



**Humour in the Game of Kings: The Sideways Glancing Warder of  
the Lewis Chessmen**  
**Humor en el juego de los reyes: la Torre de la mirada sesgada de la  
piezas de ajedrez de Lewis**  
**Humor no jogo dos reis: a Torre de olhar enviesado das peças do  
xadrez de Lewis**

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**Abstract:** The cultural turn of the twentieth century's last quarter gradually led to a new approach to the classical objects of historical research. Historians nowadays are required to take on a 'cultural perspective' in the course of their studies. Using the example of a particular piece of the Lewis Chessmen this paper examines both the benefits and the limitations that come about with the cultural approach and cautions against a too rigid application.

**Resumo:** A Virada Cultural do ultimo quarto do século XX levou, gradualmente, a novas abordagens dos objetos de pesquisa clássicos. Atualmente, historiadores precisam levar em consideração uma "perspectiva cultural" no decorrer de seus estudos. Usando como exemplo uma peça específica do xadrez de Lewis, este artigo examinará tanto os benefícios como as limitações que advêm da abordagem cultural, bem como as cautelas tomadas contra uma aplicação muito rígida.

**Keywords:** Cultural Turn – Cultural Perspective – Humour – Lewis Chessmen – Odd one out.

**Palavras-chave:** Virada cultural – Perspectiva cultural – Humor – Peças do xadrez de Lewis – O que não combina.

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## I. Introduction: Pleasure, Plato and Aristotle

What is pleasure? The question is as old as Plato and the answers philosophers, theologians, psychologists and all sorts of other more or less learned parties have given in the meantime are probably as numerous as the years that have passed since the disputatious Athenian walked the earth. This paper does not even attempt to provide an ultimate solution; instead it will simply concentrate on one constant element inherent in every approach to the subject and use it to demonstrate the chances and limitations of a cultural perspective in modern medieval history – what does it mean to work as a historian under a ‘cultural’ perspective, where are the risks and what possible benefits are there to gain?

Even Plato himself never presented one final definition of pleasure or at least a conclusive summary of his ideas.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he left a variety of different approaches scattered throughout his dialogues, documenting how time gradually changed his outlook on things, made him reiterate and adjust certain elements or even add new aspects.<sup>3</sup> The one thing, however, that remained consistent in Plato’s opinion of pleasure, is that he always understood it as the replenishment of a lack of something.<sup>4</sup> To put it in a nutshell, Plato postulated the existence of certain imbalances as a common part of a person’s being. According to him the sensation of pleasure emerges when that imbalance is temporarily rectified through outer stimuli, be it food, intellectual discourse or sex, just to name a few from the long list of possible factors.<sup>5</sup>

Plato’s student Aristotle suggested a different approach: He proclaimed that pleasure is the product of unimpeded activity, especially in the form of

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<sup>2</sup> VAN RIEL, Gerd. *Pleasure and the Good Life: Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists*. Philosophia Antiqua. Leiden: Brill, 2000, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Cf. VAN RIEL. *Pleasure and the Good Life*, p. 11.



contemplation.<sup>6</sup> The way Aristotle perceived pleasure it is not limited to counterbalancing certain disequilibria, instead, in its high quality manifestation, it arises as a side effect of undisturbed concentration on something, a by-product that adds to the activity in question without necessarily filling a void.

What both Plato's and Aristotle's views have in common is that they regard pleasure as a fleeting sensation of enjoyment, coming into being through stimuli, be they of a physical (e.g., food) or a more abstract (e.g., contemplation) nature. While lots and lots of different definitions followed Plato's and Aristotle's attempts at describing the character of pleasure, this one element of description remained through the ages to this very day: Pleasure is instigated by something. As a matter of principle, it does not appear out of thin air. It is always connected to at least one external element serving as the catalyst.

Freud coined the term 'pleasure principle' in 1911, stating that pleasure (in combination with the wish to avoid pain) is *the* motivating principle in every human being and that sex especially serves as an important source for it.<sup>7</sup> According to Freud, the pleasure principle is universal; it applies to members of different current cultures just as much as to people who lived in the time of Ancient Rome, the Middle-Ages or the French Revolution. Freud's pleasure principle caused many a heated debate over the years. Even Freud himself took a second look at his thoughts and stated in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that other factors might be overriding the human need to seek pleasure.<sup>8</sup> Despite all debates one important aspect of his ideas, however, remained: Pleasure is important for all humans, no matter when or where they live.

But what about the stimuli, the catalysts that cause people to experience pleasure? Did they remain consistent throughout the ages just as much as

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<sup>6</sup> TESSITORE, Aristide. *Reading Aristotle's Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy*. New York: SUNY Press, 1996, p. 66.

<sup>7</sup> FREUD, Sigmund. *Formulations Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning*. Papers on Metapsychology; Papers on Applied Psycho-Analysis. Vol. 4 of Collected Papers. 5 vols. London: Hogarth and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1924-1950, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> FREUD, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, STRACHEY, James (trans.). New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1961.



the human need for pleasure itself? Freud names sex as one of mankind's continuous sources for pleasure and there indeed are strong indicators that he might be right. The Warren Cup of the first century AD, Peter of Abano's writings regarding the role of touch in the context of sexual intercourse in the 14<sup>th</sup> century or 1748 French novel *Thérèse Philosophe* illustrate quite vividly that the connection of sex and pleasure is not a modern invention.

There are also strong indicators that sex might not be the only consistent catalyst for pleasure through the history of mankind. Plato talks about the pleasure experienced through laughter and amusement while watching a comedy.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas strongly emphasises the importance of laughter in his *Summa Theologica*. His words can be interpreted to the effect that the pleasure involved in laughing leads to relaxation, in his eyes a necessity for human beings.<sup>10</sup> In the days of the French Revolution ridicule was frequently used to influence the masses through pleasurable entertainment.<sup>11</sup> Thus, humour can probably be seen as another consistent catalyst for pleasure throughout the history of mankind.

Now, stating that sex and humour are continuous stimuli for human pleasure throughout history is one thing. *What kind* of sex and humour caused pleasure throughout the ages is a completely different matter, though. For the sake of concision, this paper will concentrate on the aspect of humour and take a closer look at consistencies and changes in the way pleasure through amusement has been evoked from medieval Europe to this very day.

## II. Cultural Turn, caveats and the Lewis Chessmen

In 1973 Clifford Geertz' *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* initiated a significant change in the social sciences and the study of history that is now

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<sup>9</sup> TESSITORE. *Reading Aristotle's Ethics*, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> CLASSEN, Albrecht (ed.). *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, its Meaning, and Consequences*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> MECHELE, Leon. *Molière, the French Revolution, and the Theatrical Afterlife*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009, p. 77.



widely known as the ‘cultural turn’.<sup>12</sup> In the course of the past two decades a new approach towards the objects of examination in these fields of research gradually emerged, marked by the basic assumption that symbols, rituals, events, artefacts, arrangements, religious convictions etc. are all part of one system of meaning characteristic for a certain group, time, society and so forth.<sup>13</sup>

In the wake of the cultural turn it became the new objective of social scientists and historians to describe the various systems of meanings mankind developed throughout the millennia of its existence and explain the place of their objects of research, be it a picture, a text, a piece of music or the layout of a city (just to name a few possibilities) in the respective system. In a nutshell, nowadays historians, no matter what field of history they specialise in, are required to take on a cultural perspective while conducting research on a phenomenon of the past. Thus, working as a historian under a cultural perspective involves certain ground rules: (a) always reflect on your own cultural standards and try to realise when they threaten to influence the process of research and (b) always try to shed as much light as possible on the cultural background (the ‘system of meaning’) from which the respective object of research emerged. Only then will it be possible to get an idea of its original function.

Take the twelfth century Lewis Chessmen for example.<sup>14</sup> First of all, not all 78 of the pieces look the same. They vary in clothing, equipment and carving style. It is also possible that they were not all made at the same time. Two pieces, a king and a warder, seem to have been inserted later, maybe as replacements.<sup>15</sup> The 78 pieces form the remains of four different chess sets.

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<sup>12</sup> GEERTZ, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic, 1973.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. BONNELL, Victoria E. and HUNT, Lynn (eds.). *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*. Studies on the History of Society and Culture. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> All explanations regarding the Lewis Chessmen are based on CALDWELL, David, HALL, Mark A. and WILKINSON, Caroline M. *The Lewis Chessmen Unmasked*. Edinburgh: NMS Enterprises Limited, 2010; ROBINSON, James. *The Lewis Chessmen. British Museum Objects in Focus*. London: The British Museum Press, 2004; STRATFORD, Neil. *The Lewis Chessmen and the Enigma of the Hoard*. London: The British Museum Press, 1997; 2003; TAYLOR, Michael. *The Lewis Chessmen*. London: The British Museum Press, 1978; 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. CALDWELL, HALL, WILKINSON. *The Lewis Chessmen Unmasked*, p. 63



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Researchers in the past few years, with the help of forensic anthropologists, have tried to determine which pieces belonged together in one set. In addition to that, they also tried to identify which pieces were made by the same hand. They came up with five different hands that were involved in the production of the chessmen. Nine pieces were either too damaged or too different to be associated for certain with any hand, thus altogether six different groups of chessmen can be distinguished. One group, known as ‘Group D’, is characterised by a wide, short face, a straight nose with rounded tip, round wings of the nose, visible nostrils, round, open eyes, a down-turned mouth, an infraorbital crease, a clear philtrum, nasolabial creases and an overbite. There is also a similarity in vertical and horizontal proportions between all the eleven pieces of that group.<sup>16</sup>

In their publications, both the British Museum and National Museums Scotland are quick to point out that although to modern audiences some of the chess pieces’ expressions seem comical, in the Middle-Ages they were not meant that way. While nowadays bulging eyes are associated with cartoon characters (for example Matt Groening’s ‘The Simpsons’), in medieval times eyes of that kind were, among other things, an expression of battle readiness. The same goes for the, to contemporary eyes, odd pose of the queens who are all resting their chins in their right hands, supported at the elbows by their left hands. In medieval times such a posture indicated thoughtfulness while by nowadays’ standards they, well, do seem a bit clueless.

A cultural perspective on the appearance of the pieces cautions against looking at them from a contemporary point of view. It calls to mind that nine hundred years ago depictions of emotional states and personal characteristics significantly differed from current standards – thus the warning in the publications. The Lewis Chessmen were not meant to look funny and were not intended to instigate pleasure through the stimulus of humour.

On the other hand, one of the pieces, a warder, sorted into Group D (British Museum inventory catalogue no. 119) might be an exception to that rule and thus indicate that the well-founded warnings that come with a

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



cultural perspective do need to be applied with a certain flexibility.<sup>17</sup> While all his comrades look straight ahead, this particular warder looks sideways. That is not just a trick of the light or simply attributable to necessities in the course of the carving process. The pupils of the eyes were deliberately positioned off centre by the carver. He *wanted* his warder to glance sideways. In addition to this, the piece's nose also appears slightly shifted, further emphasising the sideways glance.

The fact that he glances sideways separates the warder not only from the other pieces made by the same hand, in fact it also distinguishes him from all the other Lewis Chessmen – they all, no matter what hand made them, stare straight ahead. Not a single one has pupils that are as off centre as the Group D warder's. A comparison with other twelfth-century chess pieces led to the even more interesting result that not in a single instance could a figurative chess piece be found that did not look straight ahead. Not many are available, of course, and thus the data base is rather small, but nevertheless the lack of sideways-looking figurative chess pieces is glaring, especially since a comparison with eleventh and thirteenth century pieces led to the same result: No sideways glancing!

What does that mean in relation to the chances and limitations of a cultural perspective in medieval history? The sideways-glancing warder is definitely an odd one out, not only of the other Lewis warders but also of the other Lewis Chessmen and, although thanks to the small database, it cannot fully be proven, of other medieval chess pieces. But is it an odd one out meant to be funny?

Nowadays divergence or discrepancy is widely used in modern media to create humorous effects, for example in the 2001 English romantic comedy film *Bridget Jones' Diary*, when the protagonist shows up at a 'tarts and vicars' themed costume party dressed up as a Playboy bunny only to learn that the costumes have been cancelled. The scene is funny because the protagonist, with her glaringly inappropriate clothes, completely stands out against the background of normally dressed guests.

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<sup>17</sup> A photograph of the sideways glancing warder can be found in ROBINSON. *The Lewis Chessmen*, p. 40; also in STRATFORD. *The Lewis Chessmen and the Enigma of the Hoard*, p. 24.



The ground rules of cultural perspective (see above: always reflect on your own cultural standards and try to realise when they threaten to influence the process of research and always try to shed as much light as possible on the cultural background) seemingly forbid to assume that the sideways-glancing warder of the Lewis Chessmen follows the same principle of humoristic affect instigation. They warn against applying modern standards to medieval phenomena or, in other words: What is funny nowadays was not necessarily funny back then.

The key phrase here is ‘not necessarily’. Without a doubt the Lewis Chessmen in general, with their bulging eyes, odd poses, big men on small ponies etc. were not meant to be humorous or comical. But the sideways-glancing warder made in the twelfth century by the same hand as the others, was by exactly that hand, deliberately designed differently from the others.

The carver subtly changed the warder’s appearance and thus created a surprise for the onlooker, an unexpected viewing experience that causes the onlooker’s emotions to momentarily shift, to jump, for example from admiration of the handiwork or strategic considerations to sudden amusement. The crucial point here is that *a twelfth century person in the twelfth century* consciously created a mathematically measurable divergence that immediately catches attention.

### III. Conclusion

Could there be another explanation for the warder’s sideway glancing, aside from a humorous intention? One that has to do with its function in the context of the game, for example? Warders are nowadays widely called ‘rooks’ in chess literature and, in their figurative form, usually appear in the shape of towers.<sup>18</sup> Ever since the creation of the chess game rooks have been equipped with the power of moving along straight lines, both vertically or horizontally, in all directions. Until the queen’s powers were extended in the sixteenth century AD the rook was the most powerful piece in a chess game.<sup>19</sup> It has always been especially important for the

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<sup>18</sup> DAVIDSON, Henry A. *A Short History of Chess*. Sykesville: Greenberg Publisher, 1949, Chapter Five.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*





protection of the king. ‘Castling’ is a special move in which the king is moved two squares towards a rook on the player’s first rank. Then the rook is moved onto the square over which the king crossed. It is the only move in chess in which a player can make use of two pieces at the same time, but since it was invented in the sixteenth century, about four hundred years after the Lewis Chessmen were made, it is of no relevance for the discussion here.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, could it be that the twelfth century carver gave his warder a sideways glance to indicate that it was his job to watch out for the king and the other chess pieces? This explanation would work if there was a way to establish if the sideways glancing warder was positioned on the right or the left side of the board. A position on the left side would indeed allow the warder to ‘keep an eye’ on what was happening on the board.

A position on the right side, however, would make the warder look *away* from the board instead of concentrating on the action, a behaviour that would be totally contrary to the traditional role of a warder/rook in a chess game. Moreover, such an interpretation would raise the question why the carver only produced one sideways glancing warder and not two or four, if it was his intention to emphasise the piece’s function in the game.

There is of course the chance that a matching sideways glancing warder was lost over time. The Lewis Chessmen form the remains of four different chess sets, not a single one complete. Nevertheless, the fact that no sideways glance could be detected not only among the other Lewis Chessmen but also among other eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth century pieces, suggests an interpretation of the warder’s expression as independent of its role in the game.

The sideways-glancing warder is a funny odd one out, not only by modern standards, but also by twelfth-century standards. Humorous effect instigated through divergence or discrepancy was used in the twelfth century just as nowadays. In the sideways glancing warder of the Lewis Chessmen a trace of something incredibly rare is captured and retained for eternity: a trace of the humorous mind of a common medieval man.

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<sup>20</sup> SHORT, Nigel. *Chess Basics*. New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 1994, p. 38.



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So what does that mean for the ground rules of cultural perspective as presented above? Always reflect on your own cultural point of view, yes. Always reflect on the object of research's cultural background, yes. But never forget – taking on a cultural perspective does not necessarily mean that as a matter of principle everything was different in the pre-modern area and similarities must be the result of wrongfully applied modern standards.

Such a rigid application of the cultural approach would limit instead of broaden the scientific understanding of the past. Taking on a cultural perspective also means taking into consideration that some standards over the centuries actually stayed the same. In regard to the instigation of pleasure through certain forms of humour, the sideways glancing warder can be seen as a strong indication of this.