The Lewis Chessmen were never anywhere near Iceland!

by Morten Lilleøren

The Lewis chessmen are possibly the most famous chess pieces ever made. They were found on the island of Lewis in the Hebrides in 1831. Altogether the finding contains ninety-three items, of which seventy-eight are chessmen. Sixty-seven of them are in the British Museum (some shown in figure one) and eleven are in the Scottish National Museum. They are regarded as some of the most remarkable artifacts from the Middle Ages.

Figure One. The Lewis Chessmen. Twelfth century, British Museum, London.

In September 2010 I came across an article/internet site entitled, ”The Enigma of the Lewis Chessmen,” written by Gudmundur G. Thorarinsson, with a preface by Einar S. Einarsson (Thorarinsson, 2010). Since the content is literally filled with faults and oversights, I originally paid it little attention. Now there is good reason to address the content of this site. It seems as though portions of the chess world have accepted the proposed theories with too few reservations, a notable exception being Dr. Alex Woolf (McClain, 2010). In the notes I provide a list of Internet sites that have perpetuated Thorarinsson’s views, some with critical remarks, others without (1). The Wikipedia entry “chess bishop” has been edited along the lines of Thorarinsson (Wikipedia, 2011a).

Another marker event occurred that upset me and stimulated me to further action. I received Chess Masterpieces: One Thousand Years of Extraordinary Chess Sets, by Dean and Brady (2010). I do not intend to review this book here, but must note that it is a handsome-looking, large, hardcover book about chess pieces and their history. It must have been a labor of love and truly a costly production. They even managed to get Garry Kasparov to write a preface. Unfortunately the work is partly spoiled because it perpetuates the arguments of Thorarinsson (Dean and Brady, 2010, p.39-40).

Thorarinsson's Contentions and Arguments

In brief, Thorarinsson claims that the Lewis chessmen were made in Iceland. The main contention is that Icelandic and English are the only languages that use the words bishop/biskup and rook/hrokur, with Iceland using the words earlier than England. Thus, since there are several bishops amongst the

Lewis pieces, Iceland is their most probable source as only they were using the word “bishop” for this piece.

A similar argument is made for the rook. Another focal point is the shape of the horses used for the knights. They allegedly strongly resemble the Icelandic horse race. The fourth contention is that there were many good walrus-ivory carvers in Iceland, with a final contention that there was a good deal of trade between Iceland and Greenland, the source of the ivory material for the chessmen.

These are Thorarinsson’s main arguments in support of his theory.

We'll begin to analyze his points, first covering chess terminology.

The Language Contention

Einarson (in Thorarinsson 2010), states on page three: “The word “bishop” for a chess piece is only used in two languages, Icelandic and English.” They stumble at the start. There are several languages that use this term nowadays: English, Icelandic and Faroese are in one special group, as they have the most names in common. In The Faroe Islands the names of the game is “skáktalv,” and the major pieces are: “rókur,” “ riddari,” “ bispur,” “frúgv,” and “kongur” (Merkistein,1997 and Wikipedia, 2011b).

The Faroe language is spoken by around 50,000 people living in the islands and 10-20,000 people living abroad. As Thorarinsson’s main point is based upon the assumption that Iceland and England alone are using these terms for the pieces today, his very first point is shown to be incorrect.

But it does not end there.

The Bishop

”Bishop” is also used in Ireland (easpag), Wales (esgob; both the Irish and Welsh usage derive from Gaelic) and Portugal (bispo).

Thorarinsson (2010) states on page sixteen:

> “The Lewis Chessmen are the only chess pieces that connect chess with the church.”

Figure Two. Bishop, Twelfth Century, English, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure Three. Bishop, Twelfth Century, National Museum, Copenhagen. Wichmann no. 46 (1960).

Figure Four. Bishop, Fourteenth Century, Staatliche Museum, Berlin. Greygoose no. 21 (1979) (Cazaux, 2010).

Figure Five. Bishop, Fourteenth Century, Staatliche Museum, Berlin. Greygoose no. 26 (1979) (Cazaux, 2010).

Figure Six. Bishop, medieval/undated, Kgl.Museet, Stockholm. Mackett-Beeson no.9 (1969).

Figure Seven. Bishop, Fourteenth Century, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. Wichmann No. 64 (1960) (Cazaux, 2010).

Figures two through seven show that Thorarinsson is wrong in this respect. All these bishops are from findings other than the Lewis chessmen (2). In the Wichmanns' book on chess pieces, still a major reference work fifty years after publication (1960), we find pieces made like bishops in five pictures, all dated between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Other books on chess pieces also have other "bishop" type bishops portrayed. It culminates nicely in Hollander's statement:

> Der "reitende bischof" ist als schachfigur besonders aus dem 14. Jahrhundert bekannt" (Hollander, 2005, p.60). Translated: "As a chesspiece the riding bishop is well known, in particular from the fourteenth century."

In this matter Thorarinsson (2010) states on page sixteen:

> "The Lewis Chessmen are the only chess pieces that include bishops with crosier and mitres and full ceremonial clothing."

Clearly he missed out on something.

Einarson, in Thorarinsson (2010) continues:

> "In most other languages, including Norwegian, this piece was - and still is - called a 'runner'" (ibid., p.3).

Thorarinsson himself states:

> "In Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe, this piece is called "löber" or "Leufer," meaning runner or messenger. As far as is known, Norwegians have never called this piece a bishop" (ibid.p.9).

Figures two through seven above show us something quite different. Additionally, a Danish/Norwegian-Latin dictionary has the following entry:

> "Bisspe paa Skackspil" (Colding, 1626, p 49) (translated: "Bishops in chess") (3).

The Courier

The name "läufer" comes into conventional chess at a late stage, briefly outlined here. "Läufer" is a synonym for "kurier," or in English, "courier." In medieval times, there was a chess variant played on a twelve by eight board, adding four pieces and four pawns to the armies. The most substantial addition was two "couriers" at each side. Back then bishops proper only moved two squares diagonally. These new pieces, the "couriers," moved like the bishops of today – as far as they could along a diagonal.

The game "kurierspiel"("Courier game" or "courier chess") is first mentioned around 1200 A.D., and continues to be played in this style in Germany and some neighboring countries for centuries. Then something happens: Ordinary chess is reformed in Valencia, Spain, around 1475 (Garzón, 2005). Suddenly the new bishop moves just like the courier in the courier game. This probably caused a mix-up in Germany at some junction in time – and the name of the bishop changed and became the "courier," or to be exact, the "läufer."

It is important to note that it could not have taken place before the reformation in Valencia, when the bishop and queen were accorded their now modern style of movement. As a matter of fact, it happened much later. The first known time the term läufer/runner is mentioned as the German word for the piece is in Hyde's history of chess (1694, p.75). At the very same page the names of the Danish pieces are mentioned. The bishop was still "biscop" or "bisp." Thorarinsson misses the target by half a millennium.

Even in their claim regarding the use of "bishops" on English soil, Thorarinsson and Einarsson get it wrong:

> "The only other language where a "runner" is called a "bishop" is English—but that did not occur until after 1450" (Thorarinsson, 2010, p.3).

The Dominican monk Jacobus de Cessolis left out the clergy from the allegory he wrote at the end of the thirteenth century (de Cessolis, 2008). In this allegory he used the chessboard and the pieces as the framework for his morality. When he left out the clergy (and thereby even the bishops proper) from his sermon, he put the part of the chess world which used the word "bishop" for the chess piece in a difficult position. In translating this book, naming the piece a "bishop" was not an option. It had to be a term not associated with the clergy.

This is the reason why Thorarinsson's reference in English, Caxton's *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* (1474), could not use the word "bishop" for the piece – Caxton's book was a translation of the book by de Cessolis. Because the clergy/bishops have been left out of the moralization, we can pay no attention to the name of this piece in the whole family of de Cessolis manuscripts in German, English and Scandinavian in medieval times.

The Rook

Now to the rook. First, the use of "berserker." Thorarinsson states:

> "The rooks are berserkers, who figure prominently in contemporary Icelandic writings but are not known from written works in Norway at the time" (Thorarinsson, 2010, p.14).

Further:

> "Berserkers are presumably an older phenomenon and are well known from Scandinavia, but they were at the forefront of Icelanders' consciousness at this time. They occur in Icelandic writings – Snorri describes berserkers in *Heimskringla*" (ibid., p 12).

Here Thorarinsson fails to mention one crucial point: *Heimskringla* is a chronicle about kings. No king has ever lived in Iceland. Still the story is a tale about kings – the Norwegian kings. *Heimskringla* is a story primarily about Norwegians. The author may be Icelandic, but the content is mostly Norwegian.

Now to the rooks proper:

> "English and Icelandic speak of a rook (hrókur). Berserkers seem to figure nowhere except among the Lewis chessmen" (ibid., p.12).

Again Thorarinsson (2010) is wrong. There are not as many old pieces of rook-warriors as there are bishops, but they do exist. The best one was undoubtedly found in Öland, Sweden, shown in the figure below.

Figure Eight. Warrior rook, Thirteenth Century, Kgl.Museet, Stockholm. Found in Øland. A.Goldschmidt: Vol. IV, no.250 (1923-26). O.Ferm et al. (2005, p.33).

Figure Nine. Warrior rook. Twelfth Century, National Museum, Copenhagen. This one is Hollander no. 25 (2005).

We also have in this case several written sources, including Scandinavian ones, directly proving Thorarinsson wrong. The first is *Schacktafvels Lek* (Klemming, 1881), a Swedish translation of de Cessolis' allegory. *Schacktafvels Lek* still exists in two hand-written manuscripts, one in Stockholm, dated 1476, and one in Copenhagen, dated 1492. They are both copies from at least one older manuscript (Blomquist, 1941, p.101 ff). In *Schacktafvels Lek* the rook is named "rok," plural "rokkin" (Klemming, 1881, p.201 ff).

There is also the Colding dictionary mentioned earlier. The entry relevant to the rook is "Rocke paa Skackspill" (Colding, 1626, p. 481).

Hyde is again relevant, providing "Rock" or "elephant" (Hyde, 1694, p.75). In Poland the following was used for a rook, according to Hyde: "Pòp," meaning priest, and "roch." Murray (1913, p.420) indicates that a Czech fourteenth century vocabulary gives exactly the same words.

The German word throughout the whole medieval period is - "roch." The word appears in the *Schachzabelbuch* by Heinrich von Beringen (approx. 1300, p.93,verse 2699 ff) and Konrad von Ammenhausen (1337, column 301, line 7839 ff) and as late as 1843 in Bilguer (von der Lasa, 1843, p.2).

Obviously oblivious to all this, Thorarinsson writes:

> "In Scandinavia and Germany, this chess piece is called "tower," Swedish torn, Danish tårn" (Thorarinsson, 2010, p.12).

The fact is that in medieval times Rok/roch/rokur was the name of the piece in Germany, most of northern Europe and the whole of Scandinavia (3). Thorarinsson and Einarsson give the impression that they believe that because the names are proper usage today, it must always have been this way.

Rewriting History

Now let us turn to another point with serious implications. Iceland was inhabited from 870 onwards mainly by Norwegians (the "landnaam"). The Icelanders themselves wrote about it, for example, in *Landnaamabok* (Palsson and Schei, 1997) and *Islendingabok* (Fróde and Jonsson, 1930). Therefore, this history is fairly well-known.

This shows that the Icelanders spoke the Old Norwegian (West Norse) language. In a way they still do, at least they are much, much closer to the old language than the Norwegians are. The languages were almost the same until the middle of the fourteenth century. Then what happened? The Plague or Black Death (1350) was definitely the worst disaster ever in Norway. It killed more than half the Norwegian population, simultaneously more or less destroying the written language – too many people of literacy died. Looking at the documents produced shortly after the plague, one can see that the scribes had difficulties in handling their duties.

At the same time, the political ruling class was decimated and, a little after 1350, personal unions between the Scandinavian kingdoms were formed. Norway became a part of Denmark, and after a

while all official documents were written in Danish. The clergy were recruited from Denmark, and especially after the reformation in 1536, the church was literally Danish. Finally, in 1604, when the old laws were revised, the written language was gone. The West Norse language in Norway now became an oral language only. It remained this way for centuries (Leitne et al., 1975; Hovdhaugen et al., 2000) (4).

The old (West) Norse language never reappeared in Norway. This is why we today have two written languages in Norway: One is called “bokmaal” or the book language. One is called “nynorsk,” the new Norwegian, which stands in opposition to the old, now essentially extinct Norse language, which only has usage to a certain degree in Iceland.

The first is based on the Danish language, the second is based on the oral language that still existed, mainly in rural, western parts of the country around 1850. None of them were close to the Old Norse. But the language did exist in Norway when the Lewis pieces were made. It has therefore no merit to claim that Norwegians have never used the word "biskup." The word "loeper" wasn't even invented until centuries later. So if the Icelanders used the word “biskup,” the Norwegians must have done the same!

> “In 1939, the Arnamagnæan Commission in Copenhagen initiated the preparation of a new dictionary of Old Norse prose (*Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*)…, its scope was Icelandic prose writings up to 1540 and Norwegian up to 1370” (Hovdhaugen, et al., 2000, p.272).

These years, 1540 and 1370, are the years when the languages “left” Old Norse, separated and became something else (5).

In chess circles there are various proverbs beginning with,“Every Russian schoolboy knows… .” Similarly, “ Every Norwegian schoolboy knows” that the languages in Norway and Iceland were the same until Norway became a part of the twin kingdom of Denmark-Norway. One would assume that the Icelanders know this history as well. But Thorarinsson claims that he has “… lectured on various subjects including the origin of the Icelandic people” (Thorarinsson, 2010, p.4). How can he have lectured on Old Norse history and not know basic facts like this?

The Knight

Now let us turn to the knight – Thorarinsson states:

> “The knights are mounted on horses that seem Icelandic in both size and head shape” (ibid., p.14).

and, just to be sure we have treated him fairly:

> “They are so small that they are reminiscent of the Icelandic horse, and the shape of their heads seems Icelandic. Horses of this kind were extremely scarce in Scandinavia” (ibid., p.12).

Figure Ten. Knight, Twelfth Century, Museo Bargello, Florence. A.Goldschmidt: vol. IV, no.264 (1923-26).

Figure Eleven. Queen, Fourteenth Century, National Museum, Copenhagen (Cazaux, 2010).

Figure Twelve. Knight, Fourteenth Century, Staatliche Museum, Berlin (Cazaux, 2010).

Figure Thirteen. Knight, Museo Bargello, Florence. Sanvito p. 48 (1992) (Cazaux, 2010).

These images of other medieval chess pieces are shown because they have horses of a similar shape as the Lewis chess pieces.

This whole argument seems far-fetched. The Lewis chessmen using horses are highly stylized. Therefore the size and shape of them cannot be taken as an argument for any particular horse breed.

A horse is by nature, seen from above, of a more or less rectangular shape. Unfortunately this shape does not fit too well into the squares of the chessboard, which are quadratic. Therefore the horses as chess pieces are very often re-shaped to fit into the squares. To this end I have to add that the knights have another limitation. They should not be taller than the kings. This is an rule affecting all chess sets to the modern day. Both these limitations point towards a compact knight piece.

The material for the Lewis chessmen - walrus tusk - has its limitations: These are explained in the pamphlets of the British Museum (Stratford 1997 p.37; Robinson 2004 p.58). I would here only point at the importance of keeping the pieces as compact as possible. If they were not (for example by carving out a horizontal horse, saddled by an upright knight), the pieces could easily break.

In order not to do injustice against Thorarinsson, here is a brief survey of some aspects of the relevant horse breeds. When Iceland was populated, there were initially no horses there. The horses came along with the immigrants. Some were probably from the British Isles and many of them came from Norway and the Norse territory. This gives us an idea of the nearest “relatives” to the Icelandic horse: the Fjording and Northland horse, both rather small – and Norwegian. And of course the Shetland pony is even smaller. Again pictures tell more than words.

Figure Fourteen. Northland horse (6).

Figure Fifteen. Fjording (6).


Figure Sixteen. Icelandic horse (6).


Figure Seventeen. Shetland pony (6).

Even if it is not a major point here, figures fourteen through seventeen show that Thorarinsson's statement:

> "Horses of this kind were extremely scarce in Scandinavia"

is dubious.

To summarize: The Lewis chess horses are not shaped and formed after the horse's natural shape. It is mainly the chessboard and the shape of the other pieces that determine the form of this piece. Then the material used and its' durability shapes the piece.

The Carvings

Now to the alleged similarity between the ornamentation on the back of the pieces' thrones and Icelandic carvings. Thorarinsson states:

> "Decorative art and carving were highly developed in Iceland at this time. Many examples are known of Icelandic bishops' sending or bringing fine gifts carved from walrus tusks to foreigners. Artists, goldsmiths, and master carvers were employed at the bishops' seats, and

> written records state outright that walrus tusk was among their raw materials" (Thorarinsson, 2010, p.14).

And the evidence is:

> "The pattern of carving on the chessmen is in a Romanesque style. This style is well known in Iceland from the time of these carvings to the present day."

And then:

> "In Ellen Marie Magerøy's book *Planteornamentikken i islandsk treskurd*, there are pictures of contemporary carvings that do not seem to bear much resemblance to the patterns on the Lewis chessmen."

Of course, this is not much of a proof, so he adds:

> "This still tells but half the story, since only a small minority of the wood carvings from this time period have been preserved" (ibid., p.7).

I could not have proven my point better myself; the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

In the aftermath of Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species,* an important aspect of older archaeology was summarized as: What species are for the science of nature, type/form is for archaeology. This was later modified. The form doesn't always change according to utility, but more according to whims of fashion.

To recast Darwinism: In archaeology it is "the survival of the prettiest" that guides an aspect of the art. In a way this is similar to perhaps the most important ability of a chess player, generally recognized as "pattern recognition". The chess player in a way assimilates the positions in front of him to find chunks of pieces and clusters that form a familiar pattern.

Archaeologists do the same, looking for fragments that have a familiar design. This means that it is possible to locate shapes, forms, figures, whatever - by resemblance, both geographically and in time. This is where Thorarinsson fails (see above) and where Trondheim/Nidaros as the source (same city with two names) during time has added up points as the logical source (7).

The pamphlets of the British Museum make a thorough research in this respect. Taylor (1978) devotes a major part of his pamphlet to this (pp.8-15, including many pictures, showing the resemblance between the carvings and similar ornaments of Scandinavian – non-Icelandic – origin). Stratford (1997) devotes pp. 41-47 to the same, and Robinson (2004), pp. 30-37 and p. 58.

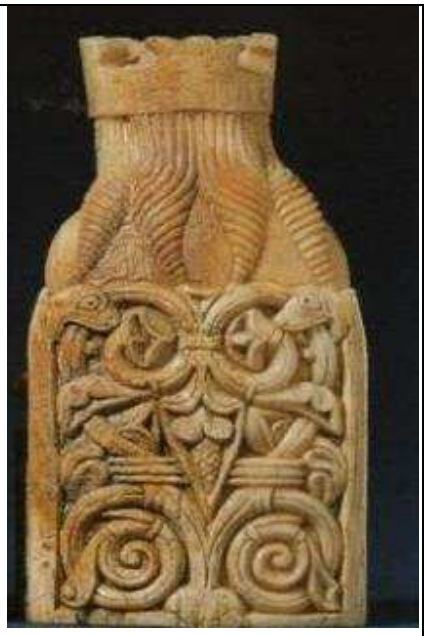

Figure Eighteen. Lewis chess king, back of throne.

Figure Nineteen. Lewis chess king, back of throne.

Figures eighteen and nineteen show the backs of some of the pieces. Many other pieces have similar ornaments. These ornamental patterns, with plants and animals, are particularly associated with locations in ancient Norway. Liebgott (1985) writes in the discussion of a similar object:

> “The circular plant patterns are in its structure common throughout northern Europe. What makes the carving so distinctly Norwegian, is the peculiar animals that grab hold of each other” (Liebgott 1985, p.30).

This pattern is called the “Urnes” style in Norwegian.

Caldwell et al. writes:

> “…most scholars would at present expect to locate the manufacture of such pieces in a town or large trading centre…(The craftsmen) had a good understanding of the robes, vestments and protective clothing worn by kings, queens, bishops and knights. This surely suggests that they had access to such people, or were perhaps employed in workshops provided by a king or archbishop. Lewis had no towns at the time in question, but there were strong links..(to) major Norwegian towns…”(Caldwell et al., 2010, p. 66).

Iceland did not have any such towns. Throughout his text, Thorarinsson makes a particular point of the fact that Iceland never had a king nor queen living on the Island.

The Source of the Lewis Pieces?

Robinson (2004) concludes:

> “Trondheim is the most likely candidate“(p.58).

Stratford (1997):

> “Trondheim or another Scandinavian town is at the moment the strongest candidate”(p.47).

Why do they come to this conclusion? There has been some major findings that make Trondheim the likely place of origin, the most important being this diagram:

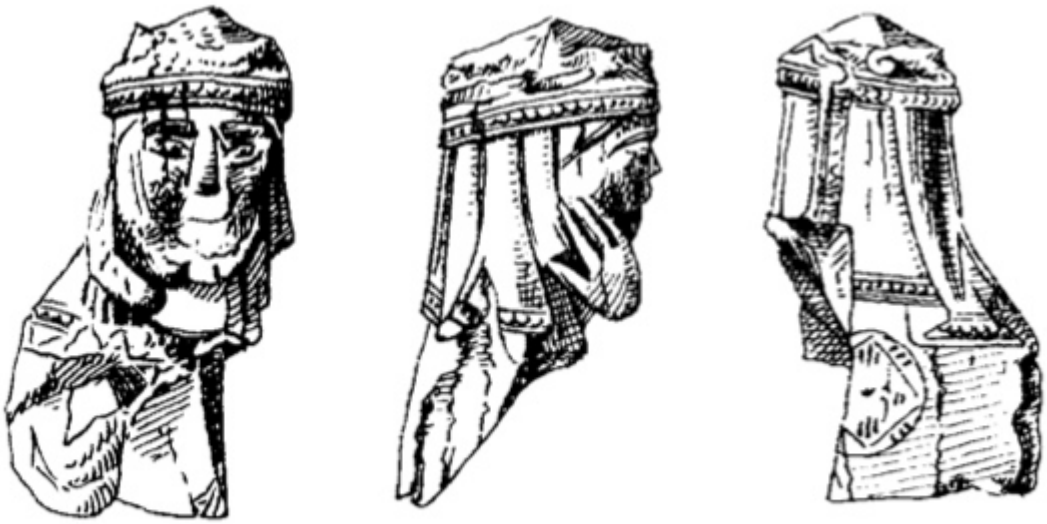

Figure Twenty. Trondheim chess queen, image taken from McLees and Ekroll (1990).

I quote at length from the article reporting the (re)finding:

> “The figurine is directly comparable with the queen pieces from the Isle of Lewis chess sets in terms of raw material, size, form and sculptural details. Regarding raw material, Krefting states that the piece consisted of ivory, and the probability is that it comprised walrus ivory. The eight Lewis queens vary considerably in size; however, the dimensions of the Trondheim figurine's surviving portion, at 4.5 cm high, would be compatible with an original height somewhere in the region of c.9 cm (an additional 4.5 cm would accommodate a suitably proportioned lower body and throne), comparing favourably with the two tallest Lewis queens. The most striking and evocative trait, however, is the characteristic, indeed, idiosyncratic, pose adopted by the figure, where the right hand rests against the right cheek. This is the most eloquent clue to the piece's particular iconographic and functional status, and, with the design of the folded shoulder-length kerchief, places it conclusively in the company of the chess queens from Lewis” (McLees and Ekroll, 1990, p. 151).

> “There can be no doubt that the Trondheim queen derives from the same workshop which produced the Lewis pieces. By virtue of its art-historical dating, it is almost certainly the earliest chess piece yet found in Norway, and is possibly one of the earliest representational forms of chess piece known from Scandinavia. The presence of this new member of the 'Lewis family' on Norwegian soil in the very heart of one of the country's most important 12th-century cities also serves to focus attention on contemporary developments in and around the city of Trondheim itself. These may have some relevance to any discussion relating to the location of the workshop in question. The manifest competence, inventiveness and interaction of local schools of Romanesque minor and monumental carving is well documented: the long-established presence in the town of professional woodcarvers and boneworkers who produced items of superior quality; the characteristic 'Trondheim Group' of stave-church portals; the local strain of ornamental stone carving in the district's Romanesque stone churches, centered

> particularly, from c. I 120, on the cathedral workshops; and, if the inferences implicit in the motifs common to a number of carved ivories, including a possible crozier head found on the nearby island of Munkholmen, can be trusted, the range of skills and motifs shared by local sculptors also extended to the intricate carving of walrus ivory"(McLees and Ekroll, 1990, p.153).

Tithe and Trade

> "Iceland had a strong connection to Greenland at this time. Icelanders settled Greenland with a large fleet of ships, and these Greenlanders had many friends and relatives in Iceland. Records describe bishops' ships that brought goods from Greenland at that time…. Icelanders thus had access to walrus tusks and other raw materials from Greenland" (Thorarinsson (2010), p.14).

For once I agree with Thorarinsson. Both Norwegians and Icelanders travelled to Greenland, and all three areas eventually became united under the rule of the Norwegian king. But long before this happened, the churches of the two islands were connected to Trondheim/Nidaros. That happened when the archbishopric of the north/Nidaros was founded in 1152/53. From then on, the provinces had to pay tithe to the archbishopric. This was in addition to commercial trade, social and family relations between the three countries. Walrus tusk came from the arctic region, from the shores of what is now known as Russia, but a lot of it came from Greenland. Written documents show that Greenland paid their tribute in naturals, amongst them walrus ivory. This means that when the archbishopric was established, Nidaros all of a sudden received a lot more ivory than before. Note the concurrence of the new archbishopric and the dating of the Lewis chessmen. It can of course be a coincidence, but the two parts fit well together. Again I quote McLees and Ekroll:

> "A potential catalyst uniting home-grown talent with an assured source of appropriate raw material may be sought in the city's establishment as the seat of the Archdiocese of Nidaros in 1152/3, the resulting influx of walrus ivory as payment of tithes from the diocese of Greenland possibly engendering the local production of sophisticated carved ivories, perhaps under the aegis of the archbishopric itself. Such a workshop, drawing on a pool of indigenous skills and techniques, an abundant supply of ivory, and located in an appropriate and dynamic cultural setting, might conceivably have produced objects as extraordinary and as expressive of their time as the Lewis and Trondheim chess pieces" (McLees and Ekroll 1990, p.154).

Before summarizing, I add another quote:

> "According to Dr. Alex Woolf, director of the Institute for Medieval Studies of the University of St. Andrews, reasons for believing the chess pieces probably came from Trondheim include: a broken queen piece in a similar styIe found in an excavation of the archbishop's palace (it appeared the piece was broken as it was being made), the presence of wealthy people in Trondheim capable of paying craftsmen for the high-quality pieces, similar carving in Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, the excavation in Trondheim of a kite-shaped shield similar to shields on some of the pieces, and a king piece of similar design found on Hitra Island, near the mouth of Trondheim Fjord. He said that the armour worn by the chess figures includes "perfect" reproductions of armour worn at the time in Norway" (8).

Conclusion

For a conclusion, one starts by simply considering the trade route and the tithe from Greenland to Norway in relation to the earlier presented material.

A review of the figures showed that bishops and rooks were found in various parts of northern Europe. Look at the chess knights' horses: They are stylized. Can they be used to sort out an existing horse breed? If so: Would it then be the Icelandic horse that had to be the chosen one? Is this at all a valid argument? I say no on both counts.

Add to this the philology, which provides written evidence of the existence of the cited names for the pieces almost all over northern Europe. The final, and certainly not least important philologic point is: How can Thorarinsson claim that Norwegian words are differing from the Icelandic, when authoritative dictionaries and books on Norse language history indicate that Icelandic and Norwegian were a common Old Norse language at least until the Plague, the Black Death, in 1350?

Apparently Thorarinsson and Einarsson made the mistake all beginning researchers are warned against, starting with the conclusion that Iceland is the place where the pieces were made. Then selectively all arguments that might possibly contribute to the foregone conclusion were added, without addressing such mundane matters as historical facts, the proper exercise of source criticism and other scholarly necessities.

> "When the beginning is a frenzy, the outcome often becomes an oddity"
> Ibsen (1867, *Peer Gynt*,act 4).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Ole Drønen, member of CCI, Chess Collectors International and Dr. Ph. Ole Kristian Førrisdahl, member of the Ken Whyld Association, for critical remarks, factual comments and corrections, and above all for technical support.

Notes:

1)

http://www.medievalarchives.com/category/games

http://www.elginism.com/20101023/3108/

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/7994966/Iceland-now-claim-they-made-Lewis-Chessmen.html

http://www.chessbase.com/newsdetail.asp?newsid=6665

http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/news/Mum39s-gone-to-Iceland-for.6526079.jp

http://www.zimbio.com/Iceland/articles/OHlM0uEXnMU/Lewis+Chessmen+made+Iceland

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/09/arts/09lewis.html?_r=2

http://ipagan.org/asp/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=8446

http://www.scotclans.com/bletherskite/?tag=lewis-chessmen

http://gambit.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/07/a-new-theory-on-the-origin-of-the-lewis-chessmen/

2)

The *Dictionarium Herlovianum* (The Herlufsholm Dictionary), the oldest and quite extensive Danish-Latin dictionary, was compiled in 1626 by the headmaster of the Herlufsholm school, Poul Jensen Kolding (or Colding) (1581-1640) (Colding, 1626).

3)

As an appendix: The Germans are the first to use the word “turm,” meaning “tower,” for the piece. This tendency seems to have started with Vida’s chess poem (1512) where he renamed the rook to an elephant (with a tower at his back). This poem became very popular, with numerous editions through the years (in the L/N-list there are seventy-four(!) editions mentioned). Several figurative chess sets started to be made after the names of the pieces in the poem. Now the rooks were pictured as elephants, with towers on their back. One day someone dropped the elephant, and only the rook as tower was left. The rest is history, as they say.

Perhaps this part of the history can be interpreted otherwise. But there is no literary proof of any “turm/tårn/torn/tower” in the languages of Scandinavia and Germany in medieval times.

4)

The Danes, on the other hand, were under severe pressure from Germany (for example, by way of pressure from the minority population in Slesvig). This way even Danish changed severely and quite rapidly during medieval times and early modern times. It is estimated that around 1700 up to twenty-five percent of the population in Copenhagen spoke German.

5)

There were some minor differences between the Icelandic and the Norwegian written language back then: One was that the Icelanders used an h in front of many words, like hr- hn- and so on. This means that the old board game "nefatafl" were written "hnefatafl" in Iceland. And the chesspiece "rook" was written "hrokur" in Iceland. In Norway therefore, it had to be written "rokur." This is closer to the English, and therefore a more probable link. This is exactly the same spelling as the Faroese.

6)

http://www.akersmus.no/husdyr/?mid=102&pid=147

http://www.shetlandsponni.info/bruks.htm

http://www.hest.no/blogg/blogg.html?bid=4707&blid=275788

http://www.pbase.com/dokufoto/image/41309599

7)

This is also why the reference to Madden (1832) is not relevant anymore. He neither had access to the material (most of the findings were made after he wrote his article – in 1832 - the others he was unaware of), nor knowledge of the method mentioned. The article is mostly based on philological evidence, which were in large part incorrect (see A.v.d.Linde's somewhat harsh criticism in "Nordisk Skaktidende," 1874). And the few archaeological remarks he made (on the "Charlemagne pieces"), were based on wrong information and even wrong descriptions of the pieces - he had not seen them himself, so he relied on a second-hand(false) description. So, by today's standards and knowledge, Madden's article has little value as a reference, apart from being the first to record the findings of the Lewis Chessmen.

8)

Dr. Woolf's statement (McClain, 2010) should have been a killer ("A hell of a lot of walrus ivory went into making those chessmen, and Iceland was a bit of a scrappy place full of farmers," Dr. Woolf said. The pieces are also exquisite works of art, he said, adding, "You don't get the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Iowa.") But because the journalist hid these statements inside an article entitled "A New Theory on the Origin of the Lewis Chessmen," they lacked the impact they should have made.

References

Blomquist, G. (1941). *Schachtafvelslek och Sju vise Mästare : studier i medeltidens litteratur historia.* Stockholm, H. Geber.

Biblioteca v.d.Linde – Niemeijeriana (1955). *A catalogue of the chess collection in the Royal Library.* The Hague.

Caldwell, Hall and Wilkinson (2010). *The Lewis Chessmen Unmasked.* National Museums Scotland, Nms Enterprises Ltd.

Caxton,W. and W. Axon (1474). *The Game and Playe of the Chesse,* a 2008 reprint of the 1883 edition

Cazaux, Jean-Paul (2010). *The first European chessmen*. Available at: http://history.chess.free.fr/first-european.htm . Accessed 21 February 2011.

Colding, Poul Jensen (1626). *The Dictionarium Herlovianum* . Available at: http://renæssancesprog.dk/ordboger/Colding1626/49/image_format?query_id=3865 . Accessed 13 February 2011.

De Cessolis, J. and H.L. Williams (2008). *The Book of Chess*. New York, Italica Press.

Dean, G and M. Brady (2010). *Chess Masterpieces: One Thousand Years of Extraordinary Chess Sets*. New York : Abrams Books.

Ferm, O. (2005). *Chess and Allegory in the Middle Ages. A collection of essays*. Stockholm, Sällskapet Runica et Mediaevalia.

Fiske, D.W. (1905). *Chess in Iceland and in Icelandic literature : with historical notes on other. table-games*. Florence, Florentine Typographical Society.

Fróde, A. and F. Jonsson (1930). *Islendingabók.* Available at: http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/%C3%8Dslendingab%C3%B3k_%28Finnur_J%C3%B3nsson%29 . Accessed 13 February 2011.

Goldschmidt, A. (1923-26). *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen aus der Romansichen Zeit*, Vol. IV. Berlin, B. Cassirer.

Greygoose, F. (1979). *Chessmen.* New York, Arco Pub.

Hollander, B. and H. Hollander (2005). *Schachpartie durch Zeiten und Welten.* Heidelberg : Edition Braus.

Hovdhaugen,E., F. Karlsson, C. Henriksen and B. Sigurd (2000). *The History of Linguistics in the Nordic Countries*. Available at: http://www.ling.helsinki.fi/~fkarlsso/nordhist.htm . Accessed 21 February 2011.

Hyde, T. (1694). "De Ludis Orientalibus : Mandragorias," reprinted, translated and abbreviated in *Chess it's Origin*, Keats,V. (1994). Oxford Academia Publishers.

Ibsen, Henrik. (1867). *Peer Gynt*, Act 4, New edition (2009). Oslo,Vigmostad & Bjørke.

Klemming, E. (1881). "Medeltids Dikter och Rim"(*Schacktafvels Lek* pp. 201-312). Stockholm, Kongl. Boktryckeriet, P.A. Norsted&soner.

Leitne, A., E. Lundeby and I. Torvik (6th ed.1989), *Språket Vårt Før og Nå* (Our language earlier and now; covers Norse/Norwegian/Icelandic). Oslo, Gyldendal.

Liebgott, N.K. (1985). *Elfenben (Ivory)*. Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen.

Mackett-Beeson, A.E.J. (1969). *Schachfiguren*. New York, Putnam.

McClain, Dylan Loeb (2010), "Reopening History of Storied Norse Chessmen," *New York Times*, September 9, 2010, page C2 in the print version. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/09/arts/09lewis.html. Accessed 13 February 2011.

Madden, F. (1832). "Historical remarks on the introduction of the game of chess into Europe, and on the ancient chessmen discovered in the Isles of Lewis," *Archaeologia: or Miscellaneous tracts relating to antiquity*, Volume 24, Society of Antiquaries of London, pp.203–91. Available at: http://books.google.com/books?id=IVpEAAAAcAAJ&pg=PA203&lpg=PA203&dq=Historical+remarks+on+the+introduction+of+the+game+of+chess++into+Europe,+and+on+the+ancient+chessmen+discovered+in+the+Isles+of+Lewis&source=bl&ots=TcYJOamEEN&sig=uuaua2XxHMqc_CGgLtyj0Cs . Accessed 24 February 2011.

McLees, C and Ø. Ekroll (1990). “A drawing of a medieval ivory chess piece from the 12th-century church of St Olav,Trondheim, Norway,” *Medieval Archaeol* 34, pp. 151–4. Available at: http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/adsdata/arch-769-1/ahds/dissemination/pdf/vol34/34_151_154.pdf Accessed 13 February 2011.

Merkistein, S. (1997). *Føroysk telving í 20. øld.* Tórshavn, Talvsamband Føroya.

Murray, H.J.R. (1913). *A History of Chess*. Oxford, Clarenden Press.

Palsson, H. and L. (1997). *Kjørsvik Schei*. Landnåmsboken. Oslo, Thorleif Dahls kulturbibliotek

Rafn, C.C. (1838). *Om Skakspil i det gamle Norden, Annaler for Nordisk Oldkyndighed 1838.* Det kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab, pp.138-159. Copenhagen.

Robinson, J. (2004). *The Lewis Chessmen.* London, British Museum.

Sanvito, A. (1992). *Figure di Schacchi.* Milano, Mursia.

Selenus, G. (1616). *Das Schach Oder König-Spiel.* Zürich, reprint 1978 by Olms.

Stratford, N. (1997). *The Lewis Chessmen and the Enigma of the Hoard.* London, British Museum Press.

Taylor, M. (1978). *The Lewis Chessmen.* London, British Museum Publication.

Thorarinsson, G.G. (2010). *The Enigma of the Lewis Chessmen.* Available at : http://leit.is/lewis/ . Accessed 21 February 2011.

Van der Linde, A. (1874). *Skak i Island, særtrykk av Nordisk skaktidende.*

Von Ammenhausen, K. and E. Vettel (1892). *Das Schachzabelbuch,: nebst den Schachbüchern des Jakob von Cessole und des Jakob Mennel.* Frauenfeld, J.Huber.

Von Beringen, K and P. Zimmermann (1883). *Das Schachgedicht Heinrichs von Beringen.* Tübingen, Bibliotek der Litterarischen Vereins.

Von der Lasa,T.H. (1843). *Handbuch des Schachspiels(Bilguer).* Reprint 1979, Olms editions.

Wichmann,H. and S. Wichmann (1960). *Schach-Ursprung und Wandlung der Spielfigur in zwölf Jahrhunderten.* München, Callwey. Specifically: pictures 46,51,57,64 and 67.

Wikipedia (2011a). *Bishop (Chess)*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bishop_(chess) . Accessed 13 February 2011.

Wikipedia (2011b). *Talv*, Available at: http://fo.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talv#Bor.C3.B0_og_f.C3.B3lk Accessed 13 February 2011.