The soundness of both is unclear.

Summary:

Black does well against **9 g4** and has multiple playable lines against **9 Bc4**. The current challenge is **9 O-O-O**, where the only established good line is the **9 ... d5** pawn sacrifice. The other lines are either experimental or insufficient. Researching **9 ... h5, 9 ... Qa5, and 9 ... Bd7** is a priority.