

The Lewis Hoard of Gaming Pieces: A Re-examination of their Context, Meanings, Discovery and Manufacture

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ALMOST 180 YEARS of scholarship on the Lewis chessmen have given us a solid foundation of understanding, primarily based upon their art-historical analysis. Taking a more interdisciplinary approach (combining elements of art history with archaeology and history), this paper focuses on some over-looked themes — primarily the archaeological, gaming and political contexts of the 12th- and 13th-century North Sea world — and some more familiar themes but in a new light. We suggest a more fluid composition and function of the gaming hoard, with at least four sets of chessmen from the same workshop conceivably made for use in Lewis, possibly in the early 13th century.

To you he left his position, yours each breastplate, each treasure . . . his slender swords, his brown ivory chessmen.⁴

The life of a man is a combination of seriousness and play, and only he who knows the delicate act of balancing the two deserves to be called the wisest and happiest of men.⁵

The purpose of this interdisciplinary paper is to reopen discussions on the hoard of gaming pieces from Uig, Isle of Lewis (Western Isles: the Outer Hebrides), commonly known as the Lewis chessmen. Found in 1831, they are probably the most well-known archaeological find from Scotland. There are 93 pieces, including 78 chessmen, 14 tables-men and a buckle. With the exception of 11 chessmen in the National Museums Scotland (NMS), all the pieces are in the British Museum (BM). The figurative pieces ('face pieces'), the main concern of this paper, are illustrated in Figures 1–8, the captions for which all follow the formula of piece-type and its number, height, group (A–E) and set (1–4). We have used the two museums' numbering systems for the pieces: pieces 19–29 are

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⁴ Verse two of 'Poem of Aonghus Mor MacDomhnall, King of the Isles', as translated by Clancy 1998, 288, and Anderson 1922, vol 2, 378. 'Breastplate' translates *lúireach*, for which a less anachronistic translation should be *habergeon* or *mail shirt*.

⁵ The words are Goethe's as quoted in Bauer 1995, 5.



FIG 1

- (a) King 19, 96 mm, D2. (b) King 20, 73 mm, X4. (c) King 78, 102 mm, A1. (d) King 79, 102 mm, D1.
 (e) King 80, 89 mm, B3. (f) King 81, 91 mm, B3. (g) King 82, 95 mm, X2. (h) King 83, 79 mm, C4.
 (i) Queen 21, 92 mm, D2. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*



FIG 2

(a) Queen 22, 70 mm, C4. (b) Queen 23, 93 mm, D2. (c) Queen 84, 96 mm, C1. (d) Queen 85, 80 mm, B3. (e) Queen 86, 80 mm, B3. (f) Queen 87, 76 mm, X4. (g) Queen 88, 97 mm, C1. (h) Bishop 24, 92 mm, E2. (i) Bishop 25, 93 mm, D2. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*



FIG 3

(a) Bishop 26, 73 mm, B4. (b) Bishop 89, 97 mm, D1. (c) Bishop 90, 97 mm, D1. (d) Bishop 91, 87 mm, B3. (e) Bishop 92, 82 mm, B4. (f) Bishop 93, 82 mm, D4. (g) Bishop 94, 89 mm, C3. (h) Bishop 95, 95 mm, C2. (i) Bishop 96, 95 mm, C1. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*



FIG 4

(a) Bishop 97, 76 mm, B4. (b) Bishop 98, 95 mm, D2. (c) Bishop 99, 83 mm, C3. (d) Bishop 100, 102 mm, C1. (e) Bishop 101, 83 mm, C3. (f) Knight 27, 89 mm, X2. (g) Knight 102, 73 mm, C4. (h) Knight 103, 73 mm, C4. (i) Knight 104, 88 mm, C3. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*

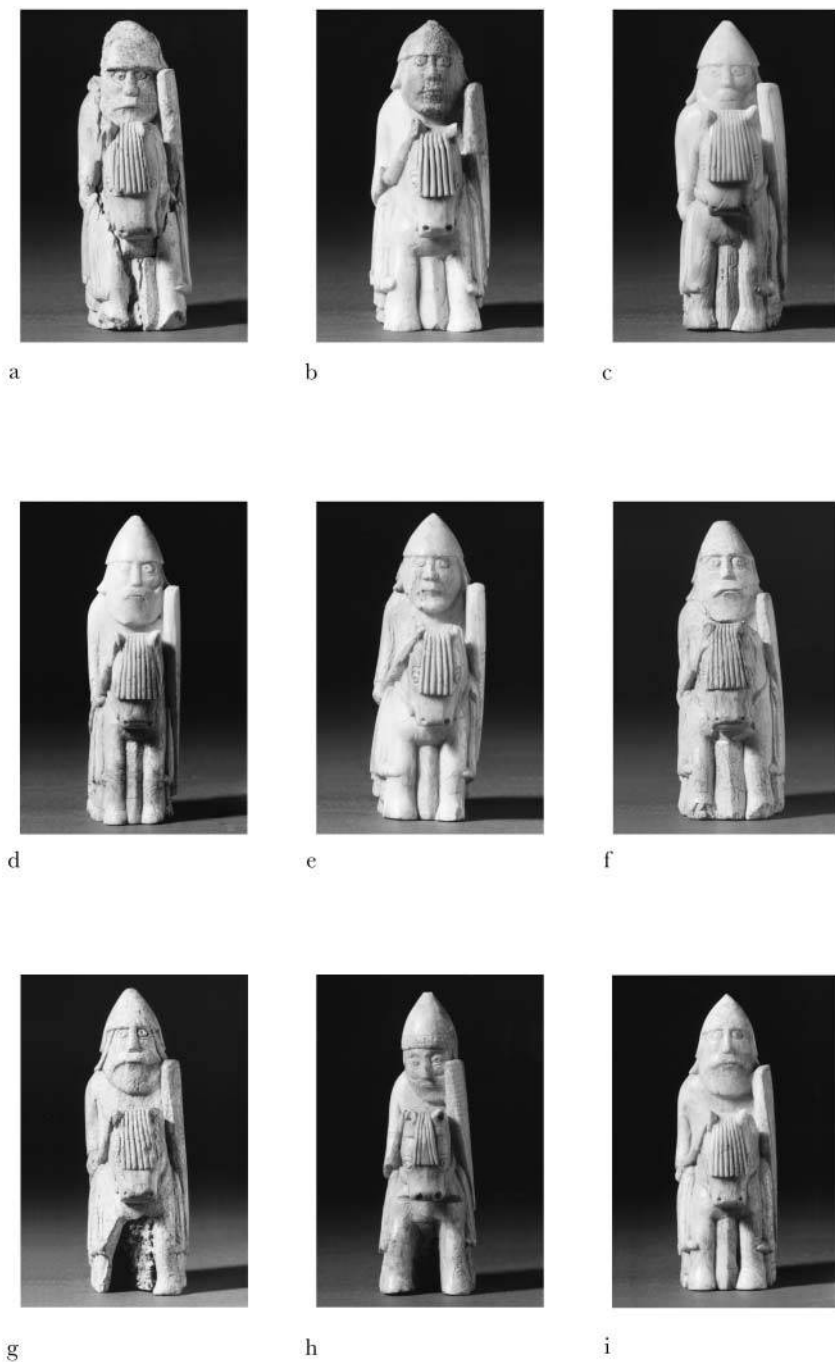


FIG 5

(a) Knight 105, 80 mm, X3. (b) Knight 106, 80 mm, X3. (c) Knight 107, 84 mm, A3. (d) Knight 108, 89 mm, A2. (e) Knight 109, 79 mm, B4. (f) Knight 110, 91 mm, A2. (g) Knight 111, 90 mm, A 2. (h) Knight 112, 103 mm, X1. (i) Knight 113, 100 mm, A1. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*

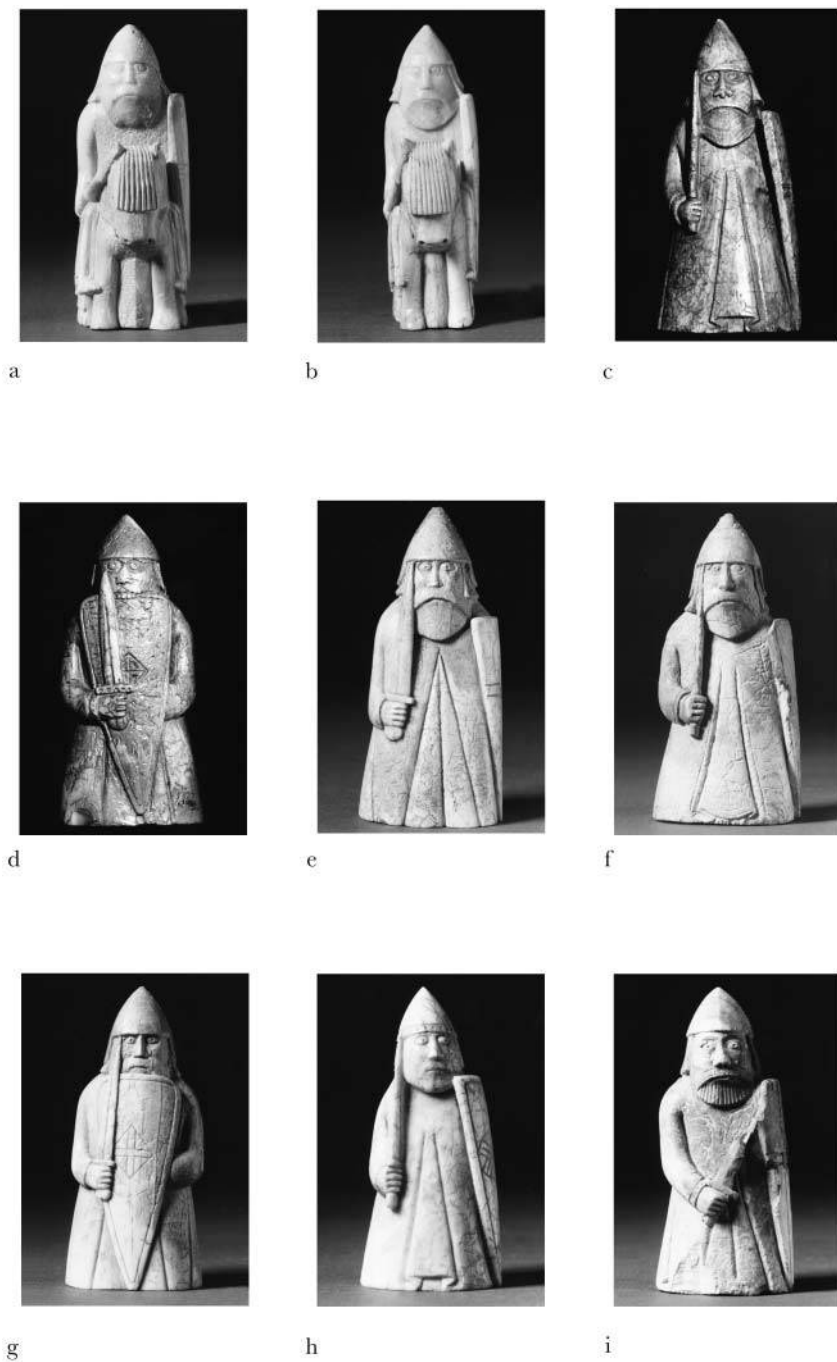


FIG 6

(a) Knight 114, 101 mm, A1. (b) Knight 115, 100 mm, A1. (c) Warder 28, 92 mm, E2. (d) Warder 29, 82 mm, E3. (e) Warder 116, 100 mm, A1. (f) Warder 117, 98 mm, A1. (g) Warder 118, 93 mm, A2. (h) Warder 119, 90 mm, D2. (i) Warder 120, 89 mm, B3. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*

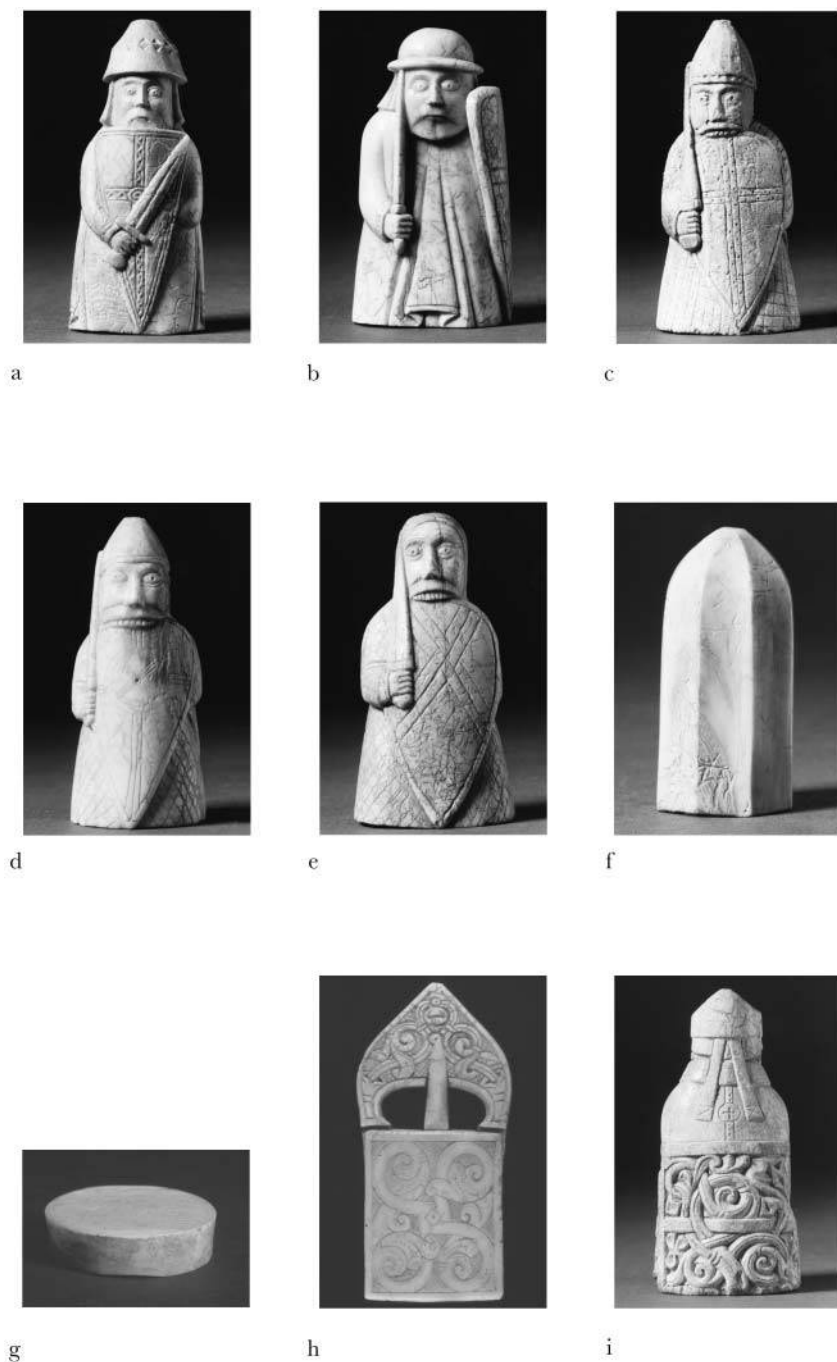


FIG 7

(a) Warder 121, 79 mm, X4. (b) Warder 122, 71 mm, D4. (c) Warder 123, 92 mm, X2. (d) Warder 124, 85 mm, C3. (e) Warder 125, 82 mm, C3. (f) Pawn 133. (g) One of the tablesmen. (h) The buckle. (i) Back of bishop 91. Note how the hair is merely blocked out. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*



FIG 8

(a) Right side of knight 108. (b) Left side of knight 108. (c) Left side of knight 112. Note the saw-cut in the horse's chest. (d) Right side of queen 22. The side of her throne is a separate piece riveted in place. (e) Left side of king 20. The face and throne are carved in the outer dentine while most of his head and body are carved in the inner dentine. (f) Back of queen 23. (g) Back of queen 21. Her veil is decoratively gathered. (h) Right side of knight 114. Note how the lance is couched for battle. (i) Back of knight 113. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*

in NMS, and those numbered from 78 onwards are in the BM. We explain group and set later.

Many see the pieces as icons of Scandinavian and Romanesque art, recognised throughout the world as archetypal chessmen. A ground-breaking and still important report on the pieces acquired by the BM was released by Frederic Madden a year after their discovery,⁶ and since then they have been well published and illustrated in numerous works of scholarship.⁷ The commonly held name, chessmen, fixed in both academic circles and popular culture,⁸ is in many ways apt but in reality is a rather limiting appellation for the diversity of material in the hoard (detailed discussion rarely also extends to the tables-men and the buckle). As we will argue below, the kings and pawns might also have been used to play *hnefatafl*, another board game popular in the Scandinavian world.

The fixed, popular identity of the hoard is evident in the many replica chess sets widely available for purchase, the souvenir replicas of individual pieces and their inclusion in, and inspiration of, other forms of cultural endeavour, including films, TV and children's literature. Two films set in the 12th century — *Becket* (UK 1964) and *The Lion in Winter* (UK 1968) — deploy Lewis-style chess sets, red and white in the former (the property of King Louis of France, who plays one of his noblemen) and black and white in the latter (played between Philip II of France and Henry II's son, Geoffrey). The 1959 French film, *Le Bossu*, is set in the late 18th century and includes a chess set modelled on the Lewis pieces, played by two noblemen. Most recently, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (US 2001) also deployed red and white pieces in a game played by Harry and his friend, Ron. Its earliest apparent depiction takes an a-chronological approach, situating the pieces in the 14th-century tale of the Black Death, *The Seventh Seal* (SW 1957). That doyen of children's literature, Rosemary Sutcliff, wrote her *Chess-Dream in a Garden* around the Lewis pieces.⁹ On television, and subsequently in book form, they inspired the classic children's animation *The Saga of Noggin the Nog*, as described by one of its creators Oliver Postgate:

At different times both Peter Firmin and I had visited the Edward VII Gallery at the British Museum, where we had both noticed a set of Norse chessmen from the island of Lewis. What had impressed us was that, far from being fierce and warlike, it was clear that these were essentially kindly, non-belligerent characters, who were thoroughly dismayed by the prospect of contest . . . it occurred to Peter that the chessmen . . . could well have been called Nogs, that their prince was a Noggin and that the wicked baron . . . could be their . . . uncle, perhaps a Nogbad.¹⁰

⁶ Madden 1832.

⁷ Including: Beckwith 1972, 158–62; Dalton 1909, 63–73, pls XXXVIII–XLVIII; Glenn 2003, 145–77; Goldschmidt 1923, 50–1, pls LXIV–LXIX, Robinson 2004; Stratford 1997; Taylor 1978.

⁸ A notable, if brief, exception is Rosedahl and Wilson 1992, the catalogue of which included the buckle and two tables-men along with several of the chessmen — cat nos 614, 615.

⁹ Sutcliff 1993.

¹⁰ The Nogs were born in the late 1950s and aired on BBC TV in the early 1960s and on many occasions thereafter. The Saga was published in book form (4 vols) in 1968, with a collected hardback edition in 1992 (Postgate and Firmin). The quote comes from Postgate 2000, 219–20.

This is a revealing comment both on the depth of artistic inspiration and re-telling that museums and medieval material culture can fuel, and in its description of facial expressions and gestures, something we return to below in our analysis of their manufacture.¹¹

The predominant approach taken by previous writers has been art-historical, and it appears to the present authors that some key questions deserve more attention. These include why, how and when the hoard ended up in the ground in Lewis, and the nature and composition of the hoard itself. We will argue that we do not have to see the presence of the hoard in Lewis as the chance loss of an unfortunate merchant. Recent discoveries and research relating to the development of chess mean that it is also time to reassess the hoard's place in the history of gaming, including the under-analysed tables-men and the hnefatafl–chess transition. Key aspects of our research are an assessment of whether the pieces can be distinguished as the products of different workshops or craftsmen, and a review of the evidence for dating them. We recognise that the dating framework remains fluid, but we are inclined to nudge the date of at least some of them from the second half of the 12th century into the early 13th century.

We accept the long-established view that the pieces are Scandinavian, and see no reason to challenge a growing consensus that the craftsmen who made them may (mostly) have worked in Trondheim, Norway. Indeed a recent fieldtrip to that city by DC and MH leads us to conclude that its 12th- and 13th-century material culture and architecture form a close fit for the hoard. Of note is the plant-scroll work, reminiscent of that on some of the chessmen, in the Cathedral Octagon; the excavation of a wooden, kite-shaped shield; the existence (currently lost) of a Lewis-style queen piece from the town; and the recent discovery of a further, related whale-tooth king on the island of Hitra near the mouth of the Trondheim fjord, as McLees discusses elsewhere in this volume. Excavations in the town itself have led to the recovery of several early gaming pieces, including wooden pawns and a king from 13th-century contexts.¹²

ALL AT SEA

On the assumption that the pieces in the Lewis hoard were not of local manufacture, the only possible mechanism by which they could have reached the island was by ship. The generally accepted hypothesis postulates that the

¹¹ Popular culture's widespread embracing of the chess-pieces as an icon is demonstrated in a range of locality and identity signalling manifestations, including beer names — the Hebridean Brewery Company of Stornoway currently brews 'Berserker Export Pale Ale', its pump-clip illustrated by one of the Lewis shield-biting 'berserkers'; Lewis recipe books — eg *A Taste of Uig, A Collection of Recipes from Uig, Isle of Lewis, Scotland* (no date, Western Isles Beach Clean-up Group) and a giant wooden statue (the work of Stephen Hayward) of a king piece erected in 2006 in the dunes at Ardoil, Uig Bay, by the Ardoil Grazings Committee.

¹² Lost Lewis-style queen piece: McLees and Ekroll 1990; Hitra find: McLees 2009 (this volume); Trondheim excavations gaming pieces: McLees 1990. The shield is not yet fully published but was excavated on the Trondheim Library site in 1975, from phase 4, dated to 1050–1100 (pers comm Ian Reed). It is in fact the second such shield known from Norway. Madden 1832, 270 notes an example in the Royal Museum Copenhagen, excavated in Røldal, Hardangr, Norway and also gives a reference to Earl Skuli of Norway using such a shield in c 1239. He further notes an example found in Ireland and sent to the Copenhagen Museum in the 17th century.

pieces arrived in Lewis together as the stock of a merchant who buried his wares and did not survive to recover them. Often inherent in this argument is the assumption that the merchant was on his way from Scandinavia to markets further south in Britain or Ireland and his hoard only ended up in Lewis by accident, perhaps after a shipwreck. In such a scenario, the merchant may have hoped to hide from local officials the fact that he had landed goods, and thus avoid paying the hefty tolls that law prescribed in the Kingdom of the Isles.¹³

We can explore this scenario further by examining the associations between gaming pieces and ships. The only excavated near-contemporary example of a cargo shipwreck appears to be that of Serçe Limani off the coast of Turkey, dated by its Fatimid glass weights to the third decade of the 11th century. Its substantial and diverse cargo included glass cullet, amphorae, millstones, glass vessels and weaponry. Also found on board were eight Islamic chessmen and a single tables-man, logically interpreted not as cargo but as part of the recreational equipment of the ship's crew.¹⁴

The only other examples of shipwrecks with gaming pieces (all on-board recreation) are closer geographically to Lewis but more distant chronologically, comprising two warships and one cargo ship. The 15th-century trading vessel recovered from the waterfront at Newport, Gwent, included at least one wooden tables-man. The royal English ship *Mary Rose* (which sank off Portsmouth in 1545) and the Swedish royal ship *Vasa* (which sank in Stockholm harbour in 1628) both contained gaming equipment, including a backgammon board on each ship.¹⁵ Playing pieces were arguably a staple element of a ship's equipment. They were likely to have been there for any passengers as well as crew, as demonstrated by the 14th-century manuscript of *Tristan and Isolt*, which includes an illumination in which the lovers play chess on board ship.¹⁶ This was a staple part of the *Tristan* (*Tristram*) legend. Another key episode, recorded as early as 1200, has *Tristram* take ship with Norwegian merchants, who have a chessboard on which *Tristram* plays; a 13th-century paving tile from Chertsey Abbey depicts the scene.¹⁷ A range of pegged pieces and pegged boards that date prior to AD 1000 would have been ideal for play on board sea-going vessels.¹⁸

The archaeological, historic and literary records further attest the association of gaming equipment and ships. Archaeologically, the many boat burials of the Viking world (though not confined to it as Sutton Hoo, with its possible

¹³ We know about these from the account of Gudmund, bishop-elect of Holar, blown off-course to Sanday (adjacent to Canna, Inner Hebrides) in 1202 on his journey in a merchant ship from Iceland to Norway. The king's bailiff claimed land-dues of 100 lengths of wadmell (cloth) or a monetary equivalent for each man in the ship (Anderson 1922, vol 2, 358–9; McDonald 2007, 77–8).

¹⁴ Cassavoy 1988, 28–9.

¹⁵ *Mary Rose*: Redknap 2005, 133–40; *Vasa*: Matz 1990, 'Off Duty' section; Newport ship: <www.thenewportship.com/ship/index>, 'Artefacts and finds' [accessed 26 October 2008]. An 18th-century shipwreck on Carnish Point, Lewis, is recorded in the folk-tale *Long an Iarunn* ('Ship of Iron') (D Macdonald 2004b, 121–3).

¹⁶ Hopkins 1994, pl on p 71.

¹⁷ Ship-chess episodes: Murray 1913, 455, 739; Chertsey tile: Shurlock and Bryce 1984, 20 and pl 1.

¹⁸ Hall 2007, 13–17. For comparison, the *Annals of Ulster* and of *Tigernach*, for example, record at least six sea journeys in the 7th century, five of them ecclesiastical (one of them transporting relics to a church foundation), one of them ending in a wreck, and the sixth charting a large-scale movement of the people of Cano of Skye to Ireland (ibid 13, n 37). In a separate source recording the same journey we are told that, on board the boats, 50 liveried gillies each carried a fidcheall board on his back and carried 50 gold and silver playing men (Anderson 1922, vol 1, 663, 642, 668, 673, 676).

hnefatafl pieces, demonstrates) signal this: the set of hnefatafl pieces from the 9th-century Skamby burial, Sweden and the late 9th-/10th-century Scar burial from Sanday, Orkney Islands; the Ille de Groix burial from Morbihan, Brittany, France (a die and gaming pieces); and the 10th-century burial from Gokstad, Norway (a fragment of a double-sided board, discussed below).¹⁹ This is a far from comprehensive listing, but the examples cited demonstrate the geographic range and effectively point-up the close association between ships and the playing of games — significant enough to warrant after-life symbolism.

The *Orkneyinga saga* (hereafter, *OS*) paints a vivid picture of Viking raiding and piracy down to the 13th century (its earliest elements were probably written c 1200), and one that is consistent with *Sir Tristram*, given his kidnapping by Norwegians in some versions. Sveinn Asleifarson, the 12th-century Orkney nobleman, had a pattern of spring and autumn raiding in the Hebrides and Ireland. The *OS* tells of how, 'The Hebrideans were so scared of [him] that they hid whatever they could carry either in among the rocks or underground' (a very tempting potential description of what could have happened to the Lewis hoard), which may explain why in a later trip he is noted as getting little plunder in the Hebrides. On another raiding trip, Sveinn ventured south of Dublin and robbed two English ships of their precious cargo of cloth. He then sailed to the Hebrides to divide the spoils. Might raiders also divide as spoil and hoard captured gaming pieces? The *OS* also records Sveinn hiding out there after a murderous episode on Orkney, staying with a Holdbodi Hundason, on Tiree: 'a great chieftain, who gave him a good welcome. He stayed there over winter ...'.²⁰ No doubt feasting and game playing was high on the agenda.

Reverting to shipwrecks, undoubtedly a common feature of this N Atlantic sea-lane, the *OS* is instructive, particularly in its description of the storm-wrecking of two ships of Earl Rognvald, off the Shetland Islands. Returning from Norway as gifts of King Ingi, each was laden with a cargo of gifts from various friends (which we could speculate included gaming sets). No lives were lost, but the ships and much of the cargo went to the bottom (though some of the cargo did wash ashore during the night).²¹ *Njal's Saga* records at least two similar severe shipwrecks and losses of cargo (but no life) on the rocks of Iceland.²²

What this all shows is that a lost merchant's stock-in-trade is but one, and probably the least plausible, of possibilities for the hoard being found in Lewis. It is to Lewis that we now turn.

¹⁹ Rundkvist and Williams, 2008; Owen and Dalland 1999, 127–32; Rosedahl and Wilson 1992, cat 360; Murray 1951, 58; Youngs 1983.

²⁰ Pálsson and Edwards 1978, ch 66 (Tiree visit), chs 105 and 106 (raiding the Hebrides). For a recent penetrating analysis of the Orkney raiding lifestyle see Barrett 2007. Viking-style raiding continued throughout the 13th century. For example, King Dugald, son of Ruairi led a great fleet from the Hebrides to Ireland, robbing a richly laden merchant ship off Connemara, returning laden with spoil — Sellar 2000, 206. The role of ships in the Lordship of the Isles in this later period is also analysed by Caldwell 2004, 73–5. Thomas 1862, 413 notes high-levels of piracy around the Hebrides in the 17th century and later.

²¹ Pálsson and Edwards 1978, ch 85, including the verses Rognvald composed about the wrecking, for which see also Bibire 1988, 229.

²² Magnusson and Pálsson 1960, chs 153, 159.

WHY LEWIS?

The most obvious explanation for the hoard should be that it belonged in Lewis to a person, and in a society, which valued its contents as gaming pieces. Indeed, it is significant that, within Britain, the only other ivory chessmen of similar quality to those from Lewis also have West Highland provenances. One is a knight, of walrus ivory, dated to the mid-13th century. It is now in the collection of NMS, but prior to 1782 belonged to Lord MacDonald of Sleat, Skye. It may have been found in 1763 during the drainage of Loch St Columba (also known as Loch Monkstadt) in Kilmuir Parish.²³ The other, now lost, is a king, carved from the tooth of a sperm whale, clearly in the same tradition as the Lewis kings, but datable on stylistic grounds to the 16th century. It came from Dunstaffnage Castle, near Oban (Argyll and Bute), by the 16th century a possession of the Campbells.²⁴

LOST AND FOUND

Such information as we have on the discovery and provenance of the hoard is of limited use in establishing the circumstances in which it was deposited, but we review it again here since we believe, importantly, that it may either have been misinterpreted or stated with an ill-deserved certainty.²⁵

Early reports of the discovery of the hoard and its provenance

An area of sand dunes at Ardrol on the S side of Tràighe Ùige (Uig Strand) is generally considered the findspot (Figs 9–10). Thomas is the first to record the name of the finder, Malcolm MacLeod, in 1863, by which time local mythology already tied the hoard's discovery to a tale of evil doings in the 17th century (see below) that accounted for its burial. MacLeod, a resident at the nearby settlement of Peighinn Dhomhnuill (Penny Donald), discovered it in 'a sandbank in the Mains of Uig'. Thomas' source for the discovery was not MacLeod directly but the manuscript of Donald Morrison, known as *An Sgoilear Bàn*, a noted local story-teller.²⁶

The earliest contemporary record of the hoard is 11 April 1831 when, by permission of Mr Roderick Pirie of Stornoway, Lewis, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in Edinburgh exhibited the pieces.²⁷ Pirie here is a mistake for Ririe.²⁸ Another version of this tale of the hoard's discovery, traceable back to

²³ This provenance is implied by J A Smith 1862, 104–5. There is clearly some confusion in Smith's account, and such a Skye provenance has, perhaps wisely, recently been dismissed by Glenn 2003, 147. Information on the draining of the loch comes from the report on the Parish of Kilmuir, Inverness-shire, in the 'New' *Statistical Account*, Kilmuir, County of Inverness, Account of 1834–45, vol 14, 246.

²⁴ Brook 1889, 185–91. Laing 1857, 366 had earlier drawn attention to Pennant's (1776, pl XLIV) drawing and the discrepancies between it and the actual piece.

²⁵ See Stratford 1997, 50–3 for a convenient gathering of most of them.

²⁶ Thomas 1862. Donald Morrison's manuscript, in Stornoway Public Library, has since been published (N Macdonald 1975, 66–7, 'The Uig Chessmen') For Donald Morrison (1787–1834) see also D Macdonald 2004b, 45–6. A letter in NMS from Bill Lawson of the Genealogy Research Service for the Western Isles of Scotland, 6 January 1995, traces the relevant Malcolm MacLeod, but there is no record of him after about 1831. See also the website of Comann Eachdraidh Uig, <www.ceuig.com/timeline> [accessed 23 October 2008].

²⁷ Stratford 1997, 50.

²⁸ The name Ririe was on a receipt in the possession of Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe and Thomas's account has it that a Captain Ririe took the pieces to Edinburgh for sale (Wilson 1851, 567 n 2; Thomas 1862, 413).

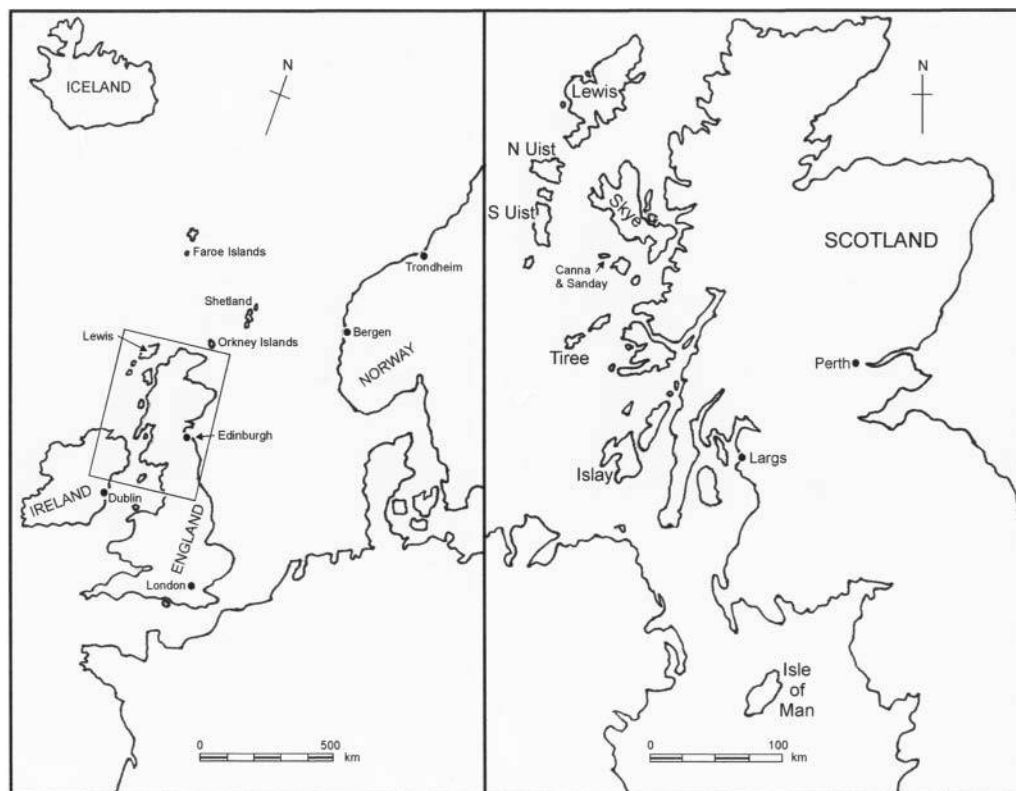


FIG 9

Map of N Britain and its wider N European setting. *Drawing by David Caldwell.*

the late 19th century, claims that MacLeod did not dig out all the pieces but that that was done by a gentleman from Stornoway, possibly Mr Ririe.²⁹

On 29 June 1831 *The Scotsman* newspaper reported that Mr J A Forrest,³⁰ opposite the Tron Kirk (Edinburgh), had recently purchased upwards of 70 chessmen of bone found some months previously by a peasant of Uig while digging a sand bank. They were found near the ruined nunnery in Uig ('Taigain collechin dugh an Uig' — literally, the house of the black women in Uig).³¹

The 'upwards of 70 chessmen' in *The Scotsman* report is unhelpfully vague. A receipt in the possession of Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe confirms that Ririe took 93 pieces, which is the complete hoard as known, to Edinburgh in 1831. Sharpe, a noted Scottish collector, bought ten face-pieces from Ririe before the latter sold the bulk to Forrest, who later that year sold 82 pieces to the BM. Sharpe later acquired a bishop from a source in Lewis that is most likely, on an

²⁹ D Macdonald 2004b, 114.

³⁰ Actually T A Forrest. He is listed in contemporary directories (eg *Post Office Directory* 1833, 30) as a watchmaker, jeweller and medallist at 171 High Street.

³¹ Scotsman Digital Archive, <archive.scotsman.com/article.cfm?id=TSC/1831/06/29/Aro0302> [accessed 17 October 2008].

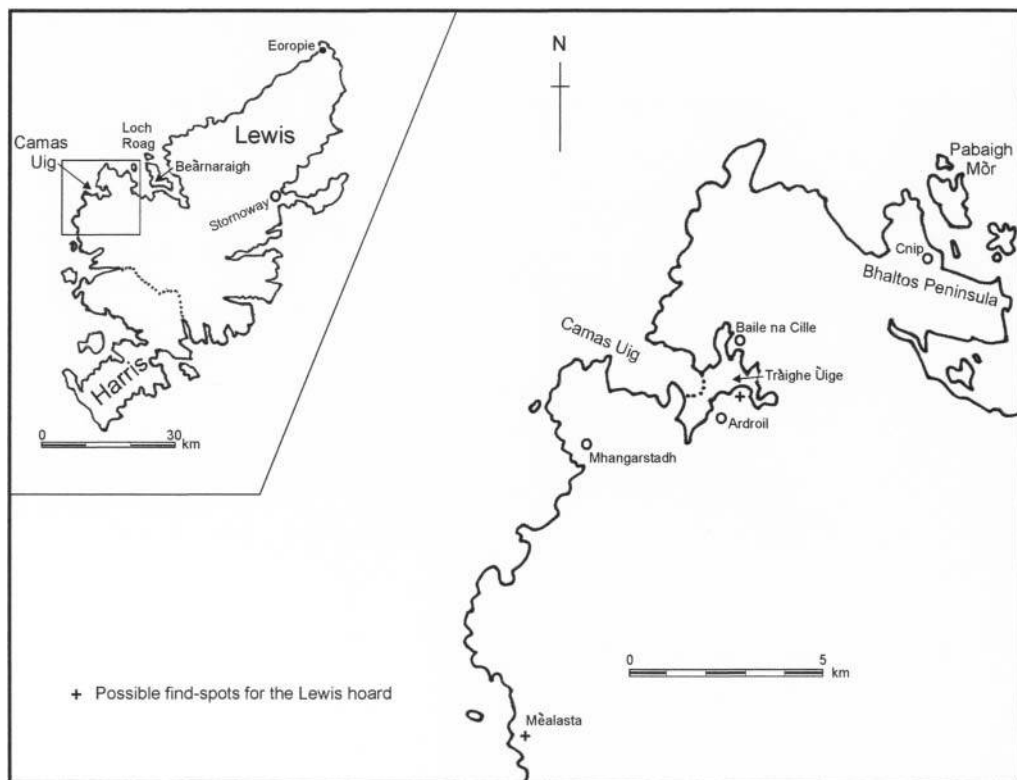


FIG 10

Map of Lewis with alternative findspots for the hoard. *Drawing by David Caldwell.*

arithmetical basis, to have been one of the 93 pieces in Ririe's possession.³² There is thus no overwhelming evidence that anyone was involved in the original discovery other than Malcolm MacLeod and, perhaps, Ririe.

In his paper of 1832 Madden repeated the discovery story as given in *The Scotsman*, rather than offer any information he might have been told by Forrest, but added in a footnote that 'A private letter from Edinburgh states the story of the nunnery to be fictitious, but that a ruin of some note exists not far from the spot where these chessmen were found'.³³ In a paper delivered the following year to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, David Laing quoted a note from Sharpe to the effect that he had been told the hoard had been found in a vaulted room about six feet (1.83 m) long. They were partially covered with sand and the floor was covered with ash. The given location was 'near a spot where tradition affirms a nunnery once stood. The name of the place in Gaelic signifies — "the house of the black women"'.³⁴

³² The piece acquired by Sharpe from Lewis can be deduced to be a bishop from his note in Laing 1857, 368. Unfortunately, we cannot identify which bishop.

³³ Madden 1832, 212 and note. It is interesting to speculate that Forrest not only did not know much about the background to his purchase, but also, very probably, did not know that Ririe had sold him only some of the pieces. Starting with Madden (Stratford 1997, 10), the BM has accused him of dishonesty in not revealing that they were not acquiring the full hoard.

³⁴ Laing 1857, 368.

The 1845 new statistical account of the parish of Uig, penned by its minister, the Revd Alexander MacLeod in 1833, states that 'In the year 1831, a considerable number of small ivory sculptures resembling chessmen, and which appeared to be of great antiquity, were found in the sands at the head of the bay of Uig, and have been since transmitted to the Antiquarian Society of Edinburgh'.³⁵

Sharpe died in 1851 and his chessmen, the 11 now in NMS, appeared in the sale of his collection in June of that year. Lord Londesborough purchased them and they only came to NMS on the sale of his collection in 1888. The 1851 auction catalogue stated they were 'found in 1831, in the Parish of Uig, in the Island of Skye',³⁶ and a Scottish antiquary wrote ten years later that Lord MacDonald told him that several chessmen, carved in ivory, were found in Loch Monkstadt, Skye, and were then in the possession of Lord Londesborough.³⁷ There is clearly unfortunate confusion here between Uig in Lewis and Uig in Skye, but we do not accept the implication of a further hoard from Skye, not least because all the 'Lewis chessmen', but not the 'Skye knight', are covered with minute surface channels, the cause of which has still not been satisfactorily explained.³⁸

Then in 1851 the distinguished archaeologist Daniel Wilson published a report on the discovery that he specifically says he got from Sharpe. In this account the discovery was made some distance from the shore after a sudden and very considerable inroad by the sea had carried away a large part of a sandbank in the parish of Uig. A small subterranean stone building like an oven, at some depth below the surface, was thus exposed. 'The peasant' discoverer only found the hoard when he broke into this structure that Wilson suggests was a 'weem' (souterrain). It was close to a considerable ruin.³⁹

The Ordnance Survey surveyed the parish of Uig in 1852–3 for its first edition six-inch map (1:10,560). The alleged nunnery, Taigh nan Cailleachan Dubha, was located by them at Mèalasta and there is a note in the appropriate *Name Book* that chessmen, which were sold to 'a society of antiquaries in Edinburgh', were found in the ruins of the nunnery about 70 (sic) years previously. Nothing then remained of it but the site.⁴⁰

Making sense of the hoard's provenance

There are certain salient conclusions we can draw from the reports of the hoard's discovery:

- None of the writers of the published reports listed above appears to have visited the findspot or have had any familiarity with Lewis.
- There is no information of any value that we can trace back to the alleged discoverer of the hoard, Malcolm MacLeod.
- There are two separate provenances given for the hoard, first in an underground stone structure at Mèalasta, and second in the sand (dunes) on the S side of Tràighe Ùige.

³⁵ *Statistical Accounts of Scotland*, Uig, County of Ross and Cromarty, Account of 1834–45, vol 14, 153.

³⁶ Tait and Nisbet 1851, lot 531.

³⁷ J A Smith 1862, 104.

³⁸ A report by the BM Department of Scientific Research (Stratford 1997, 55) suggests they may either result from the acids in plant roots or from grazing organisms.

³⁹ Wilson 1851, 567–77.

⁴⁰ Ordnance Survey 1850–3, book 78, p 87, no 194.

- The source of all the information on the Mèalasta provenance, with the possible exception of that supplied to the Ordnance Survey, was the Mr Roderick Ririe who took the pieces to Edinburgh. He may have helped to recover the pieces or been closely related to someone who did.
- The source of information on the Tràighe Ùige provenance was the manuscript of a local storyteller, Donald Morrison, and just possibly the local minister, the Revd Alexander MacLeod as well. The latter's brief statement, however, looks like it might be derived from Morrison's manuscript or Thomas' published extract from it.

Given the above points, we might reasonably wonder how the hoard has come to be associated with a location on the edge of Tràighe Ùige rather than Mèalasta. It appears that the account of a story-teller, who was not interviewed by any of those who first published accounts of the hoard's discovery, has been preferred to versions that can possibly be tied back to someone who actually recovered some of the pieces. On the basis of the evidence presented above there can be no certainty about the hoard's findspot, but the strong possibility emerges that it was deposited at Mèalasta, about which two further things are worth noting here. First, in a paper on souterrains published in 1870 Thomas noted that there had been one at Mèalasta, consisting of a gallery terminating in a beehive chamber. The stones had by then been removed for building purposes.⁴¹ Second, Museum Nan Eilean in Stornoway has a copper-alloy finger ring with a strip bezel engraved with five crosses, found on the shore at Mol Tiacanish, adjacent to Mèalasta in 2003. This dates to the 12th or 13th century, to judge from a similar ring in the Lark Hill (near Worcester) hoard.⁴²

The story of the nunnery is a red herring. The earliest mention of it is in the statistical account of the parish of Uig, published in 1797. There the minister merely mentions the remains of a nunnery at Mèalasta called 'Teagh na n cailichan dou'. The basis for his assertion is unknown.⁴³ While there was obviously a ruin at Mèalasta in the late 18th and early 19th century that some believed to be a nunnery, it is difficult to see now what that could have been. All that is readily identifiable are the house foundations and fields of a large post-medieval township, cleared about 1838 and replaced by a sheepfold. Nearby is an old burial ground reported to have contained the foundations of a church.⁴⁴

The legend of the hoard

Donald Morrison's tale of the 'Uig Chessmen' is the earliest known version of a story that explains how a herdsman came to bury the hoard. The main variant of it, said to have been current in a ceilidh house near Baile na Cille in the late 19th century, names the herdsman as 'Gille Ruadh', or the red gillie.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Thomas 1868, 171.

⁴² We are grateful to Stuart Campbell of the Treasure Trove Unit for information on this ring. For the Lark Hill hoard ring, see Zarnecki 1984, 293, no 320c.

⁴³ *Statistical Accounts of Scotland*, Uig, County of Ross and Cromarty, Account of 1791–9, vol 19, 288; Papar Project, H1 Pabay/Pabaigh (Uig, Lewis), <www.paparproject.org.uk> [accessed 27 October 2008].

⁴⁴ D Macdonald 2004a, 232; RCAHMS database, <www.rcahms.gov.uk> [accessed 23 November 2008], Uig, Mealista, Teampull Mhealastadh.

⁴⁵ D Macdonald 2004b, 112–15. See also MacKenzie 1932, 204–5.

The story is set in the 17th century and its main essentials are that 'An Gille Ruadh', a servant of the MacKenzie tacksman of Baile na Cille, spotted a young sailor fleeing his ship with a treasure bundle. 'An Gillie Ruadh' murdered the sailor for the sake of his treasure that he then buried. He was unable to return and collect it, but confessed to this crime some time afterwards when he was on the scaffold at Stornoway, convicted to death for other misdemeanours. Revd William Matheson succinctly expressed in 1971 the minimal value of the legend as an accurate account of how the hoard came to be in Lewis:

The Gille Ruadh story may be authentic enough as an example of Uig oral tradition ... but the linking of it with the chessmen is suspect. This may be merely a case of putting two and two together *after* the discovery of the chessmen. In reality the murder of the sailor and the burial of the chessmen may have been separated by a longer period of time. If there was any information about the chessmen current in oral tradition *before* their discovery, this would presumably have come from the person who hid them; and had this been Gille Ruadh, one would expect that the hoard would have been recovered at the time of his trial. Anyway there is no proof that anything was known about the chessmen in Uig or elsewhere until after their discovery.⁴⁶

To reiterate, then, the root of the story is the discovery of the pieces themselves and the desire by the inhabitants of Uig to locate an outstanding find within the parameters of their own traditions and memories. This kept the story of the hoard in local ownership. The collective story of the hoard recommends itself as a significant example of renewable stories of washed-up treasures, like a new kind of sea-nut washed up on the shore by the Gulf Stream.⁴⁷ The workings of the sea are a crucial aspect of Hebridean life and so it should come as no surprise that the sea is invoked to explain or underpin sudden happenings and chance discoveries. Such stories act as social cement amidst their communities, helping to define and maintain their collective identity, and to give a sense of continuity and enshrined cultural value.⁴⁸ The Lewis hoard folklore tells us little if anything about the 12th–13th-century chapter of the hoard's social life, but it is an important account of a communal response to the discovery of the hoard.

LATE-NORSE LEWIS

The Lewis hoard belongs in a late 12th-/early 13th-century Scandinavian context. Lewis was such a place, although we do not understand well the exact political situation of the island at that time. Although Gaelic language may again

⁴⁶ The late Revd W Matheson was, at the time he wrote this analysis, senior lecturer in the Department of Celtic, Edinburgh University, and is quoted here from correspondence copies in the NMS file on the Lewis hoard. The folklore element continues to grow. A local crofter on the Ardoil estate, Uig, tells of how her family moved there in the 1850s and as a consequence is aware of the precise findspot, the details having been transmitted orally. However, there is a gap of at least 20 years between the reported date of discovery and the arrival of the family concerned. This is a long time for uncorrupted location information to be transmitted, never mind the nearly 160 years that have elapsed since. Based partly on this story and on visual ground survey, the Western Isles Sites and Monuments Register does have a specific national grid reference (restricted access) for this findspot of the hoard. As yet no geophysical or excavation work has been carried out to explore it. We are grateful to Mary MacLeod, Western Isles Archaeologist, for her discussion of this potential site.

⁴⁷ Symonds 1999, 109. The sea-nut is an allusion to the frequent washing-up of South American seed pods on Hebridean shores. Known as sea-nuts, strand-nuts and fairy eggs, they were often turned into snuff boxes or amulets.

⁴⁸ Gazin-Schwartz and Holtorf 1999a; Trubshaw 1999; Burström 1999.

have been in the ascendancy in Lewis by the mid-13th century, there can be no doubting that there was a long period of time when Norse was the language generally spoken there.⁴⁹ Whether speaking Norse or Gaelic, the leaders of local society in the 12th and 13th centuries clearly belonged to the Scandinavian world. It is worth restating this here since many of their descendants reinvented themselves as Gaelic families, after Norway ceded the Isles to Scotland in 1266, and stressed their cultural links with Ireland.

Contact with royal authority in Norway remained of importance throughout the period. The 13th-century *Chronicles of the Kings of Man* (hereafter the Manx Chronicle) record Norwegian military intervention in the Isles in 1098, 1153, 1165, 1230, 1238, 1250 and 1263, the first and last of these being major expeditions led by the kings in person.⁵⁰ There are also several mentions of Islesmen attending court in Norway, with kings of the Isles specifically going to pay homage, or at the request of the King of Norway, in 1230, 1239, 1247, 1250 and 1253.⁵¹ The bishops of the Isles remained under the authority of the archbishops of Nidaros (Trondheim) after 1266. It should be clear from all this that ongoing Scandinavian influence in the Western Isles was considerable.

Na Leòdhasaich — the people of Lewis

Despite its relatively large landmass, Lewis did not support a particularly large population in the high and late Middle Ages. A useful measure of this is the number of men that the island was required to carry as a professional fighting force, since this was proportional to agricultural productivity. Thus Lewis does not compare well with the other large islands in the Hebrides:⁵²

Lewis, including Harris, and North Rona	222,601 ha	840 men
Skye	166,500 ha	1,980 men
Mull	87,794 ha	900 men
Islay	61,950 ha	800 men

Neither then nor now have significant mineral or other resources been identified that could add to the wealth to be gained from farming and fishing.

It is worth pointing out, however, that one of the likely findspots of the hoard is adjacent to Camas Uig, a sheltered sandy inlet of the sea, ideal for drawing up medieval ships. The island of Pabaigh Mòr, about 8 km from Camas Uig, is described in the mid-16th century as a former residence of the MacLeods of Lewis, the chief family in the high and late Middle Ages.⁵³ The surrounding land, including Bhaltois Penninsula, Loch Roag and the island of Beàrnaraigh (Great Bernera), are, and probably always have been, relatively well populated thanks to the availability of arable land. At the nearby Cnip Headland a pagan Viking cemetery — the largest known concentration of

⁴⁹ While many Lewis place-names are of Norse origin, place-name experts are reluctant to identify any Gaelic names as necessarily dating prior to the Scandinavian *adventus* (Crawford 1987, 96–8; Gammeltoft 2007, 479–98; Kruse 2005, 141–56; Sellar 2005, 209–15).

⁵⁰ Broderick 1996, fols 34v, 36v, 39v, 44v, 45v, 48r, 49v. For an invasion in 1210 see McDonald 2007, 133–7.

⁵¹ Broderick 1996, fols 44v, 46r, 48r, 49r.

⁵² The document that describes this levy dates to the late 16th century, but it appears likely to be a system that dates back to the 13th century (Skene 1880, vol 3, 428–40). The areas for each island have been taken from Groome 1882–5.

⁵³ Munro 1961, 82.

such burials in the Hebrides — included a wealthy female burial with a second such burial close by from Bhaltois School. The full chronological range of the cemetery is not yet known,⁵⁴ but elsewhere in the Western Isles excavations have confirmed the presence of a prosperous Norse settlement continuing beyond the 12th century. Recent archaeological work in South Uist has done much to illuminate the settlement hierarchy, from a single farmstead, as at Cille Pheadair, to a principal complex such as Bornais, which reached its largest extent in the 11th and 12th centuries.⁵⁵

The Macaulays ('sons of Olaf') held much of the land around Uig in high and late medieval times. Tradition identifies this Olaf as King Olaf 'the Black' of Man (ruled 1226–37). A Macaulay tradition also records that the main residence of the chief of the Macaulays, John Roy Macaulay, about the end of the 14th or beginning of the 15th century, was at Cradhlastadh (Crowlista) on the N side of Camas Uig.⁵⁶ The reliability of some of these accounts remains to be tested, but they do counter the misconception that the hoard was buried somewhere remote. Recent survey work on coastal chapel-sites also suggests a thriving local medieval landscape in its conjunction of fertile sandy shores and sea-routes.⁵⁷

Kings in competition

The Manx Chronicle has encouraged the view that Lewis remained part of the Kingdom of the Isles, ruled by a dynasty of kings based in the Isle of Man. They owed allegiance to the kings of Norway; King Magnus of Norway ceded Man and the Western Isles to Scotland in 1266. In 1156, however, a local strongman, Somerled, had defeated the Manx King Godred Olafsson in a naval battle and forced a division of the Isles. From that time he and his descendants, generally known as the MacSorleys, held parts of the Kingdom of the Isles, and Somerled and some of his progeny were also kings.⁵⁸ Lewis should have remained in the control of the Manx kings after 1156, but the scarce early sources cast doubt on this version of events. This is not the place to give a detailed account of Lewis history, but suffice it to say that a case can be made for MacSorley control of the island for much of the period down to 1266 and beyond.

Bishops and archbishops

The foundation of the archbishopric of Nidaros in 1152/3 was a key political and ecclesiastical event for the Kingdom of the Isles,⁵⁹ at the least serving to reinforce links with Norway and incorporating the kingdom in a vast

⁵⁴ For a full review of the evidence, see Armit 1996, 186–214, and Crawford 1987.

⁵⁵ Sharples 2005; Sharples et al 2004; Smith and Mulville 2004.

⁵⁶ Thomas 1880, 364, 396.

⁵⁷ Barrowman 2005. We are grateful to Rachel Barrowman for supplying a copy of this report and discussing the survey work with us.

⁵⁸ McDonald 2007, 77–9, 92–5; Power 2005; Caldwell 2008, especially ch 4. For a detailed account of the history of the Isles during this period, see McDonald 1997.

⁵⁹ Nidaros had prior to that been a bishopric in the archdiocese of Lund (from where there is also a Lewis-style chess piece), which then covered the whole of Scandinavia. Nidaros owed its promotion to the huge popularity of its shrine to St Olav. The earliest phase of church building in Trondheim/Nidaros followed the fall of King Olav at the battle of Stiklestad in 1030 (Jondell et al 1997, 4–18).

ecclesiastical province comprising 11 bishoprics. Rents and taxes from across the archdiocese were gathered into Nidaros, particularly in the 12th and 13th centuries, when the main phase of Nidaros Cathedral (and its attendant palace) was being erected.⁶⁰ The Hebrides, including Lewis, would have had their contribution to make to this, just as they would to their own bishopric of Sodor, centred on Man. The emphasis as late as the 12th century appears to have been on a peripatetic bishopric, in which major churches were visited logically in tune with the year's major festivals, the bishop travelling 'in company with an extensive retinue, including warriors as well as clerics, living off the tithes that would be collected at the episcopal centres'.⁶¹

Such a centre, relatively near to Lewis, is perhaps identifiable at Snizort on Skye, and another in Lewis itself, Teampull Mholuidh (St Moluag's Church) at Eoropie, at the island's northern tip. The latter is comparable in size to the cathedral at Gardar (Igaliko) in Greenland.⁶² During these progresses — be they ecclesiastical or secular — entertainment and hospitality would have been necessary.⁶³

Ownership of the hoard

Whether kings or princes from the Isle of Man or descended from Somerled, local nobles or high-ranking clerics, there were several men in late-Norse Lewis who could have aspired to own the Lewis pieces, and who would have valued them as gaming pieces. Rather than accepting the *deus ex machina* explanation of a passing merchant losing his stock, it is surely more plausible that the Lewis pieces were found in Lewis because that was where they were intended to end up and be enjoyed. They might still have arrived as the stock of one or more merchants, perhaps even a merchant or peddler who is commemorated in the name of a farm, Mhangarstadh (Old Norse Mangarastaðir, peddler's farm), on the coast between Méalasta and Tràighe Ùige.⁶⁴

They could alternatively have come as renders or gifts. The Irish *Lebor na Cert* ('Book of Rights') provides a picture of how this might have worked. It is a collection of poems dealing primarily with the renders owed to over-kings and the reciprocal gifts (or stipends) given to sub-kings. The earliest surviving manuscript is of 14th-century date, but the contents date back to the late 11th/early 12th century and reflect a Hiberno-Norse cultural milieu. The wide range of prestige, aristocratic gifts included weapons, jewellery, slaves, women, hunting dogs, ships and sets of gaming pieces. The term used to describe them is invariably fitchill (and once 'white brandubh' is mentioned), which Dillon translates as

⁶⁰ Ibid, 4.

⁶¹ For a recent analysis of the bishopric, see Woolf 2003. The quote is at p 180.

⁶² Simpson 1961, 7–8. This church was restored for use in the early 20th century. Dates assigned to it by expert opinion have varied from the 12th to the 14th century, but Simpson's ascription to it of a 12th-century date is credible. See also Barrowman 2005, 10–13.

⁶³ Such a progress is recorded in 1155 when Somerled allowed his son Dugald to be paraded around the Isles by Thorfinn, as a usurper-successor to King Godred Olafsson — 'He was acclaimed king by each local assembly in turn'. Another, about 1220, was undertaken by Bishop Rognvald when he annulled the marriage of Olaf during his visit to Lewis (Woolf 2004, 104; Broderick 1996, fol 42r).

⁶⁴ Pálsson 1996, 13.

chess. Fitchill (or fidcheall) actually means ‘wood-sense’, and so is more a generic reference to board games. Given the date, it probably meant *hnefatafl*, though chess is still a good possibility. Perhaps both were given.⁶⁵

Whether such Hiberno-Norse customs were of direct relevance to the Hebrides is unknown, but both regions interacted in many different ways, sharing many cultural traits, including a reliance on ships. These ships were used by similarly, culturally attuned elites, who placed great store by the playing of games as a mark of status. In *OS Kali Kolsson*, soon to be Earl Rognvald of Orkney, poetically lists ability at ‘chess’ as one of nine key skills or attributes of a nobleman. Indeed, it is the one he cites first.⁶⁶ The idea that the playing of games was one of the marks of a great man was an aspect of the panegyric code detectable in Gaelic poetry, though in material surviving from the 17th century onwards the games cited are tables, dice and cards.⁶⁷

There is no clear indication that princes of the Manx dynasty who lived in Lewis had an official status as sub-kings, but when Olaf, brother of King Rognvald, was sent there c 1202, effectively into exile, it would presumably have been with the panoply of a court.⁶⁸ We have already noted how the peripatetic bishops of Sodor would have visited their key centres with a diverse retinue. It seems reasonable to infer the possibility of a system of stipends as well as renders operating in the Isles and that such a system would have included gaming sets. Those mentioned in the *Lebor na Cert* were always given as multiple sets, another inviting parallel with the Lewis chess sets. In such cases multiple sets were perhaps less about the need to play than the desire to show status through the awarding of plenty. There may also have been an element of signifying the status of office. In later medieval Wales, on admission to office a chancellor ‘received a gold ring, a harp and a game from the king . . . a judge of court received playing pieces made of sea-animal bone from the king . . .’. These were expected to be retained for life.⁶⁹ They might then become heirlooms, as indicated in the poem to Aonghus Mor (Angus Mor), already referred to on the title page.

Angus Mor of Islay, a great-grandson of Somerled, was also one of the commanders of King Hakon’s invasion fleet in 1263. The quote at the beginning of this paper, from a mid-13th-century praise poem, has him inheriting his ivory chess-pieces from his father Donald, the eponym of clan Donald. It also describes him as king of Lewis — flattery, perhaps, but he was clearly a considerable force in the politics of Ireland and the Western Isles of Scotland.⁷⁰ Even the leaders of local families, like the ancestors of the MacLeods, might have considerable wealth. In 1231 Tormod the son of Torquil evaded capture on

⁶⁵ For a reliable parallel text and translation, see Dillon 1962. Of the many listings of stipends on only two occasions do ‘chess’ sets and ships overlap, with respect to Uliad and Connachta (*ibid*, 182 and 187). For a discussion of the *Lebor* focusing on its ship stipends and their ‘Vikingness’, see Swift 2004, 189–206.

⁶⁶ Pálsson and Edwards 1978, ch 58 (alternative translation in Bibire 1988, 226, which also appears in Clancy 1998, 190). The word being translated as chess in both cases is *tafl*, which does not specifically mean chess — see discussion in main text.

⁶⁷ MacInnes 1978; Black 2001, pp xix–xx, 526.

⁶⁸ Woolf 2007, 81, suggests Olaf was in Lewis as sub-king or viceroy but this is not spelled out by the Manx Chronicle.

⁶⁹ Schädler 2007, 375.

⁷⁰ Bergin 1935, 61, 63; Duffy 2002, 56–7; Anderson 1922, vol 2, 617–18, 625.

Lewis by a Norwegian invasion force but not his wife and a 'great treasure'.⁷¹ Might it have included ivory gaming pieces similar to those in the Lewis hoard?

There are two final points to make here. First, no matter how or why the Lewis pieces arrived at Uig, it is only a presumption that they were new when buried. If they belonged to a local nobleman or cleric they may have provided many years of enjoyment before they passed out of use. This is a significant point to which we will return after a more detailed analysis of the individual pieces. Second, the circumstances of the hoard's discovery are so vague that there can be no confidence as to whether it was lost or deliberately hidden.

Barbara Crawford suggests that the hoard might relate in some way to the visit of Godred Olafsson, King of Man, to Norway in 1152 to pay homage to the king of Norway. This trip may have aimed to demonstrate his keenness to have his kingdom under the ecclesiastical care of the new archbishopric of Nidaros rather than the equally new one based on Dublin. The hoard might have represented a regal gift from one king to the other, or in this particular context be a suitable gift from the Archbishop of Nidaros to the Bishop of Sodor to mark his diocese's inclusion in the archdiocese.⁷² Certainly, the arrival of many of the pieces in Lewis in 1152 is a possibility, although we will argue below that that is far too early a date for the hoard's deposition. Gift exchange between senior clerics resonates with the readily observable fact that the bishops in the Lewis hoard have a marked prominence derived from their realistic depiction, perhaps sufficient to suggest ecclesiastical patronage, both for their production and distribution.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES: CHESS, TABLES AND HNEFATAFL

We now turn to muddying the waters a little via an exploration of how the Lewis pieces are capable of bearing more fluid, ambiguous meanings than has hitherto been allowed them. Our focus is the transition and overlap between hnefatafl and chess (a way in which gaming mirrors the changing times in which they were being played) and the broader associations of games. Hnefatafl is a game in which, as largely reconstructed from later evidence, a group of attackers arranged around the edge of the board, seek to capture a centrally placed king piece defended by his guards. The king wins if he can reach one of the four corner squares. All the pieces — king and pawns — move orthogonally, as the rook or warder in chess.⁷³

In trying to loosen some of the fixity around the Lewis pieces let us consider the accepted identification of some of them (Figs 6c–7e) as warders (chess rooks),⁷⁴ and pawns. Four of the warders (Figs 6d, 7c–e) have since Madden's analysis been accepted as berserkers, Norse warriors who fought in an uncontrollable fury, possibly trance induced. Indeed, in his recent, cogent

⁷¹ Anderson 1922, vol 2, 475, 478. See also Sellar 1998.

⁷² Crawford forthcoming, n 16.

⁷³ There were undoubtedly variations of play on these basic rules; for fuller discussion see Parlett 1999, 196–204; Murray 1951, 55–64 and Hall 2007, 11–19.

⁷⁴ The term warder for these pieces was coined by Madden (1832, 212).

analysis of Viking belief systems Neil Price cites these warders as a key, rare depiction of the berserker.⁷⁵ They are though open to another interpretation. The distinctive feature shared by them is shield-biting, a key attribute of berserkers. This apart, there is no obvious fury in the faces; their expressions are not overtly dissimilar to the other pieces. If they are berserkers they do not demonstrate the other key requirement of being naked or at least without a mail shirt, indeed just the opposite with all in full length coats, three of them apparently of mail (Figs 7c–e). There may well be some humorous pun or satire intended on berserkers, or a comment on Galloglass (Hebridean warriors) being as fearsome as berserkers. They could even signify frustration with the slowness of the game, a commonly perceived problem from at least the 13th century, which led to several rule variations to speed things up.⁷⁶ That these four pieces are straightforward depictions of berserkers seems far from certain.

The remainder of the non-berserker warders (Figs 6c, 6e–7b) are also foot soldiers. The identification as warders is one that stems back to Madden's brief, simple assertion that that is what they are; no argument for the identification is presented beyond what seems to be a natural logic given the identification of the other pieces and the gap that is left if all the pieces are deemed to represent complete sets. We could in fact interpret all the so-called warders as pawns. They certainly bear a close, formal similarity to the single pawn of 11th-century date, part of the incomplete set from S Italy, known as 'Charlemagne's chess set' after it was added to the treasury of St Denis, Paris.⁷⁷

This suggestion does not conflict with the accepted identification of the non-figurative, geometric-cylindrical pieces from the Lewis hoard (Fig 7f). The form is common enough from a number of other finds from across Europe.⁷⁸ The surviving examples from other sets share their abstract nature (derived from Islamic pieces that obeyed strictures on depicting the human body) with their fellow non-pawn pieces; geometric pieces are never mixed with figurative ones, and so intuitively one would not expect the Lewis abstract pawns to be part of any of the sets that may be represented in the hoard. The Lewis hoard then could have two types of pawn represented, abstract and figurative, the corollary of which is that the Lewis hoard may be less complete than has hitherto been supposed, lacking any warders at all (unless we allow the shield-biters to be warders, their shield-biting meant to distinguish them from the pawns).

The geometric pawns could also have doubled-up as pawns for the game of *hnefatafl*. Such improvisation is no stranger to the world of games,⁷⁹ and in this instance would have gained encouragement from the extended period of transition from one to the other — beginning by the 11th century (by which time chess was relatively common in Europe) and ending in the 13th century

⁷⁵ Price 2007, 364–78.

⁷⁶ Hall 2001a, 175–6; Eales 1986, 24; Murray 1913, 455–6. The reference here to Galloglass is, strictly speaking, anachronistic, since the earliest mention of them is in 1290, but see Duffy 2007a.

⁷⁷ Pastoureaux 1990, frontispiece illus; also Gamer 1954, 745.

⁷⁸ McLees 1990, figs 17, 18; Kluge-Pinsker 1991, cat nos A1, A3, A6, A8, A14, A15, A17, A19, A24 and A38.

⁷⁹ MH was reminded of this point by the BBC Radio 4 World Service broadcast of 'From Our Own Correspondent' on 25 February 2007, in which a reporter from Albania observed how he had seen two men playing outside a shop, using carrot tops and garlic cloves as gaming pieces.

(by the end of which chess seems to have replaced hnefatafl in popularity). Both games relying on king pieces and foot-soldiers/pawns would have leant further encouragement to this duality of play-purpose. That hnefatafl was still being played in the 13th century is demonstrated by an incised stone board from a 13th-century context at Whithorn Priory, Dumfries and Galloway.⁸⁰ Excavators in Waterford, Ireland found a 12th-century wooden hnefatafl board and a range of pieces of late 11th–13th-century date, for chess, hnefatafl and tables.⁸¹

Double-sided boards, found in both the archaeological and the literary record, signal an even closer duality. The 10th-century board from the Gokstad ship (referred to above) had a hnefatafl board incised on one side and a nine men's morris (or merels) board on the other. Similar double-sided boards for hnefatafl and merels come from Trondheim and Toftanes, Faroe Islands.⁸² The Icelandic *Króka-Refs Saga* includes a list of presents sent from Greenland to Harald Hardrada, an 11th-century king of Norway, including a 'tanntafl' or tooth-board (ie carved from walrus ivory or whale's tooth). The item is glossed by the saga-writer as being both a hnefatafl board ('hnefatafl') and a chess board ('skáktafl'), a clear reference to a double-sided board.⁸³ We should also expect from the same time-frame double-sided boards for a chess-tables (backgammon) combination, or indeed variant combinations of all the games mentioned. Double-boards persisted right through the high and late Middle Ages, as the 14th-century dual chess-tables board from Aschaffenburg, Germany, spectacularly demonstrates.⁸⁴ The presence of the 14 tables-men in the Lewis hoard suggests that they may have been used on a double-board, either with chessmen or hnefatafl pieces.

The literary evidence is also informative more generally on the hnefatafl/chess transition. A range of sagas written in the 13th and 14th centuries, but describing 11th- and 12th-century events, deploys references to chess ('skák' and 'skáktafl').⁸⁵ Of course, the written versions of the sagas may only reflect the popularity of chess at the time of writing rather than at the time of the events they recount. While people clearly played chess in northern Europe from at least the 11th century, it does not automatically follow that the sagas referred to it in preference to hnefatafl or other games.⁸⁶ This is paralleled by what happens in Irish texts (as we have seen with *Lebor na Cert*) to the game of fitchill/fidcheall (probably the Irish equivalent to hnefatafl), which in later medieval versions of their texts becomes chess.⁸⁷ In this context it is worth noting that in some

⁸⁰ Nicholson 1997, 449.

⁸¹ Hurley and McCutcheon 1998, 583–4, 592 and 666. Were some of the wooden rods carved with human heads excavated in Novgorod to be re-identified as pegged pieces for hnefatafl, then there would be a similar overlap with chess and hnefatafl in Novgorod (Kolchin 1989, vol 1, 204–5, 191–6; vol 2, pls 201, 218).

⁸² Trondheim: McLees 1990, pls 11, 12; Toftanes: Rosedahl and Wilson 1992, cat 321; Gokstad: Murray 1951, 58, fig 22. It is conceivable that simple domed hnefatafl pegged pieces could readily be deployed on a peg-hole merels board.

⁸³ Murray 1913, 444 (*Króka-Refs Saga*); Bryant Bachman 1985, p xi, 1–37 for a recent English edition. This saga, the historicity of which is doubtful, is thought to date to the early 14th century.

⁸⁴ Jenderko-Sichelschmidt et al 1994, 64–86 (cat 70). The board also functioned as a reliquary. In the later Middle Ages there are also triple boards, generally for chess, tables and merels and frequently depicted in art and copied as toys, a triple motif that also served as a social satire (Hall 2001a, 174).

⁸⁵ MH is very grateful to Paul Bibire for an extended email discussion of these issues.

⁸⁶ Murray 1913, 443–5.

⁸⁷ Hall 2007, 12. Compare also Meuwes 1996, 152–3, for a parallel situation in Dutch texts.

cases the transitional renaming to chess was underway by the 12th century, for instance in the so-called Breton lays of Marie de France and other (anonymous) poets.⁸⁸ Intriguingly the *OS*, originally written at the turn of the 12th century includes, as noted above, lines on the desirable accomplishments of a leader, including proficiency at chess.⁸⁹ In fact the term chess is the translation used by Paul Bibire, not of its precise Icelandic term 'skák', but of the broader term 'tafl', which could have meant board game or be a specific reference to tables (of which the later backgammon is a variant) or have been understood by the 13th-century audience as either tables, chess or hnefatafl.⁹⁰

The tables-men from the Lewis hoard, despite being plain and unglamorous (Fig 7g), are a significant addition to the European corpus, including figurative and geometric pieces. The figurative ones are underway by the 9th century and are spectacularly represented in Britain by the 11th-century set (with board) from Gloucester Castle. In Scotland there are later medieval (12th-century onwards) figurative pieces, and a series of 11th–12th-century interlace-decorated examples is evidenced by now lost finds from Forfar Loch (Angus) and St Andrews (Fife).⁹¹

The buckle (Fig 7h) is perhaps the item that has received least attention. Its size would certainly make it suitable for securing a strap on a large leather or textile bag in which to keep the playing pieces. An 11th-century textile bag in the treasury of Sens Cathedral was latterly used as a relic bag but may originally have had a secular purpose — its decoration of a mounted figure against a chequer-board background is suggestive of storage for gaming pieces, though it did not have a buckle-fastening.⁹² A range of bags and boxes remained essential for more or less peripatetic royal households and an inventory of Henry VIII's possessions lists many bags used for storing playing pieces.⁹³ The presence of the buckle also reminds us that the hoard may have contained a wider array of objects than was recovered,⁹⁴ and invites comparison with the group of associated 12th- to 13th-century ivory and bone finds — comb, seal-pendant and buckle — from Jedburgh Abbey (Scottish Borders).⁹⁵

MATCHING SETS AND CARVERS

In the following analysis only the 'face-pieces' are included and the assumption has been made that they are all primarily intended to be used as chessmen.

⁸⁸ Rabbert 1992, 148–60.

⁸⁹ Pálsson and Edwards 1978, ch 58. Chess as a princely attribute was not unique to Scandinavian culture. It is evident in early-medieval Irish law codes (Hall 2007, 13 and n 37) and extended lower down the social scale. Chess was also a knightly attribute. Petrus Alfonsi, in his *Disciplina Clericalis* (c 1100–25) lists chess as one of the seven skills of a good knight (Eales 1986, 15, and Vale 2001, 171). In the *Chanson Huon* of Bordeaux (c 1200) the knight-hero (disguised as a minstrel) intones nine attributes, including unsurpassed skill at chess and tables (Murray 1913, 738).

⁹⁰ Tables is a predecessor of backgammon but the latter term gets used (as in this paper) as an understandable equivalent. We should remember, however, that there were some 25 medieval variants of tables (Murray 1941, 58).

⁹¹ Hall 2007, 23–4 and refs there.

⁹² Symonds and Preece, 1928, 171 and pl XXIV.

⁹³ Starkey 1999; Hayward 1997.

⁹⁴ Other commentators have ignored, and we have no comment to make on, another object seen with the hoard in Edinburgh in 1831 by Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe. He described it as 'like the handle of a knife' (Laing 1857, 368).

⁹⁵ Higgin 1987; 1995, 83–4.

Even the most cursory of overviews of the Lewis face-pieces shows that they vary in size, quality of finish and design, and in the attributes awarded to each class. Underlying these variables are, surely, different craftsmen, if not workshops. The most economical explanation for the hoard is that it includes four chess sets. On that basis only 1 knight, 4 warders and 44 pawns are lacking. The best explanation as to why these pieces are missing appears to us to be because they were too fragmentary for their discoverer(s) to scoop them up. Those that do survive show a gradation from perfect condition to poor and partially broken.

The pawns do not form part of our study, but let it be said here that 13 of them, varying in height from 40 mm to 56 mm, are generally similar — undecorated and tapering to a pointed top, with or without a button. The other six are wider, they have rounded tops, and vary in height from 51 mm to 59 mm. Two of them have engraved decoration. Dalton's catalogue entries indicate that he saw them falling into five or six different types,⁹⁶ but we do not believe that this is compelling evidence for more than four sets. As with the face-pieces, there was probably no intention by whoever assembled them in sets to achieve the same level of matching as is now readily achieved in mass-produced sets manufactured in factories.

The face-pieces vary in height from 70 mm to 103 mm, and very little of this variation is accounted for by differences in relative height between different types of pieces. Table 1 assigns them to four sets solely based on height. From this it appears that two sets, 1 and 2, can be made in which the chessmen are quite tightly grouped in terms of size, but that there is much greater variation in grouping the rest into sets 3 and 4. It is possible that this is evidence that the hoard represents more than four sets, that they are not all chessmen, or that height alone is not a sufficient guide for grouping them.

FACIAL ANALYSIS

Irrespective of size, the best approach would appear to be to study the pieces for stylistic similarities, although there are obvious difficulties in attempting to compare, a knight, say, with a queen, since they have totally different clothing

TABLE 1
GROUPING OF LEWIS CHESSMEN BY HEIGHT
Heights in mm. * 3 pieces only ** 2 pieces only

	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Set 4
Kings	102–102	95–6	89–91	73–82
Queens	96–7	92–3	80–80	70–6
Bishops	95–102	92–5	83–9	73–82
Knights	100–103*	89–91	80–89	73–9
Warders	98–100**	90–93	82–9	71–9**

⁹⁶ Dalton 1909, n 2, 72–3.

and equipment. For that reason, we have concentrated on the faces. It is not unreasonable to suppose that a craftsman regularly turning out chessmen would tend to give them the same facial features, in the same way as a modern cartoonist or a carver of holiday souvenirs. In order to reduce the element of subjectivity in such a traditional art-historical approach, CW, a forensic anthropologist, undertook the comparisons.

This involved assessing and comparing visually each face (with the aid of magnification and measurements) in relation to facial morphology and facial proportions (ie mouths, noses and eyes). Figure 11 explains the technique of proportional comparison. This approach produced viable results for 50 of the 59 faces in the hoard, identifying five groups (A–E) with similar facial morphologies. The nine pieces that were not amenable to analysis (Figs 1b, 1g, 2f, 4f, 5a, 5b, 5h, 7a, 7c) were either too damaged and indistinct or too different from the identified groups to be included (showing no clear similarities with any one group).

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| <i>Group A</i>
(Fig 12) | A long straight nose with a flat base, inferiorly placed nostrils and a high nasal root (between the eyes); round open eyes; a down-turned mouth; and a long naso-labial distance (the distance between the nose and the upper lip). Similarity in vertical and horizontal proportions between all the pieces. |
| <i>Group B</i>
(Fig 13) | A bulbous nose with round alae (the fleshy part of the nose surrounding the nostrils) and visible nostrils; a wide short face; round open eyes; a down-turned mouth; a retrusive chin; and asymmetrical eye heights. Similarity in vertical proportions between all the pieces but variations in horizontal proportions between pieces. |
| <i>Group C</i>
(Fig 14) | A long narrow nose with an up-turned base, flat alae and visible nostrils; round open eyes; a down-turned mouth; an infraorbital crease (crease below the eyes); a clear philtrum (column-like hollow between the nose and the upper lip); and an upright facial profile. Similarity in vertical proportions between all the pieces but variations in horizontal proportions between pieces. |
| <i>Group D</i>
(Fig 15) | A wide short face; a straight nose with a rounded tip, round alae and visible nostrils; round open eyes; a down-turned mouth; an infraorbital crease; a clear philtrum; nasolabial creases; and an overbite (malocclusion where the upper teeth are more prominent than the lower teeth). Similarity in vertical and horizontal proportions between all the pieces |
| <i>Group E</i>
(Fig 16) | A defined nose with straight flat profile, visible nostrils and shaped nasal base; round open eyes; and an infraorbital crease. Similarity in vertical and horizontal proportions between the warder pieces but no similarity with the bishop piece (Fig 11). |

WORKSHOPS AND WORKMANSHIP

We will use these groupings in the rest of our analysis of the face-pieces, with the addition of a group X to cover the nine that were not amenable to

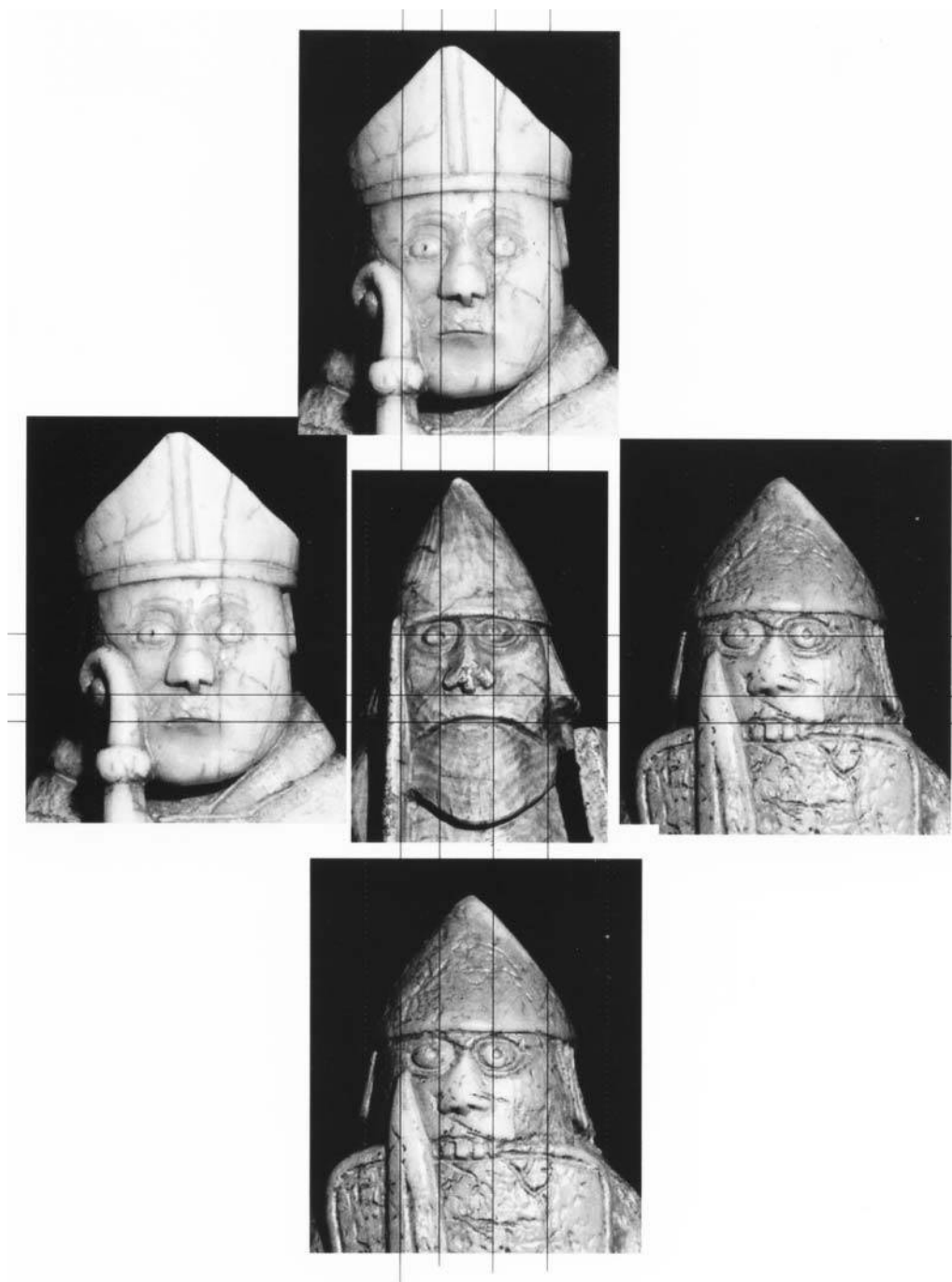


FIG 11

The technique of proportional comparison, using Group E as an example. The facial proportions of mouths, noses and eyes, both vertically and horizontally have been checked. In this case there is a resemblance in both the vertical and horizontal proportions between the two warders but no similarity with the bishop. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*

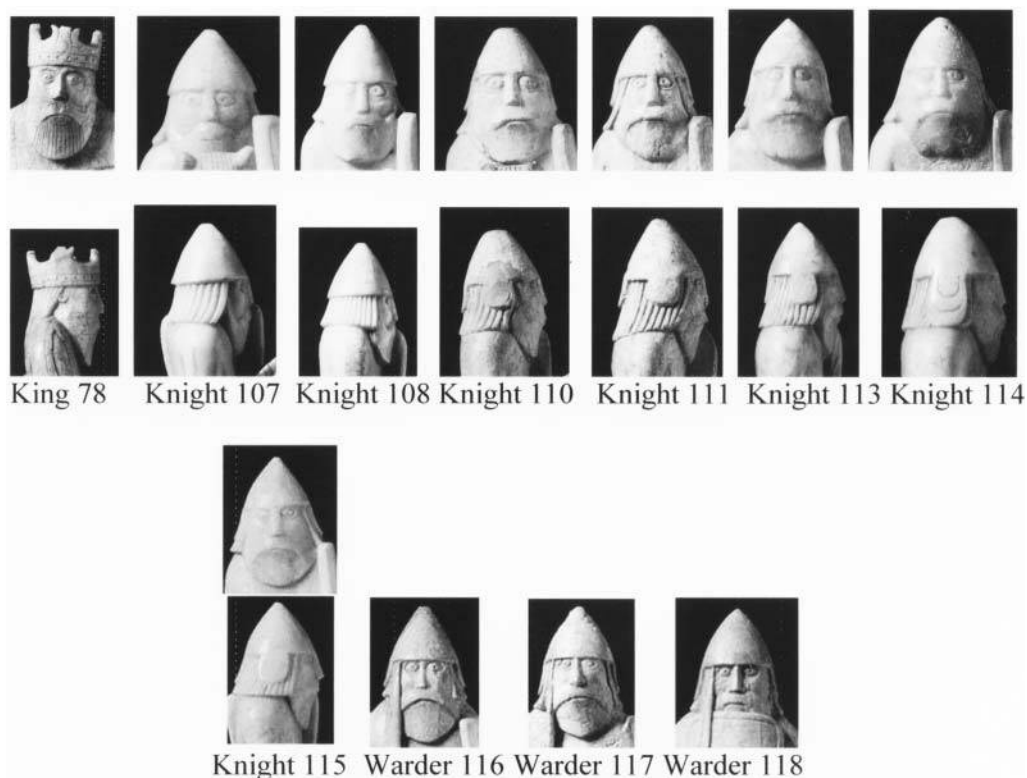


FIG 12

Group A faces. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*

facial analysis.⁹⁷ Combining the size data from Table 1 with these groups produces four sets, as in Table 2.

Group C pieces occur in all four sets, groups A and D in three, and groups B and E in two. Since there are no clear divides between our putative sets this may be taken as evidence that most of the chessmen were produced in the same workshop, a largish establishment with four or more master craftsmen working on ivory chess-pieces at any one time. We will consider later on whether there is support here for phasing the craftsmen and the sets they produced.

Other evidence exists for a workshop with several workers. Two chessmen have not been properly finished. One is a bishop (Figs 3d, 7i), with his hair merely blocked out, not striated, to indicate strands, like the hair on every other piece. The other is a knight (Figs 8a–b) whose hair is striated on one side of his head only. Presumably there were three main stages in turning out a

⁹⁷ For what it is worth, a separate study of the faces by DC, relying only on intuition, did come up with remarkably similar results. The main differences were that he failed to distinguish between Groups B and D, and created a separate group for the king and the warder in Group B on the basis of their beards and moustaches, features not taken into account by CW. DC also considered that the chessmen in Group C might be the work of more than one carver since they appear to range from competently designed pieces to ones that are crudely carved.

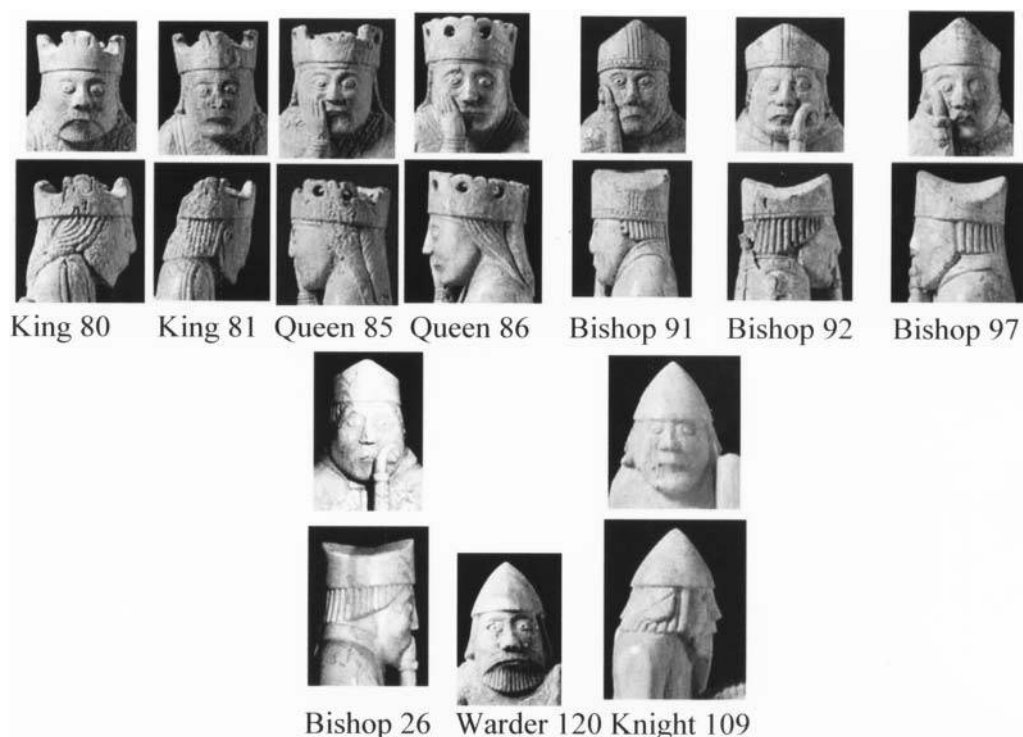


FIG 13

Group B faces. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*

chessman: select a suitably sized piece of ivory or tooth; carve it into shape; and give it a good finish, including removal of tool marks. Since the two pieces in question have been polished their defects cannot be taken as evidence that they were still being worked on when the hoard was deposited.⁹⁸ We would suggest that such errors would only arise in a workshop where there was a division of labour, with some craftsmen carving the pieces and others finishing them off. Both pieces are otherwise good, well-designed and executed pieces. They are more likely to be the output of a workshop under pressure to deliver rather than one that habitually produced poor work.

Substandard work is also apparent in a knight (Fig 8c), with a horizontal slot in the chest of the horse, possibly caused by the craftsman carelessly sawing too deeply when he was cutting the outline of the horse's head. This piece also has a large, deep, hole in the side of the knight's helmet, which looks like it might be a flaw or damage in the tusk rather than damage that occurred after manufacture.

⁹⁸ Stratford 1997, 54 notes there are certain pieces with areas left unfinished, revealing tooling with a tiny punch. The example he cites is the knight no 117 (his pl 37), but the surface he is drawing attention to is one cut in the inner dentine, and we fail to see any clear evidence for the type of tooling he mentions. The surface's roughness results from deterioration over a long period of time.

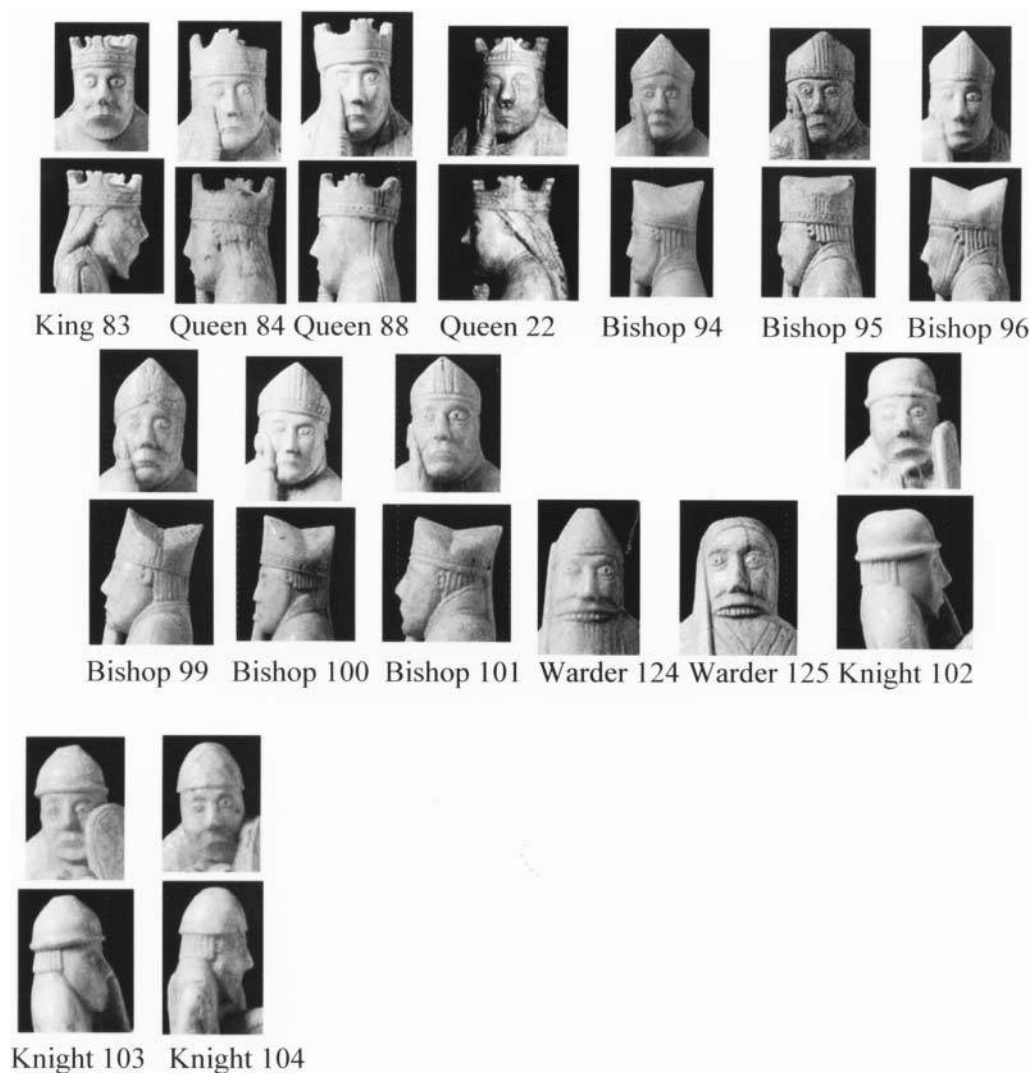


FIG 14

Group C faces. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*

The hoard clearly contains pieces varying enormously in quality, not just in the carving but also in the material used. Apart from three warders (Figs 6c, 6h, 7a) and two pawns (nos 126, 133) all made from whales' teeth,⁹⁹ the pieces are believed to be cut from walrus tusks. Walrus ivory was expensive with as little as possible wasted in the manufacturing process. Considerable skill was

⁹⁹ More detailed examination of all the pieces in the hoard may lead to other whales' teeth being identified, or even the use of other material, like narwhale tusks. These identifications of the warders and one of the pawns were made by Andrew Kitchener of NMS in 1996 (Stratford 1997, 54). It is now clear that the warder, no 29, is walrus ivory.

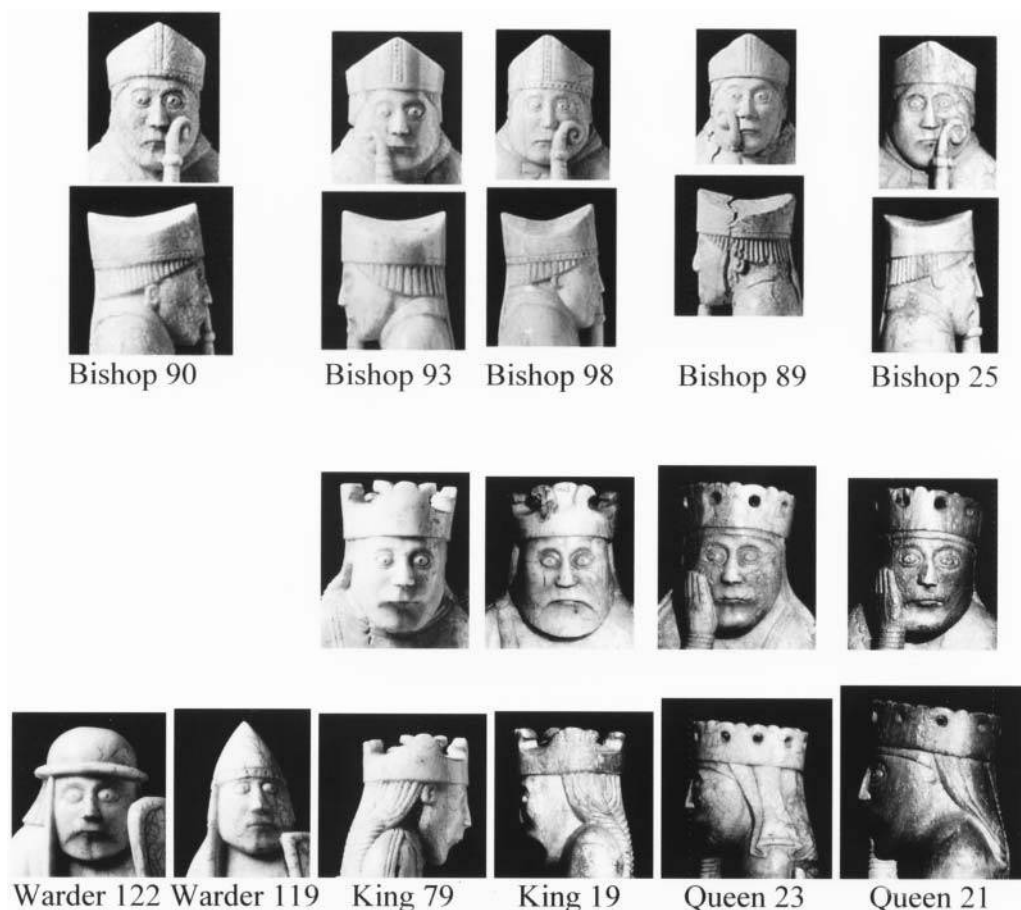


FIG 15

Group D faces. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*

involved in getting the maximum number of chessmen out of a tusk. One of the queens has one side of her throne attached as a separate piece (Fig 8d). It is neatly held in place with four ivory rivets, and is probably the work of the original craftsman. This may demonstrate the lengths craftsmen went to not to waste pieces of ivory.

Walrus tusks, which have a hard, dense outer layer of dentine and an inner layer of less dense, sponge-like or granular dentine (clearly visible in Fig 5g of a knight where it is damaged), could be over 900 mm long, though perhaps ones of half that length would have been more typical. In girth they might vary from about 190 mm to 220 mm.¹⁰⁰ The best results were achieved by carving all of the chessmen in the outer dentine, and many of the better pieces are like this. Others have their details only partially carved in the outer dentine. The division

¹⁰⁰ Ward 1910, 515–16.

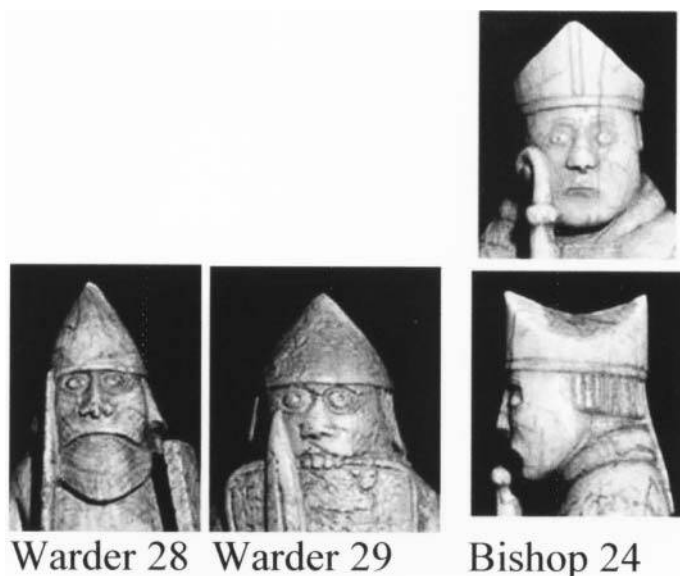


FIG 16

Group E faces. *Courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Scotland.*

TABLE 2
GROUPING OF LEWIS CHESSMEN BY GROUPS AND HEIGHT
* missing piece

	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Set 4
Kings	AD	DX	BB	CX
Queens	CC	DD	BB	CX
Bishops	CDDD	CCDE	BCCC	BBBD
Knights	AAAX	AAAX	ACXX	BCC*
Warders	AA**	ADEX	BCCE	DX**

between the two zones of material is often obvious, the outer dentine retaining its smooth surface, the inner dentine looking rougher and darker in colour (Fig 8e). The carvers sometimes broke through to the inner dentine when carving one or both sides of a piece, and in some cases got two chessmen from one section of tusk.¹⁰¹

At a more basic level of artistry, the ability to design and represent features in a pleasing and competent manner, there is a range that is difficult to construe as anything else than the measure of different craftsmen of varying competency. At the upper end of this scale the craftsman who carved the type-D pieces can be reckoned a genius, while the type-C pieces were being turned out by somebody with less ability or sense of design. This assessment comes from the pieces as a whole. One characteristic, however, which it might be noted is common

¹⁰¹ We are grateful to M François Poplin of the Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, for pointing this out to us.

to all groups, is round open, or bulging, eyes, perhaps because they reinforced a supposed amuletic or apotropaic quality in the pieces.¹⁰²

The possibility that there is a correlation between the groups identified by us and good use of walrus tusks is worthy of further detailed examination, while bearing in mind that the rough, marbling of inner dentine, which to modern eyes looks disfiguring, may have been seen by medieval eyes as a visual enhancement, making plain its exotic and precious nature.¹⁰³ Knights must have been difficult to make well, and, given their greater length, have normally required a piece of ivory from the lower portion of the tusk. Whereas craftsmen would generally have sought to have the faces of their pieces totally carved in the outer dentine, this was sometimes not achieved with the knights, for instance Figures 5a and 5b.

The option might also be considered that some craftsmen concentrated on making particular types of pieces. This might explain why 7 of the 11 pieces in group A are knights, and 5 of the 11 in group D are bishops.

CHANGING FASHIONS: CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT

Alongside variations in faces, materials and quality of carving must be set a range of different attributes and postures within each type. Previous writers, intent on finding comparative material for dating and tracing the origin of the pieces, have tended to pay a lot of attention to the thrones of the kings, queens and some of the bishops. Thus Stratford has noted that the foliage of the thrones was to some extent anticipated by stone sculpture from Trondheim churches, dating from the second quarter of the 12th century, and drew attention to a group of Scandinavian walrus-ivory carvings that show an intimate connection. On dating, he noted that the mitres worn by the bishops represent a change of fashion that occurred about the middle of the 12th century and proposed that the chessmen date to the second half of that century.¹⁰⁴

Glenn has similarly stressed stylistic links with Trondheim and the surrounding area of Trøndelag. She drew attention to the wood carving of the stave-churches there that, although having 'an element of folk art and a tendency to the archaic', still echo the decoration on the chessmen. There is also a chair from Tyldal, a bit to the south of Trøndelag, which is similar to the thrones of the Lewis chessmen. Glenn favoured a date towards the end of the 12th century because of these comparisons.¹⁰⁵

Here we would like to pay more attention to the clothing of the pieces. Although their bodies are not in proportion, their clothing, as well as thrones and other equipment, gives the impression of being based on real examples familiar to the craftsmen. This would seem to favour the view that many of them were made in an important centre like Trondheim where craftsmen of such prestigious items might be supposed to have had access to the court and senior churchmen.

¹⁰² The apotropaic quality of bulbous eyes is discussed in connection to St John the Baptist pilgrim badges by Spencer 1999, 219.

¹⁰³ This observation was made by Arthur MacGregor as a personal comment in Hall 2001b, 173.

¹⁰⁴ Stratford 1997, 40, 41, 44.

¹⁰⁵ Glenn 2003, 153–4.

TABLE 3
ATTRIBUTES OF KINGS

Fig	No	Group	Set	Other attributes
1c	78	A	1	
1d	79	D	1	
1a	19	D	2	
1g	82	X	2	
1e	80	B	3	
1f	81	B	3	shoulder-length hair
1h	83	C	4	
1b	20	X	4	

Kings

The kings (Figs 1a–h, Tab 3) are all seated on thrones, each holding a sword across his knees, right hand on the grip, left hand grasping the scabbard or blade. They all appear to have beards, with the possible exception of two (Figs 1d, 1f), and wear their hair in long braids extending down their backs, apart from one (Fig 1f), with hair cropped to shoulder length. This may be a conscious representation of a change in fashion.

They have open crowns ornamented with four trefoils, and wear long mantles. These are not tailored but secured at the right shoulder, and a tunic or dalmatic (a vestment with sleeves and slit sides) is worn underneath.

Queens

The queens (Figs 1i–2g, Tab 4) all sit on thrones, cradling their chins with their right hands. Two hold drinking horns in their left hands (Figs 2b–c). All the others support their right elbows with their left hands.

Four wear crowns (type I) of similar form to the kings. The other four (Figs 1i, 2b, 2d–e) have type-II crowns in which the trefoils have merged in a continuous band. All are clad in long mantles or cloaks that cover both shoulders and leave a gap down the front. In three cases (Figs 2c–e), these garments are fastened at the neck. Under them they have a gown, with close sleeves. Their hair, worn long in braids, sometimes shows under a veil (Fig 8f). In two cases,

TABLE 4
ATTRIBUTES OF QUEENS

Fig	No	Group	Set	Crowns	Other attributes
2g	88	C	1	I	
2c	84	C	1	I	drinking horn
2b	23	D	2	II	drinking horn
1i	21	D	2	II	
2d	85	B	3	II	
2e	86	B	3	II	
2a	22	C	4	I	knee-length gown
2f	87	X	4	I	knee-length gown

nos 21, 22 (Fig 8g), the veils are decoratively gathered at the back. Veils tend to be seen as a 10th–11th-century item but excavations in Dublin recovered a range of scarves, bands and veils, with one dated to the late 12th century.¹⁰⁶ Two queens (Figs 2a, 2f) have a knee-length gown under their mantles, with an undergarment extending to the feet. This would appear to represent an earlier, 11th-century fashion.¹⁰⁷

Bishops

Greatest diversity is shown in the representation of the bishops, whether they are standing or enthroned (Figs 2h–4e, Tab 5). All are apparently clean-shaven.

In terms of their vestments, they can be divided into two groups: those that wear a cope (cloak) as an outer garment (Figs 2h, 3g–i, 4b–c) and those that have a chasuble (sleeveless vestment) topmost (Figs 2i–3f, 4a, 4d–e). Of those with copes, one (Fig 2h) is obviously also wearing a chasuble and another (Fig 4b) has a dalmatic, stole (long scarf-like garment of silk, etc) and alb (white vestment reaching to the feet).¹⁰⁸ The vestments represented on the other four bishops clad in copes are open to interpretation. No 94 (Fig 3g) is particularly puzzling, as there appears to be a chasuble on one side of the crosier, but not the other. This may be another example of a mistake, or perhaps a measure that the carver of this piece really did not understand what he was trying to represent. The ten other bishops wearing a chasuble are clearly wearing them over dalmatics, stoles and albs.

TABLE 5
ATTRIBUTES OF BISHOPS

Fig	No	Group	Set	Mitres	Crosiers	Other attributes
3i	96	C	1	II	left	cope
4d	100	C	1	II	left	book
3b	89	D	1	II	left	seated, book
3c	90	D	1	II	right	seated, blessing
3h	95	C	2	II	left	cope
2i	25	D	2	I	right	blessing
4b	98	D	2	II	right	book, cope
2h	24	E	2	II	left	seated, cope
3d	91	B	3	I	right	seated, blessing
4e	101	C	3	II	left	book
3g	94	C	3	III	left	cope
4c	99	C	3	III	left	book, cope
3a	26	B	4	I	right	seated
3e	92	B	4	II	right	seated, book
4a	97	B	4	II	left	
3f	93	D	4	II	left	seated, book

¹⁰⁶ Heckett 2003, 4–9 (which cites the Lewis chess queens as parallel evidence).

¹⁰⁷ Compare a reconstruction of the dress of Matilda, Queen of King William I of England, in Norris 1940, 23–4, pl 1.

¹⁰⁸ For a useful explanation of these types of vestments see Mayo 1984, 38–46.

The mitres all have horns, worn front and back, and, all but one, no 99, infulae (ribbons — see Fig 7i) pendant at the back. They divide into three groups:

- Group I: cylindrical caps with low peaks and no decoration (Figs 2i, 3a, 3d).
- Group II: more clearly defined, peaked or ‘triangular’ forms, invariably with decorative bands, especially vertical ones, front and back; vertical sides like group I (Figs 2h, 3b–f, 3h–4b, 4d–e).
- Group III: low sides, peaks relatively higher and the bottom edge raised at the front; decorated front and back with vertical bands (Figs 3g, 4c).

Group-II mitres compare well with representations of mitres on seals, paintings, etc, of the late 12th century. Group-I mitres are typologically nearer in form to the simple round caps from which mitres developed, and might tend to be earlier in date, but no earlier than the mid-12th century when the fashion for wearing mitres with the horns front and back first arose. We know of no exact parallels for group-III mitres but they seem to have most in common with representations of 13th-century mitres.¹⁰⁹

Each bishop holds a crosier, grasped with one or two hands, the crook either facing right or left. Some hold a book or have their right hand raised in blessing.

Knights and Warders

The knights (Figs 4f–6b, Tab 6) and warders (Figs 6c–7e, Tab 7) seem mostly to be bearded. Both wear similar protective coats, divided at front and

TABLE 6
ATTRIBUTES OF KNIGHTS

Fig	No	Group	Set	Headgear	Shields	Shield designs	Other attributes	Horses
5i	113	A	1	IIe	II	blank	lance couched	I
6a	114	A	1	IIe	II	cross	lance couched	I
6b	115	A	1	IIe	III	cross		I
5h	112	X	1	IIIf	III	quartered	lance couched	II
5d	108	A	2	IIa	II	cross		I
5f	110	A	2	IIe	II	lozenge centrally		I
5g	111	A	2	IIe	II	cross		I
4f	27	X	2	IIe	II	blank		I
5c	107	A	3	IIa	III	square centrally		II
4i	104	C	3	IIc	I	cross		II
5a	105	X	3	IIIb	III	cross		II
5b	106	X	3	IIa	II	saltire in chief	lance couched	II
5e	109	B	4	IIe	III	cross		II
4g	102	C	4	IIIa	I	saltire in chief		II
4h	103	C	4	IIIa	I	divided per pale		II

¹⁰⁹ Norris 1949, 102–6.

TABLE 7
ATTRIBUTES OF WARDERS

Fig	No	Group	Set	Headgear	Shields	Shield designs	Other attributes
6e	116	A	1	Ile	III	cross	
6f	117	A	1	Ile	II	blank	
6g	118	A	2	Ile	II	lozenge centrally	
6h	119	D	2	Ile	III	saltire centrally	
6c	28	E	2	IIa	III	cross	
7c	123	X	2	IIf	I	cross	berserker
6i	120	B	3	IIa	III	cross	
7d	124	C	3	I/IIIf	I	cross	berserker
7e	125	C	3	I	I	saltire	berserker
6d	29	E	3	IIa	II	lozenge centrally	berserker
7b	122	D	4	IIIa	II	cross	
7a	121	X	4	IIIIf	III	cross	

back for ease in moving, and especially for sitting astride a horse. These were probably of hide or leather.

There are two effigies of warriors in the Abbey Museum at Iona (Argyll and Bute), apparently wearing similar garments, extending to the knees. Since neither is likely to be earlier than the 14th century, they demonstrate how some traditions and equipment in the West Highlands and Isles changed little over a long time.¹¹⁰ Three warders (Figs 7c–e), however, are represented wearing hauberks (mail coats), two with coifs (hoods) that are integral with the main garment. For the purposes of our analysis these are labelled by us as type-I headgear. All are remarkable for the crudeness of their execution. The mail is merely indicated by irregular, scratched, cross-hatched lines.

Most of the knights and warders wear helmets (type-II headgear) with, surprisingly, no mail coifs or aventails (capes) to protect the neck, or any straps to hold them in place. Several are conical in form (type IIa) (eg Fig 6d), those of two warders being faceted vertically (Figs 7c–d), indicating that they are of *spangenhelm*-type (type IIf), that is made up of segments, riveted together. This form of construction for helmets is of considerable antiquity, but continued into the 14th century.¹¹¹ One of the knights (Fig 4i) has a helmet that is rounded in profile (type IIc), a form that was introduced about 1150 and remained popular until the middle of the 13th century,¹¹² and the helmet of one of the warders (Fig 6i) is keeled, front and back (type IID).

Although contemporary images of 12th- and 13th-century warriors normally show them wearing helmets with nasals, rectangular extensions to protect the nose, the helmets represented in the Lewis hoard do not have them, with the possible exception of three of the knights (Figs 5c, 6a–b). The evidence is not compelling. Many, however, do have three broad flaps (Figs 8h–i), two

¹¹⁰ RCAHMS 1982, 234–5. For further discussion of such defensive coats, see Caldwell 2007, 151–9.

¹¹¹ Blair 1972, 25.

¹¹² Ibid, 29.

at the sides and one at the back (type IIe). In some cases they are treated differently, for example engraved with crosses, perhaps to indicate they are of leather. Parallels for these are difficult to find, but one, appropriately enough, is from a 12th-century carving on the wooden portal of a door from a stave-church at Hylestad, Norway. It shows Sigurd the Dragon-slayer with a conical helmet provided with protective pieces at sides and rear, but also a nasal.¹¹³ One of the knights (Figs 5h, 8c) has a helmet with flaps, a decorative band and a high, pointed profile (type IIIf). Exact parallels for it have been difficult to find, though it is more reminiscent in profile to basinet (helmets) of the 14th century.¹¹⁴

Two of the knights (Figs 4g–h) and one of the warders (Fig 7b) have kettle-hats — rounded iron hats with rims that give them the appearance of bowler hats (type IIIa). Finally, one knight (Fig 5a) and a warder (Fig 7a) have a distinctive form of carinated, flat-topped kettle-hat (type IIIb). The warder's has a series of diamond-shaped piercings on the keel, as if to indicate that it has a textile covering. No close parallels are known for it, but kettle-hats of broadly similar form, although with more pronounced rims, are depicted in the Morgan Picture Bible, thought to have been produced in Paris in the 1240s, and even later manuscripts.¹¹⁵

All the knights and warders carry large, kite-shaped shields. Typologically, the earliest form (type I) represented is broad, with a rounded top (Fig 7e). Such shields remained in use in Europe until about 1200. From the middle of the 12th century the curve at the top of them became much less pronounced (type II), like many represented in the Lewis hoard (Fig 8b). They are also much narrower than type-I shields. At the beginning of the 13th century narrow forms with a straight top edge (type III) began to appear,¹¹⁶ of which there are some examples among these pieces (Fig 8c).

Most of the shields have geometric decoration. Systematic designs, the beginnings of heraldry, had appeared in Europe by the middle of the 12th century.¹¹⁷ The preponderance and variety of cross designs (Figs 7c, 7e, 8b) on the shields of the Lewis chessmen, rather than a wider range of patterns, might suggest that most of these are non-heraldic, but possibly proto-heraldic, that is concerned with depicting devices of recognition but without indicating family and lineage. The graveslab of Riddar Bjørn Finnsson in Trondheim Cathedral, dated to 1250–1300, shows him with a type-III shield with a simple decoration of small roundels.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Nicolle 1988, vol 1, 398–9; vol 2, 845, illus 1049C. The portal is now in the Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo.

¹¹⁴ See, for instance, Clayton, 1972, pls 6–10. Blair, 1972, 51–2, was unable to trace illustrations of tall, conical helmets of this type any earlier than the second decade of the 14th century.

¹¹⁵ This Bible used to be known as the Maciejowski Bible. It is in the Morgan Library in New York (MS M638). See, for instance, fols 12r, 15v, 16v, 22r at <www.themorgan.org/collections/> [accessed 16 October 2008]. See also Nicolle 1988, vol 1, 444 and vol 2, 866, illus 1213A, for a similar kettle-hat represented in a late 13th-century Swabian (?) manuscript of the *Vita Caroli Magni*, now in the Cathedral Library, St Gallen, Switzerland. Madden 1832, 263, compares the representations of kettle-hats in paintings of the life of St Eric in Uppsala Cathedral, Sweden, but they date to the 15th century.

¹¹⁶ Blair 1972, 181.

¹¹⁷ For a valuable recent analysis of the development of heraldry between 1050–1250, see Crouch 2002, esp 28–37.

¹¹⁸ Ekroll 2001, 17, 42, no 28.

The warders carry swords while the knights have lances (Fig 8a), in four cases couched for battle (Fig 8h). Their horses can be divided into two types depending on whether the heads rest on the chest (type I — see Fig 8b) or there is a distinct gap (type II — see Fig 8c). The heads of the latter type are more naturalistic.

DISCUSSION

It now remains for us to discuss what significance there might be in the variations identified above. Any noteworthy correlation between groups and the design of pieces appears to be elusive. It would therefore be difficult to claim that individual carvers concentrated on making, for instance, bishops distinctively different in design from other craftsmen. It is also hard to detect any overall pattern of attributes that might be an indicator of sides within each set. The obvious way for distinguishing sides would have been by coating the 'black' pieces in some colouring material that has since worn off or dissolved.¹¹⁹ It appears, however, that it might be possible to extract important information on the dating of the hoard and the integrity of the sets from our analysis.

Study of this kind has previously been inhibited by the assumption that the hoard represents a merchant's stock and the pieces within it would therefore all have been new and unused when buried. Examination of the individual pieces has so far failed to detect any signs of wear and tear resulting from handling, but this is by no means surprising given the toughness of ivory. There are clues, however, that they are not all from the same batch or of the same date, which, if true, would favour the interpretation that the hoard is actually a group of sets belonging to a chess-playing prince, cleric or nobleman.

We have identified some features of the pieces that represent fashions for which a date into the 13th century seems to be required. There are other characteristics identified as being potentially early, though we do not have any certainty that any of them would have been unacceptable within the period of the chessmen's manufacture.

Comparing dating features and their distribution across our groups and sets (Tab 8), we draw the following conclusions. Set 1 may be the earliest of the four while either set 3 or set 4 may be the most recent. The craftsmen represented by groups A and E may not have commenced work, at least in the main workshop, as early as those represented by groups B, C and D. Only group C pieces occur in all four sets and have early to late dating features. That alone may suggest that the period within which the majority of the pieces were being made may have been a relatively few years.

Those years may have been more recent than has hitherto been supposed. That is the reasonable conclusion to draw from the representation, noted above, of features including type-III mitres, straight-topped shields, carinated kettle-hats and a helmet (type II_f) with a high pointed profile. We therefore favour a date

¹¹⁹ Madden 1832, 212 claimed that some of the pieces retained traces of red colouring. None do now, and it is possible that what Madden saw was some discolouration caused by long burial. Whatever it was, it appears to have totally vanished or been removed (Stratford 1997, 55).

TABLE 8
SUMMARY OF DATING FEATURES ACROSS GROUPS AND SETS

	Set	Early		Mid	Late	
		Groups	Dating evidence		Groups	Dating evidence
Kings	1			AD		
	2			DX		
	3			B	B	hair
	4			CX		
Queens	1			CC		
	2			DD		
	3			BB		
	4	CX	gowns			
Bishops	1			CDDD		
	2	D	mitre	CCE		
	3	B	mitre	C	CC	mitres
	4	B	mitre	BBD		
Knights	1			AA	AX	helmet, shield
	2			AAAX		
	3	C	shield	X	AX	kettle-hat, shields
	4	CC	shields		B	shield
Warders	1			A	A	shield
	2	X	shields	A	DE	shields
	3	CC	shields	E	B	shield
	4			D	X	shield

span for the pieces in the hoard from the end of the 12th century to the early 13th century.

We have also to consider the possibility that some chessmen are replacements for other pieces that have become lost. This would particularly apply to some classified as group X. Indeed one king (Fig 1g) has a face so different from the rest that it is clearly a good candidate for the product of another workshop. Even the knight (Fig 5c), the only group A piece not in sets 1 or 2, might be a contender for consideration as a replacement. That none of the pieces need be later in date than the early 13th century might indicate that the date of deposition was not much later.

CONCLUSION

Our review of the hoard suggests that it is not necessarily a merchant's stock and, indeed, that this is not the best explanation. In historical and cultural terms there are no impediments to placing its use in Lewis as the prized possession of a local prince, nobleman or senior churchman. We infer manufacture of the individual pieces in the late 12th and early 13th century with deposition of the hoard not long afterwards.

An important Scandinavian centre, especially Trondheim, still appears to be the most likely source for the individual pieces, and while we suggest that most were manufactured in the one workshop, we believe that our analysis

allows different craftsmen to be identified. Our facial analysis is the basis for the identification of five main groups, possibly equating with the work of five craftsmen of differing ability.

The hoard consists of pieces for at least four chess sets, and probably not more. Some of these pieces may have been for hnefatafl, or both chess and hnefatafl, and we must remember the presence of tables-men for the game of tables. The richness of the hoard indicates a pursuit of fashionable and long-held gaming practice on the Isle of Lewis. Possession of such playing equipment would have imbued its owner with considerable status.

There is much yet to learn about the Lewis gaming hoard. More information should come from further detailed study of the constituents of the hoard, including chemical analysis of the ivory. A fieldwork project to help advance issues of geographical and cultural context, and to tie down the findspot, highly recommends itself.

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Abbreviations

BM	The British Museum
NMS	National Museums Scotland
OS	<i>Orkneyinga saga</i>
RCAHMS	Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland

Résumé

Le trésor de pièces d'échecs de Lewis : un réexamen de leur fabrication, de leur contexte, de leur découverte et de leur signification par David Caldwell, Mark Hall et Caroline Wilkinson

Les études menées depuis presque 180 ans sur les pièces de jeu d'échecs de Lewis ont posé des bases solides en la matière, surtout du point de vue de l'histoire de l'art. En adoptant une approche plus interdisciplinaire (qui associe des éléments d'histoire de l'art à l'archéologie et à l'histoire), cet article s'intéresse à certains thèmes négligés, en particulier les contextes archéologique, politique et du jeu dans le monde de la mer du Nord aux XII^e

et XIII^e siècles, et revisite d'autres thèmes plus fréquentés. Nous suggérons une composition et une fonction plus fluides du trésor de pièces d'échecs, avec au moins quatre jeux de pièces d'échecs provenant du même atelier et pouvant avoir été destinés à l'île de Lewis, peut-être au début du XIII^e siècle.

Zusammenfassung

Der Hort von Spielfiguren auf Lewis: Eine Neuuntersuchung ihrer Herstellung, ihres Kontexts, ihrer Entdeckung und Bedeutung von David Caldwell, Mark Hall und Caroline Wilkinson

Beinahe 180 Jahre Forschung zu den Lewis-Schachfiguren hat uns eine solide Grundlage für ihr Verständnis gegeben, das hauptsächlich auf einer kunsthistorischen Analyse beruht. Mit einem eher interdisziplinären Ansatz (einer Kombination von Elementen aus der Kunstgeschichte, Archäologie und Geschichtswissenschaft) konzentriert sich diese Arbeit auf einige Themen, die bisher übergangen wurden – hauptsächlich den archäologischen, spieltechnischen und politischen Kontext der Welt um die Nordsee um das 12. und 13. Jahrhundert –, und auf einige vertraute Themen, die jedoch hier neu beleuchtet werden. Wir schlagen eine flexiblere Zusammensetzung und Funktion dieses Hortes von Spielfiguren vor, wobei man sich vorstellen könnte, dass in der gleichen Werkstatt im frühen 13. Jahrhundert mindestens vier Sätze von Schachfiguren für den Gebrauch in Lewis hergestellt wurden.

Riassunto

I pezzi degli scacchi rinvenuti in massa sull'isola di Lewis: un riesame della fattura, del contesto, della scoperta e del significato di David Caldwell, Mark Hall e Caroline Wilkinson

I quasi 180 anni di studi sui pezzi degli scacchi dell'isola di Lewis hanno fornito solide basi di conoscenza soprattutto dal punto di vista della storia dell'arte. Adottando un approccio più interdisciplinare (associando elementi di storia dell'arte con l'archeologia e con la storia) questo studio concentra la sua attenzione su alcuni temi in precedenza trascurati, particolarmente quelli dei contesti archeologico, politico e ludico nel mondo del Mare del Nord nel XII e XIII secolo, e considera altri temi più noti in una nuova prospettiva. Gli autori sostengono che la composizione, oltre che la funzione, dell'ammasso di pezzi è più variata, e che almeno quattro set di pezzi, forse fatti per essere usati su Lewis e che potrebbero risalire agli inizi del XIII secolo, provengono dalla stessa fabbrica.