

The Lewis Chess Pieces

By Tristian See

Introduction:

This report is a project for the Henry Morris Award, in which I researched about the history, importance and representation of the Lewis Chess Pieces. To further my understanding of the rare chess set I have been educated through online resources as well as visiting the National Museum of Scotland to consolidate and gain first-hand experience of a few of the remaining pieces.

What are the Lewis Chess Pieces?

How did chess originate?

The game of chess derives from sixth century India and began to spread by the Arabs as they began to occupy and conquer countries such as Spain, Portugal and Italy. From then on other European nations were also introduced to the board game as such leading to Scandinavia through many different forms from their invasions as well as their trading and travelling. It became extremely popular with the upper class allowing them to exercise strategical plans of war. Across the world chess pieces were able to represent varied cultures and high statuses.

The discovery:

On 1831 a farmer named Malcolm Macleod uncovered a stone case hiding the Lewis Chessmen alongside 14 table men and a belt buckle . These pieces discovered on Uig beach found on the Island of Lewis were made from walrus ivory and sperm whale tooth. Experts believe that the pieces were carved around 500 years ago. During the medieval period it is difficult to tell where the chess pieces were exactly first created but due to previous events such as the invasion of the Vikings ,that first began in 793, it could be argued that it was originally from the Nordic region being heavily linked to Norway or in Scotland itself throughout the era of Viking rule.



Image obtain from the National Museum of Scotland Website

The carvings

From the carvings of the rooks and bishops, experts believe they were created between 1150-1200 as the warders also known as rooks represent typical Nordic warriors with long leather coats, Norman shields, swords and pointy helmets. Moreover, the biting of man further indicates a Nordic Berserker which displays the wildness, ferocity and animal like qualities they possess. As for the bishops they also had pointed hats peaking at the front and the back but instead carried a crosier implying a position within the Church. The bishops also found itself new to the game by the rare chess set as it replaced the previous war elephants used by the origins in India. Surprisingly, the Queen was the weakest piece only able to move to one adjacent square per turn which was unchanged until the 15th century becoming the most powerful pieces. The queens are depicted with detailed gowns but a distinctive feature of every queen is that they are all placing their right hand on their cheek. Unfortunately, there is no known reason for the placement but gives the representation of a miserable Queen. For their counterparts, the kings likewise sitting down on a throne appear to have a frown. Other key attributes include braided hair and holding a sword above their lap. Knights ride their horses while carrying a spear, sword and shield. The pawns have no human representation as they are portrayed like a cylinder with a pointed top. The thrones which could be found used by the Kings, Queens and some Bishops depicted Norwegian churches.

As mentioned previously the pieces are made from Walrus ivory which is likely to be from Greenland displaying clear trading opportunities created by Scandinavians countries. With the size of walrus ivory up to 4 pieces were able to be made. The colours of the pieces have disappeared but mercury traces lead to believe that they were originally red and white.



Images taken by myself in the National Museum of Scotland

In total there are 79 Lewis Chess Pieces discovered including:

- 8 Kings
- 8 Queens
- 16 Bishops

- 15 Knights
- 13 Rooks
- 19 Pawns

Height of the pieces:

- Pawns can range from 3.5 to 5.8 cm
- The other pieces range from 7 to 10.2 cm

There are diverse expressions carved amongst the faces of the chess pieces which alludes to an increase possibility of undiscovered pieces. Furthermore, due to the large range from the pawns it could be predicted that at least five sets were created.



Image taken by myself in the National Museum of Scotland

Where are they now:

From the stone case discovered in 1831, 82 of the objects are now kept within the British Museum while the rest of the 11 items are displayed in National Museum of Scotland.



Image taken by myself in the souvenir shop of the National Museum of Scotland selling replicas of the Lewis Chess Pieces

Learning and Reflection

This chess set has been inspiring by the creativity and detail of the carvings of Lewis Chess Pieces. The creators have also displayed their own cultures within the pieces.

I have benefited from completing this project to research and gain insight on a specific area of my interest. It has been a valuable experience which will be essential in my further education of researching and acquiring information. I am very grateful for the Henry Morris Memorial Trust for supporting this project.



Me at the National Museum of Scotland