

**THE ENIGMA
OF
THE LEWIS CHESSMEN**



Gudmundur G. Thorarinsson

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PREFACE

Around 1830 A.D., on the sandy shores of the Isle of Lewis—one of the isles of Outer Hebrides—there were found chess pieces that are believed to have been made before the year 1200.

The chessmen are made primarily from walrus tusks and the consensus among scholars is that they are great works of art. The Lewis Chessmen, as they have come to be known, are the oldest chess pieces in the world that bear the features of modern chessmen.

The origin and surrounding mystery of these chessmen has been a source of undying speculation by various publications and institutions, including the National Museum of Scotland and the British Museum which regards the Lewis Chessmen as being among its most remarkable relics and masterpieces.

Until recently, the consensus among scholars and historians was that the chessmen originated from Thronheim, Norway. In the following paper on the history of the Lewis Chessmen, G.G. Thorarinnsson puts forward a compelling new theory about the enigma of the origin of these treasured artifacts.

One of GGTH's main arguments hinges on the fact that chess is, in essence, a war game. And yet the Lewis chessmen are the first pieces where the game of chess is connected to the church as one of the pieces is carved in the image of a bishop.

The word “bishop” for a chess piece is only used in two languages, Icelandic and English. In old Icelandic manuscripts, written in the 13th and 14th centuries, we read about the bishop in chess. According to Oxford dictionaries, the word bishop in chess entered the English language around year 1470--long after the carving of the Lewis Chessmen. In most other languages, including Norwegian, this piece was--and still is--called a “runner.”

Thus, it seems likely that at the time of the creation of the Lewis Chessmen (circa 1150-1200), no nation except Iceland had connected the game of chess with bishops or the church. The only other language where a “runner” is called a “bishop” is English—but that did not occur until after 1450 which coincides with the era when trade activity between Iceland and England was quite lively. Icelanders, in fact, refer to the period between 1400 and 1500 as “The English Century.”

Iceland had no king and power was concentrated in the hands of the bishops. Perhaps this is why they named the chess piece that resides beside the king a bishop. Furthermore, Icelandic bishops employed smithies, goldmiths, and craftsmen, many of which were educated overseas.

Icelandic commerce with Greenland resulted in an economic boom that enabled the writing of the Sagas and the true flowering of a uniquely Icelandic culture. And it is through the Sagas that we learn about the Icelandic skill at carving and ornamentation.

Einar S. Einarsson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gudmundur G. Thórarinnsson is a civil engineer, a former MP of Althingi - The Icelandic Parliament and of the Reykjavik City Council. He has served on several governmental committees and has been a member of The European Council. Thórarinnsson is the former President of the Icelandic Chess Federation and was the chairman of the Organizing Committee of the historical World Chess Championship Match between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky in Reykavik 1972.

GGTH has written several articles about the works of Shakespeare and lectured on various subjects including the origin of the Icelandic people, the Icelandic Sagas, and even Jesus Christ in The New Testament. His most recent article concerns the unique and enigmatic chessmen found on the isle of Lewis in 1831. In this paper he hypothesizes that the Lewis Chessmen were, in fact, made in Iceland around the year 1200.



The Bishopric Skálholt 1153 - Painting by Gísli Sigurðsson

Are the Isle of Lewis chessmen Icelandic?

INTRODUCTION

Exhibited in Edinburgh in 1831 was an unusual set of chessmen that had been discovered on the sandy shore of the Isle of Lewis, at the north end of the Western Isles, or Outer Hebrides, of Scotland. The island is mentioned in ancient Icelandic manuscripts such as *Heimskringla* and *Flateyjarbók*, which refer to it as *Ljóðhús*, meaning “house of song.” Indeed, “Lewis” is very likely derived from this lovely Icelandic name. Today the exact place the chessmen were found is unknown. The chessmen, generally thought to be the oldest set bearing the features of modern chess pieces, are among the British Museum’s most remarkable relics. The Museum has published pamphlets and DVDs with information on the Lewis chess pieces, which are among its most popular exhibits, and has commissioned copies of the set and offered them for sale. This ambitious and carefully crafted work by the British Museum was the catalyst for the article that follows. The chessmen found on the Isle of Lewis are considered the first bearing the features of human beings, and the oldest set using the bishop as one of the pieces. The set has made its impact far and wide: It is used in the film “*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*” and inspired the cartoon “*Noggin the Nog*.”¹ The brochure from the British Museum states that the chessmen were probably crafted in Trondheim, Norway, but their actual origin remains unknown. Various theories mention Iceland, Norway or Scandinavia, Scotland, Ireland, or England as possibilities.² Most of the pieces are carved from walrus tusks (some of them from whale’s teeth), and they are thought to have been made between 1150 and 1200.³



Figure 1: The Isle of Lewis

- 1 Fulmar Television & Film Ltd., *The Lewis Chessmen*.
- 2 Stratford, *The Lewis Chessmen and the enigma of the hoard*.
- 3 Robinson, *The Lewis Chessmen*.

CARVING, DECORATIVE ART

Most agree that the Lewis chessmen are a work of art and that the carvers who made them were master artisans. Foreign scholars have been of the opinion that the courts of royalty and the bishopric were the principal cultural centres where crafts and the arts could flourish enough to generate such works of art. Icelandic scholars consider it beyond doubt that master carvers were at work in Iceland during this period. It is known that Mediaeval Icelandic artisans lived in Trondheim and sought their artistic education there.⁴ Examples of artistic endeavour in Iceland are numerous. Construction timber with traditional carvings from the early Middle Ages, which have been preserved in Iceland and are considered without doubt to have been carved in this country, bear witness to a well-developed ornamental carving art. Clearly, highly specialised artisans were at work in Iceland during that time. During the Mediaeval period, the Catholic Church was rich and powerful. It owned extensive lands and maintained cultural ties all over Europe, including Rome. It engaged the services of expert goldsmiths and carvers. Sources from around 1500 mention a smithy, goldsmith's workshop, and a goldsmith's shed in Skálholt, where goldsmiths worked and probably did so in earlier times as well.⁵ Icelanders travelled abroad bearing gifts and sent gifts to their overseas friends.

Notable among wood carvings are the *Flatatungufjalir*, stanchions from Laufás, descriptions in *Laxdæla saga* of pictorial carvings in the walls of the lodge of Ólafur pái in Hjarðarholt, and others.

The *Saga of Bishop Páll* contains some remarkable stories such as this one: “[Páll] sent Archbishop Þórir a crosier carved of a tusk with such skill, that no man had seen such craftsmanship in Iceland, made by Margrét the Adroit, who at that time was the most skilled carver in all Iceland.” This saga mentions other such artefacts and also describes another artisan, Thorsteinn the Shrinesmith, and his skills. The crosier found in Páll's coffin was indeed carved from a walrus tusk.⁶

Around the year 1190, Icelandic chieftain, Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, visited Thomas Becket's abbey at Canterbury and gave the monastery a delicately carved walrus tusk.⁷

Margrét and Þorsteinn were both active in their craft at the time when the Lewis chessmen are believed to have been created.

In his book *Ancient Settlements at the Northern Edge of the World*, Poul Nörlund describes a bishop's grave, possibly that of Jón Smyrill, bishop of Greenland. In that burial was found a crosier that, according to the author, must be from around 1200. The crosier is carved from a walrus tusk, and Nörlund hypothesises that Bishop Páll Jónsson may have given the crosier to Bishop Jón when the latter was travelling in Iceland, as the two men were fast friends. Nörlund furthermore claims that Páll had in his service Margrét the priest's wife, who was known as “the Adroit” for her prodigious skill at carving walrus tusks,⁸ a statement that doubtless draws on *Páll's saga* as its source.

4 Magnússon, Interview.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Sveinsson, *Páls saga biskups*.

7 Fiske, *Chess in Iceland*.

8 Nörlund, *Fornar byggðir á hjara heims*.



Figure 2: The head of the Greenland crosier

THE CARVING PATTERN

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. 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. This still tells but half the story, since only a small minority of the wood carvings from this time period have been preserved. It is known that Icelandic artisans learned from their colleagues in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe. Not all foreign scholars in art history have realised that, in addition to Iceland's remarkable literary tradition, the country boasted of a highly developed culture of decoration and carving.



Figure 3: The queens, seen from behind

GREENLAND WALRUS TUSKS

Professor emeritus at the university of Iceland, dr Helgi Guðmundsson has laid out an interesting hypothesis about the relationship between Iceland and Greenland at this time in his book *Across the Sea: Westerners and Icelandic Culture in the Middle Ages*. He believes that Iceland and Greenland traded actively with each other, and that western Iceland served as a sort of hub for trade with Greenland. From Greenland, Icelanders imported walrus tusks, narwhal tusks, *svarðreiði* (a type of rope made from thongs of walrus hide), polar bear skins, and more. The Icelanders in turn exported these products and sold them in Scandinavia, Ireland, and elsewhere in Europe. This business was the source of great wealth in western Iceland, which enabled Icelanders to write the famous Sagas of the Icelanders. Helgi points out a story in the *Annals of the Kings* about a bishop's ship that was shipwrecked at Hitarnes circa 1266 while carrying a load of goods from Greenland; walrus tusks were found on nearby beaches for quite some time afterward. He also cites a passage from the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, according to which traders with four ships were in Greenland in 1135 or 1136 to fetch goods.⁹ Icelanders settled Greenland and left their home country with many ships to settle there. The settlers of Greenland therefore had many friends and relatives in Iceland, and the two communities interacted frequently. When the Icelandic fleet of ships shrank to near nothing, the connection to Greenland was broken despite the fact that Norway had plenty of ships. The ultimate fate of these early Greenlanders remains a mystery.¹⁰ It is worth mentioning that toponyms seem to suggest the presence of walruses in Iceland during the Age of Settlement; for example, Rosmhvalanes, Hvalseyjar, and Hvallátur. (Walruses (Icel. *rostungar*) were known as *rosmhvalir* or simply *hvalir* (whales) at the time, as true whales do not have *látur*, i.e. beach themselves in order to mate, as seals and walruses do.)

This evidence clearly indicates that walrus tusks were available in Iceland at this time. It is likely that the Norwegians who continued to sail to Greenland made a stopover in Iceland on their way, although they are not mentioned in written documents.

Thus Icelanders not only wrote their legendary manuscripts at this time, but also developed decorative art, carving, and carpentry.

⁹ Guðmundsson, *Um haf innan*.

¹⁰ Guðmundsson, Interview.

A BISHOP IN CHESS

In his book *Chess in Iceland*, published in Florence in 1905, Daniel Willard Fiske claims that the word “bishop” is used for the pieces next to the king and queen in only two languages, Icelandic and English. He considers this an indication that the game passed to Iceland from the British Isles.¹¹ 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.



Figure 4: A bishop

In *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* from 1971, the entry for “bishop” reads thus: “One of the pieces in the game of chess, having its upper part carved into the shape of a mitre, formerly called archer and in still earlier times alfin or aufyn.” This entry also cites a source from 1562: “The Bishoppes some name Alphins, some fooles, and some name them Princes; other some name them Arches.” Further sources from the years 1581 and 1656 are also quoted. An 1802 source reads: “The alfin was also denominated, with us an archer and at last a bishop.”¹²

11 Fiske, *Chess in Iceland*.

12 “Bishop.”

The dictionary also discusses the word “alfin”: “Alfin, alphin . . . the piece in chess called the alphin, and now the bishop, having had originally with Indians, Chinese and Persians the figure and name of an elephant. 1) Former name of bishop in chess.” This entry cites sources from the years 1440, 1474, and 1530 where the word “alfin” is used for a chess bishop.¹³ This confirms

Fiske’s claim that the bishop was called “alfin” in 14th and 15th century English.

Sources thus indicate that the word “bishop” did not enter the English chess vocabulary until the late 15th century. This suggests that the chess term may have originated in Iceland. The Lewis chessmen are believed to have been made between 1150 and 1200.

This line of reasoning implicates the Icelandic bishops who hired master carvers and sent works of craftsmanship as gifts throughout the world, for the church was often the instigator of artistic and cultural development. Iceland had no king, its highest authority figures were the bishops. One might imagine that the bishops, who had little experience of warfare, thought it fitting that the men standing closest to the royal couple should be bishops.

WHEN DID CHESS APPEAR IN ICELAND?

The first Icelandic written records of chess are from Snorri Sturluson the author of *Heimskringla*, (1178-1241).¹⁴ Snorri appears to have had some knowledge of the game, though his description in the *Saga of St. Olaf*, which deals with events 200 years before the time of writing, appears to refer to an older game than the one now played. The *Saga of Earl Mágus*, which was written in Iceland ca. 1300-1325, describes how an emperor was checkmated by bishop.¹⁵ Snorri studied at Oddi with Icelandic chieftain, Jón Loftsson and became acquainted with Jón’s son Páll (1155-1211) who would later be bishop. Páll was at school in England around 1180, and Fiske believes he learned chess there. Incidentally, several other Icelanders were studying in England at the time, including Thorlákur Thórhallsson Icelandic bishop (1133–1193, later St. Þorlákur), and Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, who was there before 1190.

It is thus highly probable that chess was known in Iceland at the time when the Lewis chessmen were made.

SITE OF DISCOVERY

The chessmen were discovered on a sandy beach on the Isle of Lewis, the largest of Scotland’s Outer Hebrides. A farmer on the island is believed to have found them when digging up a sand bank. Various hypotheses have been advanced as to how the chessmen found their way to this remote location. The find consisted of 78 chessmen from four chess sets that are missing a number of pieces. A belt buckle and fourteen objects from board games were found at the same location. Some sources state that the objects were contained in a box of sorts. Most of the chessmen were made of walrus tusk, but some were made of whale tooth.¹⁶

13 “Alfin, alphin.”

14 Fiske, *Chess in Iceland*.

15 Friðjónsson, Interview.

16 Stratford, *The Lewis Chessmen and the enigma of the hoard*.

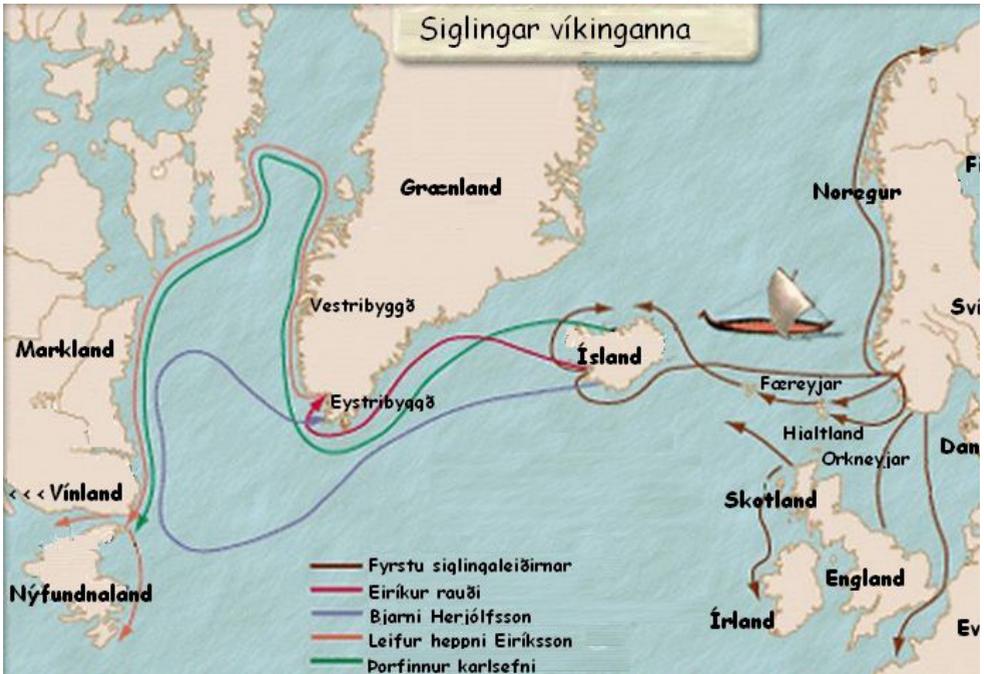


Figure 5: The Vikings Sailing Routes

The author of another British Museum pamphlet seems to think it most probable that a merchant hid the chessmen there with the intent of retrieving them later.¹⁷ This is probably an oblique reference to various other valuables that have been buried and later found. But it is equally possible that the chessmen were washed ashore after a shipwreck. The condition of the pieces is quite variable; some are as new, others quite worn. This calls to mind the story of the bishop's ship from Greenland that was wrecked at Hítarnes in 1266 and the walrus tusks that washed up on the nearby shore for a long while afterward.

BERSERKERS

It is remarkable that the Lewis rooks seem to be berserkers and are depicted biting the edge of their shields. 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*, and they also figure in *The Saga of the Heath-Slayings* – and they also appear in Icelandic toponyms such as Berserkjähraun (berserkers' lava field). Written records of berserkers from other countries are scarce.

In Scandinavia and Germany, this chess piece is called “tower”, Swedish *torn*, Danish *tårn*. English and Icelandic speak of a rook (*hrókur*). Berserkers seem to figure nowhere except among the Lewis chessmen.



Figure 6: Berserkers

KNIGHTS

The knights are mounted, and the second brochure from the British Museum points out that the horses have Icelandic features. They are so small that they are reminiscent of the Icelandic horse,¹⁸ and the shape of their heads seems Icelandic. Horses of this kind were extremely scarce in Scandinavia.



Figure 7: Knights

BISHOPS' MITRES

According to documentation from the British Museum, the age of the Lewis chessmen is estimated primarily from the bishops' mitres. Mitres of this kind were first introduced around 1150, so the chessmen cannot predate that time. These mitres are highest at the front and back, with a depression between the two peaks. Before 1150, the highest points were to the sides and the cleft between them ran from front to back. Mitres changed again around the year 1200, so the chessmen are unlikely to be much younger than that.¹⁹ Icelandic bishops' mitres came from Scandinavia or Europe, and they are thus not much use as a diagnostic feature for the chessmen's provenance.

THE QUEEN

The queen is rather unusually carved. She rests her hand on her cheek and seems worried or sad.²⁰ This is somewhat reminiscent of icons of the Virgin Mary and further supports the hypothesis that the figures were carved under a bishop's instructions.

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Robinson, *The Lewis Chessmen*; Stratford, *The Lewis Chessmen and the enigma of the hoard*.
Fulmar Television & Film Ltd., *The Lewis Chessmen*.

HYPOTHESIS

British Museum publications theorise that the Lewis chessmen were carved in Trondheim, Norway, where facilities and tools for such work were available and where the patterns on the pieces were most fashionable at the time. Furthermore, they conclude that the chessmen were most likely buried on the Lewis shore by a merchant who intended to retrieve them later. In 1832, a year after the pieces were first exhibited, the English archaeologist Francis Madden wrote an article, *Historical Remarks on the Ancient Chessmen discovered in the Isle of Lewis*, where he advances the hypothesis that the chessmen were carved in Iceland before the year 1200.²¹ This theory has met with little enthusiasm.

Here I advance the hypothesis that the Lewis chessmen were carved in Iceland and present evidence in support of this theory.

- 1) The word “bishop” does not seem to have been used for chessmen in Norway at any point in history. This word only occurs in Icelandic and English. Written records show that the word “bishop” was used in Iceland around 1300 and in England in the late 15th century. Records indicate that the word “alfin” fell out of use in English around 1475, after which the chess piece was exclusively known as a bishop. When the Lewis chessmen were carved, these pieces were only known as bishops in Iceland. They were probably carved here at the behest of a bishop who thought it appropriate that pieces closest to the king and queen be bishops. Should this prove correct, then the English adopted the word “bishop” for a chess piece from Icelanders. Helgi Guðmundsson points out that the timing of this change coincides with the so-called English century (1400–1500), when trade and interaction with the English was at its zenith. He then asks whether it can be ascertained where this usage was first adopted, whether it may have been in Bristol, for example, or other hometowns of companies that traded in Iceland at the time.
- 2) The knights are mounted on horses that seem Icelandic in both size and head shape.
- 3) The rooks are berserkers, who figure prominently in contemporary Icelandic writings but are not known from written works in Norway at the time. There they used the word *torn*.
- 4) 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.

- 5) 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. This connection was severed when Icelanders lost their fleet of seaworthy ships. Icelanders thus had access to walrus tusks and other raw materials from Greenland.
- 6) A ship carrying the Lewis chessmen from Iceland could have been shipwrecked near the Isle of Lewis on its way to Dublin and the pieces been washed up on the sand. It is telling that the men are from four chess sets, none of which are complete, which indicates that a number of pieces were lost. Perhaps more pieces remain buried there in the sand. Icelanders sold a great deal of their exports in Ireland, because in Norway they were required to pay a toll.
- 7) In *The Saga Writing of the Oddi Clan*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, professor at the university of Iceland, advances the hypothesis that men from the Oddi clan wrote *Orkneyinga saga*, the *History of the Earls of Orkney*. A friendship existed between Bishop Páll and the Earls of Orkney at this time, and there was considerable communication between them; there are stories of gifts' being exchanged. From there the Outer Hebrides are not far off.^{22 23}
- 8) One might even entertain the notion that the Lewis chessmen were made at the request of Bishop Páll of Skálholt and carved by Margrét the Adroit, whose carving skills were the stuff of legend. The men were then sent abroad for sale or as a gift, but the ship was then lost.

22 Sveinsson, *Sagnaritun Oddaverja*.
23 Kristjánsson, Interview.

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Figure 5 is from http://www.melt.is/lok/myndir/islenska/bokmenntir/eiriks_saga_rauda/kort_1_unnid.jpg

APPENDIX

A few more points to consider:

- 1) The Lewis Chessmen are the only chess pieces that connect chess with the church.
- 2) The Lewis Chessmen are the only chess pieces that include bishops with crosier and mitres and full ceremonial clothing.
- 3) Chess is a war game where a battle is being fought. The use of the word bishop in chess is only found in two languages in the world, Icelandic and English. In Scandinavia and Germany this piece is called a runner--a messenger that investigates the situation in the battle and informs the king. The runner participates in the battle.
- 4) The word bishop in chess is found in old Icelandic manuscripts. In Magus story there is found the word "bishopsmate." This manuscript originated between 1300 and 1325, but the story itself is much older. The word "bishopsmate" is a combination of the words bishop and mate. Philologists are of the opinion that a combination like this is an example of the creative power of the language and hardly happens before the first word has been in use for a long time. Therefore it is safe to assume that the word bishop as a chess piece is much older in Icelandic. Therefore it is safe to assume that the word bishop as a chess piece is much older in Icelandic
- 5) According to The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary from 1971, the the word "bishop" entered the English language around 1450-70. The use of this word seems to have come into English from Icelandic at a period where commerce was lively between Iceland and England. This era, spanning from 1400 to 1500, is known in Iceland as the "English Century".
- 6) The Icelandic Sagas mention skilled Icelandic artists, carvers at the time of the making of the Lewis chessmen. These artists are called the adroits. Decorative art and carving were highly developed in Iceland at this time. Most of the Icelandic artists learned and studied in Throndeim.
- 7) According to historians, the "Church politic" in Throndeim was clear: the church should be peaceful and not participate in war or violence; the church should be and an independent, spiritual power--separated from the worldly power of kings. Most of the artists were working in cooperation with the church and its vast riches. In Trondheim in 1194, a severe dispute between the bishop and the king resulted in the excommunication of King Sverrir (1151-1202) by the Pope. It is therefore highly unlikely that during the age of King Sverrir's excommunication, the church would consent to or tolerate the involvement bishops in a war game where these clergymen are servants, fighters and defenders of the king, participating in battles and the killing of enemies.
- 8) Some scholars find it likely that the Lewis chessmen were carved in Throndeim. It might also be worth considering that the vestments of an archbishop differ from that of a bishop. An archbishop wears a pallium over his shoulders and in front of him. This garment is not to be seen on the Lewis bishops. Yet carvers in Throndeim would probably have clothed the bishop in a pallium since the only bishop in their vicinity was an archbishop.
- 9) In Iceland, the "Church politic" at this time was much different. The bishop at Skalholt, Pall Jonsson (1155-1211), was a descendant of the Norwegian kings--his grandmother was a daughter of the Norwegian king Magnus Olafsson. The bishop was proud of his ancestry. Therefore, he would have espoused close cooperation between king and bishop. In his worldview, the bishop should stand beside the king -- even on a chess board.
- 10) It may therefore be argued that the Lewis Chessmen were made in Iceland at the bishopric in Skalholt by the skilled craftsmen, mentioned in Icelandic manuscripts, working for bishop Pall Jonsson.

THE LEWIS CHESSMEN

A History of the World in 100 Objects...

Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum
on BBC Radio 4, 28th June 2010

“In every place the chess pieces will change to reflect that society that played it”.

“European pieces by contrast are often intensely human and the Lewis Chessmen not only appear to show us particularly kinds of characters but strikingly reflect the structures of the great medieval power game as it was fought out across Northern Europe, from ICELAND and Ireland to Scandinavia and the Baltic!”

“At the edges of the board where we now have castles are the ultimate shock troops of the Scandinavian worldthese are the fighters called Berserkers. It is an Icelandic word for a soldier wearing a shirt made of bearskin”.

“There is one piece I have not looked at yet but it is perhaps the most fascinating figure of all the Lewis Chessmen, the one which gives us a crucial insight into the society that made it!”

It is the Bishop

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/console/b00stb51>

