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**A Medieval Treasure:
The Story of a Hoard of Chess Pieces**

Lana Rose

Medieval Europe

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The Story of a Hoard of Chess Pieces

On an island that is still inhabited today, a hidden stash of chess pieces was discovered. The finding of these gaming pieces was by no means commonplace because there were several dozen pieces and they were all intricately carved. The chess pieces are rare because they were made completely out of solid walrus tusks and five were made from whale's teeth. The original story behind the chess pieces is not clearly obtained. There are different stories ranging from an escaping sailor hiding the chessmen to a travelling merchant leaving them behind. Without knowing who the original owner of the chess collection was, we can hypothesize that the pieces were obtained with a considerable amount of wealth. The ninety three piece hoard would have required the skill of a master carver as well as a decent amount of time for completion. The chessmen were allegedly found in 1831 A.D. by a wondering peasant. Scholars debate about who found the collection and where exactly they found it. Most believe that the pieces were found on the Bay of Uig on the Isle of Lewis located in what is today the Scottish Hebrides. The Lewis chessmen are one of the most unique chess collections that exist because of their age, composition, the intricate nature of the carvings, and the size of the collection. It is important to study objects from different time periods because it can tell us about aspects of culture and the role that the objects had in the society. The Lewis chess pieces show aspects of Scandinavian culture and represent the influence of gaming in Medieval society.

There is no doubt that the Lewis chessmen are unique and the quantity of them gives contextual hints about the original possessor of the objects. The quantity of chess pieces is proof of the status of the owner because the material and skilled labor that it took to craft them meant that the chess pieces were costly and highly valuable. The chess pieces were made sometime around the 12th or 13th centuries. Individual pieces, such as the knights, have some Scandinavian influence exhibited by the clothes and shields. The origin of the pieces was most

likely Trondheim, Norway. This is a reasonable assumption because the Isle of Lewis and the Isle of Man used to be ruled by Scandinavia. The Isle of Lewis was part of the Kingdom of the Isles which owed allegiance to Norway¹. It was not until 1266 A.D. that the Isles became officially part of Scotland. The estimated time period for the carving of the Lewis chess pieces coincides with the time when the Isles were under the control of Norway. There is archaeological evidence for the theory that the chess pieces came from Trondheim. A drawing of a similar chess queen as one found in the Lewis hoard was uncovered in Trondheim². There is a contestation to the theory that the chessmen are from Norway, however. That contestant has said that the chessmen are not from Norway because they resemble the Icelandic people more clearly. Unfortunately, the chess pieces don't line up with the Icelandic culture of that time period and that is why the ties with Scandinavia are a better match for the origin. Even the armor and shields of the knights matched up with the correct Scandinavian armor that knights wore. Dr. Alex Woolf comments on the claim that the Lewis knights wear Scandinavian style armor by saying, "It looks like they had access to the real thing...Iceland didn't have knights."³ The pieces, and therefore the knights, that were made would have reflected the society that they were created in. Another thing we must look at to determine the origin is access to walrus tusk, skilled craftsmanship, and money. Each of those things are evidenced in Trondheim.

The craftsman who made the pieces had to be talented to accomplish the feat of carving the chessmen. It is possible that there were different craftsmen because of the varying proportions and shapes of faces. Scholars used proportional comparison to make this assumption⁴. According to David Caldwell, the king's heights range from 102mm to 73mm. Queens have a height range from 96mm to 70mm⁵. The craftsman had to be careful with the tusks, which were rare and expensive. Sometimes they could make multiple chess pieces out of

one tusk, depending on the size of the tusk. A typical walrus tusk is an average of 14 inches long. This is one reason that the chess pieces are so unique and worth a lot. The collection was comprised of ninety three pieces: 8 kings, 8 queens, 16 bishops, 15 knights, 12 warders, 19 pawns, and 14 tablemen (not chess pieces). A warder was a prison guard, and was replaced by the modern rook. The collection could have taken as many as thirty to forty walrus tusks. The eight sets are missing a significant number of its pieces, mostly pawns. Some of the pieces had traces of red paint on them which means that the board would have been red and white instead of the traditional board of black and white⁶.

The Lewis chessmen could have had multiple uses or purposes. It is not known whether the pieces were ever used to play with, but they were intended to be used for gaming purposes. They could have been given as a gift or a render for something that was owed. It could have been meant as a symbol of wealth or rank. This would have been a sign of stature in a society where one's position compared to the king was an indicator of how important you were as a person. The chess pieces were made in a time when owning a chess set meant you were wealthy or you had received the pieces as a gift. People would give a lavish gift like this to a king or to a bishop. A king could have also given a gift to a bishop to show favor towards the church and bishopric.

The setting of the story of the Lewis chessmen occurs at two different times: the 13th century and 1831. In Scotland before the 12th century, the Norwegians had overtaken the Scots. The Manx Chronicle records Norway's military achievement in Europe. Norway came into contact with the Scottish Isles seven times between 1098 and 1263 A.D. The Norwegian King made the people of the Western Isles give homage to him. This is the reason why there was still Scandinavian influence in the Western Isles⁷. The sway of the church soon hit the Western Isles when the pope set up an archbishop in Nidaros in 1152 A.D. There were now 11 bishops in the

area of the Isles⁸. Since the archbishop had just arrived to the area, he stayed whenever the Nordic people handed over the islands to Scotland in 1266 A.D. The locals were still loyal to the archbishop and would give him gifts. The Lewis Chessmen could have been intended as a gift for the archbishop of Nidaros.

The origin of the Lewis Chessmen is still considered vague and inadequate to the world of scholarly research. Many stories have been rumored, but the exact story of how the pieces came to be on an island on the outskirts of Scotland has still not been proved. Was it a sailor that hid his treasure in the sand or was it simply lost by a merchant on his way to town? A story was told of a sailor that fled from his ship and was murdered by a servant named Gille Ruadh⁹. He murdered him because he saw that the sailor was running away with treasure. The reason why this story is unlikely is because we don't know if Gille Ruadh had really seen the sailor hide a treasure. If he had seen the sailor bury it, then it would have been easy for the court that tried Gille to go and procure it.

One commonly accepted story of the Lewis chessmen finding is that Malcolm MacLeod found the hoard in a sand dune. This story was recounted by a storyteller from the Isle of Lewis¹⁰. There is no primary evidence that ties someone named Malcolm directly to finding the treasure, however. This story was mainly accepted by local people of the Isle of Lewis. The discovery of the chess pieces on the island was a major point in the history of the Isle of Lewis. The island was now recognized by chess fans all over the world as the place where the Lewis chessmen were found. The locals accepted the stories about the chess pieces because it acted as a "social cement amidst their communities, helping to define and maintain their collective identity, and to give a sense of continuity and enshrined cultural value."¹¹ The discovery of the chessmen pulled the community of Lewis together and gave them something to be proud of. Another story of the discovery of the hoard is that a peasant came upon a crypt one day in a sand

dune¹². The crypt was filled with the Lewis collection that had been preserved there. There was also mention of a ruin that was nearby the sand dunes. The locals believe it to be an old church or nunnery, but only parts of it are left standing. They used the ruin to help themselves remember where the hoard was found.

The economy of the Isles at this time was merchant capitalism. Merchant capitalism is one of the earliest forms of capitalism. Capitalism is based on a trade economy that focuses on the trade of goods and services as opposed to mass production. People trade with money or goods and merchants transport the goods. There are many accounts of merchants coming to the Scottish islands to sell their wares and to participate in the small town economy. Ships and the ocean were crucial to the economy of the Scottish Isles because they had no other lifeline to the mainland. The burial of the chess pieces is actually tied up in a story about a merchant. In one story, a merchant supposedly got lost and hid the chess pieces in a box in order to come back and retrieve them later¹³. If this story is true, then the merchant became very unlucky and never returned to retrieve the pieces. However the chessmen came to be found on the Isle of Lewis, they were found in 1831 to the excitement of the island's population.

The society that encompasses the Isle of Lewis was similar to the rest of Medieval Europe at that period in time. It was based on agriculture and trade. The towns were the center of commerce because the market was located there. The most action was seen in the towns and the burghs of the Scottish highlands. Burghs were essentially townships in Scotland that were protected by a castle. The culture of the Isle of Lewis still had strains of their Norwegian heritage. The strains of heritage that we see from the Lewis chessmen is the similar knight apparel. The reverence for the archbishop of Nidaros and the other 11 bishops was also a

reflection on the Norwegian heritage and the kingship that prevailed on the Isle of Lewis until 1266 A.D.

The game of chess has transformed since ancient times in different parts of the world. Hnefatafl was a strategy game similar to chess that involved a king and unevenly divided chessmen. It came from Northern Europe (Scandinavia) and was also known as "Tafll"¹⁴. With Hnefatafl, the king starts out in the middle of the board and is surrounded by the other pieces who are on the edges of the board. The goal of the game is to get the king to one of the corners without dying. Chess, on the other hand, featured equal playing pieces. The precursor to chess, chaturanga, originated in India¹⁵. According to David Shenk, chess is a "war without bloodshed"¹⁶. Some myths and stories about the origin of chess begin with a king asking one of his men to make a board and place characters on it. The king would then use the board to explain to an enemy what was going to happen and try to negotiate with an enemy to play chess instead of start a battle. It was used as a negotiation tool and that was why it was a war that didn't require bloodshed. Chess has been used to explain and discuss economics, politics, war, education, math, and romance. It is a tool for thought¹⁷. The ancient game of chess was a common thread in civilizations starting in the fifth or sixth century. The thread runs throughout major civilizations such as Arabia, the British Empire, Medieval Europe, and Contemporary America. It is a way to visualize culture and it was tweaked over time until it became the chess game that we know today.

Chess is significant to the Medieval Ages and to the Modern Age. It started in the Medieval Ages and it has been a common game since then. One thing that it shows is that gaming is something that is valuable. It is a pastime and an enjoyment. There is something unique about chess that made it able to be enjoyed by rich and poor alike. In the Medieval Ages

it was enjoyed predominantly by the nobles, but today it can be enjoyed by anyone. Chess gave people in the Medieval Ages something to do in the midst of war, famine, and plague. It was not only something to do, but something useful to do. Playing chess could be an enactment of a battle plan, a math lesson, or a sign that someone is of the nobility.

Chess is not just a pastime to be occasionally enjoyed. It is also an indicator of the society from whence it came. For example, in the Medieval Ages, there are clear personages of kings, queens, knights, bishops, and pawns. The pawns would be the serfs or peasants that are taken care of by the king. In return for protection against invaders, the pawns and knights work together to protect the king at all cost. They do this even if they have to sacrifice their own lives. This just described a common move in chess where the pieces move into line and are defeated, but the whole purpose is to get the opponents king in a position where they are forced to a checkmate. Chess is also symbolic of an economy where the serfs once again are dependent on the land and do not move about where as upper levels of society have more liberties (think of the abilities that the knight has compared to the pawn).

The enduring significance of the Lewis chessmen is evident in the movies that have come out that feature or resemble the hoard. Some of these are: *The Lion in Winter*, *Becket*, and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*¹⁸. Children's literature also makes mention of the chess collection. Today, eighty two of the pieces are at the British Museum and eleven of the pieces were bought by a Scottish collector soon after they were found. The British Museum bought them for 80 guineas or about 3,000 pounds. David Shenk states that, "The museum immediately recognized not only the pieces' unique importance in the history of chess, but more importantly their profoundly palpable connection to life in the Middle Ages"¹⁹.

The Lewis chessmen are the most researched chess collection in the history of the game. They hallmark the early era of chess and thus provide a landmark to the continuation of chess in the adaptations that are seen in the game today. Thus, the game of chess today draws from the early stages of chess that is represented in the Lewis chessmen. The ongoing influence of the game in society is characteristic of its nature as not only a pastime, but a game of wits. Chess is used in modern times to learn and practice many things according to David Shenk, "Chess has also, in modern times, been used to study memory, language, math, and logic, and has recently emerged as a powerful learning tool in elementary and secondary schools."²⁰ Even with the fast paced growth of the world's technology, chess still has a role for the betterment of the society. Chess is still something that can be played as a pastime for fun and also as a strategy game based on logic.

Even though the exact story of how the Lewis chessmen arrived on the Isle of Lewis is not known, the impact that the chessmen had on society is still evident today. From the moment of their discovery, they have been a source of scholarly work and research. Each piece of the collection is important to notice and examine. It is important to study artifacts from different time eras because it can tell us important characteristics of a society. Once we know what makes up a society in any case, we can understand that society better and realize how different aspects of it entwine and complement each other. In the case of the Lewis chessmen we found that the society was dependent on agriculture and trade in a merchant economy. Also, we saw the value of gaming in the society and the hierarchy of the system. The influence of the Norwegian culture was another important characteristic of that society. By knowing the culture, economy, and hierarchy of the Isle of Lewis, we can now better understand the importance of the Lewis

chessmen. The Lewis chessmen have made an impact as part of the heritage of the Isle of Lewis and as part of the continuation of the game of chess.

Appendix



Annotated Bibliography

British Museum Guide. London: Published for the Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Publications, 1976.

This book was a guide through the British Museum. It had pictures of important artifacts in the museum and it had some of the facts about them out beside the picture. It put the artifacts in order by time period and numbered the pictures so you could find where the facts were that corresponded with it.

This book wasn't a very interesting book just because of its nature. It really just put the facts beside the object and had a picture. There was no variation to the outline or style of the book. I started out with this book for my research. I looked through it to find a good artifact. Once I found the chess pieces, I read about the facts and found out what I wanted to do my research on.

Caldwell, David, Mark Hall, and Caroline Wilkinson. "The Lewis Hoard of Gaming Pieces: A

Re-examination of Their Context, Meanings, Discovery, and Manufacture." Maney

Online. Accessed April 23, 2015.

<http://www.maneyonline.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1179/007660909X12457506806243>.

This text covered the origins, myths, discovery, and importance of the Lewis chessmen. It sought to find the true story behind all the myths while describing the pieces. The authors pulled out several names and stories that are associated with the discovery of the Lewis chessmen. It described the context of the Isle of Lewis during the time when the pieces would have been carved and when they were found. The authors give a good description of the individual pieces and how they are proportional to the other pieces.

This was very detailed research on the Lewis chessmen. It covered questions that came up about the chessmen like, why would the chess pieces be at the Isle of Lewis? I have based my research heavily on this paper because of the wonderful details and different perspectives it takes with the myths associated with the chessmen. It has been useful because of the context it gives and the descriptions listed.

K., G. (1999). Games. In G. Bowersock et al. (Eds.), *Late antiquity: A guide to the postclassical world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Retrieved from

[http://ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.obu.edu:](http://ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/content/entry/hupla/games/0)

[2048/content/entry/hupla/games/0](http://ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/content/entry/hupla/games/0)

This reference article was a description of games in the ancient world. It included archaeological artifacts involving games, and the evolution and development of games. It specifically addresses children's toys, dice, board games, hnefatafl, and chess.

There was a lot of information in here about gaming and how they relate. It talks about gaming all over the world including the Byzantine Empire and the Sassassanian Persian Empire. I was able to use this in my research to help me get a good background on the game *hnefatafl*.

McClain, D.L. (2010, Sep 09). Reopening History of Storied Norse Chessmen. *New York Times*

Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/749963220?accountid=28323>

The newspaper article here takes a look at the Lewis chessmen and gives a basic outline and story of what they are. It describes how many pieces were in the collection, where they were found, and the theories of why they were left on the Isle of Lewis. It addresses the issue of the Icelanders wanting the chessmen to be from Iceland. The author debunks their proposed solution by saying that the culture exhibited by the pieces (especially the knights) did not match that of Iceland.

This article did a good job at being unbiased and fairly presented the Icelanders point of view. The author did a good job at not just accepting what the Icelanders said, but doing some research and seeing what the experts said about where the chess set came from. I used this article in my paper to give me a basic overview of the important things to note about the Lewis chessmen. I also used it to affirm the number of chess pieces that there were. I drew on this article in my paper to talk about the Icelanders view on the chessmen.

Shenk, David. *The Immortal Game: A History of Chess or How 32 Carved Pieces on a Board*

Illuminated Our Understanding of War, Art, Science, and the Human Brain. New York:

Doubleday, 2006

This book was a comprehensive view of the game of chess. It tied chess in with a lot of different aspects like math, education, logic, and war. The author covered different chess moves, chess in different eras of history, and chess and culture. The part that I focused on was about chess in the Medieval Ages and the Lewis chessmen.

I really enjoyed reading this book and I found some good information. I want to read through all of it one day because the writing style was so good. I was able to use a couple of quotes from this book. One of them had to do with the different things that you can apply to chess. I am also using the section about the Lewis chessmen to add general facts to the body of my research paper.

Endnotes

¹ Caldwell, David, Mark Hall, and Caroline Wilkinson. "The Lewis Hoard of Gaming Pieces: A Re-examination of Their Context, Meanings, Discovery, and Manufacture." Maney Online. Accessed April 23, 2015.

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⁴ Caldwell, David, Mark Hall, and Caroline Wilkinson. "The Lewis Hoard of Gaming Pieces: A Re-examination of Their Context, Meanings, Discovery, and Manufacture." Maney Online. Accessed April 23, 2015.

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¹⁷ Shenk, David. *The Immortal Game: A History of Chess or How 32 Carved Pieces on a Board Illuminated Our Understanding of War, Art, Science, and the Human Brain*. New York: Doubleday, 2006. 15.

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¹⁹ Shenk, David. *The Immortal Game: A History of Chess or How 32 Carved Pieces on a Board Illuminated Our Understanding of War, Art, Science, and the Human Brain*. New York: Doubleday, 2006. 44.

²⁰ Shenk, David. *The Immortal Game: A History of Chess or How 32 Carved Pieces on a Board Illuminated Our Understanding of War, Art, Science, and the Human Brain*. New York: Doubleday, 2006. 6.