



Uig Bay on the Isle of Lewis. Image free of copyright.

Pensive Queens and Warrior Bishops

The Lewis chessmen come to New York

John Fiske

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The Isle of Lewis lies off the northwest coast of Scotland. It's remote and beautiful; it's wind-swept and sea-beaten. The winter days are short and grey. It's the sort of land whose secrets are dark and closely guarded.

In 1831 the island gave up one of its secrets. A crofter, Malcolm Macleod, was digging in a sandbank in Uig Bay, on the island's west coast, when he came upon a small stone chamber that had been uncovered by the sea. It contained ivory figures that he feared were "elves or gnomes upon whose mysteries he had unconsciously intruded." He fled, but his "fierce wife" made him return and gather up the "pigmy sprites of Celtic folklore." (The quotations are from an 1851 account of their discovery.)

The figures were, in fact, chessmen that had been carved from walrus ivory between 1150 and 1200, probably in Trondheim, Norway. But how did they get to Uig Bay?

In 1832 the common belief on the island was that the chessmen had been carved by the "black women of Uig," nuns from a mysterious convent for which there is neither documentary nor archeological evidence but which was well established in local folklore. The National Museum of Scotland evidently shared the islanders' belief, for when



Two Royal couples in the British Museum. Image free of copyright.

it acquired 11 of the pieces in 1888, it recorded their findspot as near *Tigh nan Caillachain dbu nan Uig* – "the house of the black women of Uig."

In 1863, there emerged the story of a herdsman who saw a shipwrecked sailor swimming ashore with a bag on his back. When he reached the shore, the herdsman promptly murdered him. Disappointed to find the supposed riches in the bag were merely little figures, the herdsman buried them to conceal the evidence of his crime. Eventually, he

was hanged for his "abuse of women" as well as the murder of the sailor, and the secret of the chessmen died with him.

A variant on the story was published as recently as 1967. Here a cabin boy stole the chessmen from his ship and rowed ashore with them. He, too, was murdered by a watching herdsman, who, once again, buried the loot and ended his life swinging on a gallows.

The most likely explanation, however, is that the chessmen were

buried for safekeeping by a merchant traveling the busy trade route from Norway to Ireland, which passed Uig Bay, where his ship may have sheltered from a storm. We'll never know what dangers led him to hide the pieces and why he never returned to claim them, but we can always imagine. The pieces are from four incomplete chess sets, which makes it quite feasible they were indeed part of a merchant's stock.

Their story after the discovery is not much clearer. Uncertain about how to convert his discovery into cash, Malcolm Macleod sought the help of Roderick Pirie, a merchant from Stornoway (the only town on the island), and then, T.A. Forrest, a slippery antiques dealer from Edinburgh, got himself involved. Over the next 30 years, most of the pieces passed profitably through his hands, some of them two or three times.

We do not know how many pieces had lain for centuries in that stone chamber. What was thought to be the whole hoard was exhibited by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in April, 1831, soon after its discovery. The exhibition consisted of "upward of 70" chessmen, 14 tablemen (counters for games such as backgammon) and an ivory belt buckle. But Forrest had sold

the hoard to the society, and may well have already sold individual pieces. Events after the exhibition are equally uncertain, probably because they involved Forrest and his money-making schemes. Eventually he contacted the British Museum, where thankfully they came into the hands of the man who did most to preserve them for posterity. He was Sir Frederick Madden, curator of ancient manuscripts, who purchased 82 pieces from Forrest in 1831. In 1888 the National Museum of Scotland acquired 11 more that had been in private hands. There may well be others, sold individually by Forrest, which are still out there waiting to be rediscovered.

The characters of chess

Chess is a war game that is believed to have originated in India in the sixth century A.D. It came to Europe via Persia and Arabia. The Sanskrit word for chess, *chaturanga*, means “four bodies” and refers to the four divisions of the Indian army: Elephants (bishops), cavalry (knights), chariots (rooks) and infantry (pawns). The Lewis chessmen are the first to include the Europeanized pieces of the queen and the bishop.

The Christian Church tried to ban the game, despite the fact that clergymen were among its keenest players. The reformer Peter Damian wrote in 1062, “how shameful, how senseless, nay how disgusting this sport is in a priest.” But, a mere 50 years later, the Spanish cleric Petrus Alfonsi listed the “Seven Knightly Skills” as “riding, swimming, archery, boxing, hawking, chess and verse-writing.”

The chessmen are miniature works of art differing only in size from more monumental works produced in what has become known as the “Twelfth-Century Renaissance” (see sidebar). The figures all have similar facial features: Prominent, staring eyes, down-turned mouths and slightly protuberant upper lips. They look mysterious, though modern eyes may also see them as lugubrious, even comically so. The backs of the thrones are exuberantly carved with arches, scrolling foliage, mythical beasts and intricate, geometric interlace. The design of the chessmen draws from a repertoire of twelfth-century forms found in church architecture and monuments, in metalwork, and in manuscript illuminations.

The Twelfth-Century Renaissance (c. 1050 – c. 1235)

“The phrase was coined to convey the notion that such a phenomenal growth of ideas had not occurred since the times of ancient Rome. Artistic activity during this period was enriched by influences drawn from Classical Rome, Byzantium, Islam and Judaism. Centres of cultural co-existence were critical to the process of cultural transmission. They were to be found in cities such as Venice and Constantinople (Istanbul), or the territories of Sicily, the south of Italy and the south of Spain, where communities of Christians (including Greek Orthodox), Muslims and Jews all lived together in relative harmony. There was a corresponding growth in literature, philosophy and science as Classical Roman and Greek texts, which had been preserved in Arabic translations, were made available and translated into Latin...The period was remarkable for the foundation of schools and universities such as those at Bologna, Paris, Oxford and Cambridge...The Lewis chessmen were carved precisely in this period of intellectual and artistic growth.”

James Robinson, *The Lewis Chessmen*, The British Museum, 2004, pp. 13-14.



The Lewis chessmen in the National Museum of Scotland. An armed warder (rook) fronts kings, queens and bishops. Image free of copyright.



A selection of pieces in the British Museum. A row of bishops at the back; knights in front of them; then a warder and some pawns; and in the foreground warders and a knight. Image free of copyright.



“Knights Templar Playing Chess,” from Alphonse le Sage, *Livre des Echecs (Book of Chess)*, 1283. Image free of copyright.

The Kings

The eight kings in the hoard are all seated on thrones with elaborately carved backs. They grasp swords that symbolize strength on the battlefield and justice at home. Their cloaks are pinned on the right shoulder leaving their right arms free to wield the sword.



The Bishops

There are 16 bishops, nine standing and seven seated on thrones. They all wear mitres, the ceremonial headdress of a bishop, and some grasp a crozier (as here) while others hold a Bible or perform a blessing. The bishops are, obviously, a European innovation. The piece that they replaced in Indian chess sets was the war elephant. In Scandinavia there was a fearsome class of warrior-bishops known as the *Baglar* ("Crosiers"). Bishops also fought in the Crusades. Besides being highly placed in the social order, bishops were warriors, and as such are appropriate participants in the war game of chess.



The Knights

There are 15 knights, all riding sturdy ponies typical of those native to the Scandinavian countries as well as Iceland and Scotland. The knights wear helmets, of two designs, and are armed for battle with swords, spears and shields. Each shield has a different heraldic design.



The Queens

The eight queens sit on thrones that are very similar to the kings. In the fashion of the twelfth century, they wear veils under their crowns, and they all rest their cheeks on their right hands. Most support their elbows with their left hands, though two hold a horn (as here) and one holds a veil. To modern eyes, the queens may look bored, but to their contemporaries, their expression was one of thought and contemplation.

There are Arabian roots to their expression. In Arabic chess sets the position of the queen was occupied by the king's adviser, the "vizier." When chess came to Europe, the vizier was transformed into the queen. Her thoughtful expression derives directly from the role of the vizier.

The horn may have held drink for the king, but more probably it was a money-horn, which would be more appropriate for a vizier. In the twelfth-century Icelandic epic *Edda*, to provide some Scandinavian support for this idea, the queen carries money in a horn.



In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry played his game of "Wizard's Chess" with the Lewis chessmen (replicas).

The Rooks (Warders or Berserkers)

The 12 warders, the early European version of the rook, are shown as foot soldiers, most with helmets and all with swords and shields similar to the knights. Four of them (including the two shown here) are biting the tops of their shields, an oddity that is explained in one of the Norse sagas, which describes the soldiers of Odin "raging like dogs or wolves, biting their shields, and in strength equal to furious bulls or bears....This frenzy was known as Berserksganger." Today, of course, we know it as "going berserk." Biting the shield was a sign of wildness and ferocity.

The name "rook" comes from the Persian *ruk* meaning chariot. The only trace of chariots remaining in European rooks or warders is their speed of movement. Oddly, rooks eventually took the form of castles, which hardly suggests speediness.



The Pawns

The 19 pawns are all of similar, abstract form, similar to the abstract forms of Arabian chess sets.

The Lewis chessmen are currently on display in an exhibition at the Cloisters Museum in New York (see sidebar). Of course, they're behind Plexiglas, and even though they're begging you to pick them up to feel their heft and the silken ivory, you cannot. But you can feel their otherworldly power; you can understand why they inspired dark legends of mysterious black women and bloodthirsty herdsman, and you'll surely know why the crofter who found them fled in terror back to his fierce wife.



The Lewis Chessmen Come to New York

Thirty-four pieces from the British Museum are on display at the Cloisters Museum, New York, until April 22, 2012, in the exhibition *The Game of Kings: Medieval Ivory Chessmen from the Isle of Lewis*.

This is the first time that such a large ensemble of the chessmen has been on view outside the United Kingdom. After the showing in New York, they will return to London. The exhibition also includes examples of Islamic and Medieval chessmen from the metropolitan's own collection. A blog related to the exhibition is featured on the museum's website.

The Cloisters Museum and Gardens is the branch of The Metropolitan Museum of Art for medieval art and architecture, at 99 Margaret Corbin Drive, Fort Tryon Park. For hours and information, visit www.metmuseum.org.

Material for this article is drawn from the book accompanying the exhibition: James Robinson, The Lewis Chessmen, published by the British Museum, and available in the shops of the Metropolitan Museum for \$12, www.metmuseum.org.