

# The Value of

The Isle of Lewis chessmen are the most



“OH MY GOODNESS, it’s one of the Lewis Chessmen.”

Alexander Kader, Head of Sotheby’s European Sculpture and Works of Art Department, couldn’t believe his eyes. A family from Edinburgh had brought in a small ivory figure for a quick expert appraisal. They were part of a steady stream of people who stop into the auction house, inquiring about the value of some old trinket or knickknack. “That happens every day,” Kader explained. “Our doors are open for free valuations. More often than not, it’s not worth very much.”

This one was worth very much. The piece sold in a Sotheby’s auction last June for £735,000, or approximately \$925,000. How could a small, decrepit piece of old walrus tusk hold such an extreme value?

Without a doubt, the Isle of Lewis chessmen are the most famous chess pieces in the world. Millions of people have marveled at them in the British Museum and the National Museum of Scotland, where the pieces have been on

display since 1832 and 1888, respectively. Even more so, their regular appearances in movies, television shows, books, magazines, and social media have steadily increased their worldwide recognition and popularity, to the point where the pieces are widely acknowledged as historical icons for the ages.

But widely acknowledged does not mean widely known. Verified facts about their provenance are few and far between. This much we know for sure: that in April 1831, the discovery of a hoard of medieval “curiosities” was announced on the Isle of Lewis, in the Outer Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland. The hoard had at least 93 pieces, consisting of 14 plain disks for playing a board game; one belt buckle; and 78 pieces that are universally identified as chessmen. All of the chess pieces are figural, in human forms, except the pawns. The chessmen can be arranged into four separate, distinct chess sets, albeit with a few pieces missing: a knight, three warders (rooks), and 45 pawns. (The newly-found piece is a

warder, thus reducing the number of missing non-pawn pieces from five to four.) Almost all of the pieces were made from walrus tusk, although five were most likely made from whale’s teeth.

So far so good. But things get murkier from here. Virtually everything else about the hoard—its origin, dating, the story of discovery, time and place of discovery, interpretation of the pieces’ features and carved adornments—are up for ongoing debate and heated dispute.

The generally accepted theory is that the pieces were carved in Norway, probably Trondheim, sometime around 1150 to 1200 A.D. (the Isle of Lewis was part of the Norse Kingdom at that time.) A plausible competing theory is that they were carved in Iceland; some adherents of the Icelandic theory have even identified a specific artist, Margret the Adroit, as possibly having made the pieces under a commission by Bishop Pall Jonsson. Other candidates of origin have been advanced as well, including Britain, Scotland, Ireland,

# Priceless

famous in the world. But why? *By* JON CRUMILLER



Sweden, and the Isle of Lewis itself. The date of manufacture is also debated: various researchers have suggested that the pieces were manufactured in the 12th century, or perhaps the 13th century, or the 14th century, or possibly the 17th century!

How, when, and where was the hoard discovered? There are as many stories as there were storytellers. Depending on the source, the hoard was found by Malcolm Macleod, “a peasant of Uig, digging in a sandbank,” who thought he had stumbled upon a family of gnomes; or by a cow that kicked in an underground chamber, revealing the hidden pieces; or the pieces were discovered near a nunnery, “Taigain collechin dugh an Uig,” the House of the Black Women in Uig, who may have carved the pieces themselves to alleviate perpetual boredom. The best-known (and most outlandish) story tells about “An Gille Ruadh,” the Red Gillie, who spotted a young sailor fleeing his ship with a bundle, which turned out to hold the Lewis pieces; Gillie

murdered the sailor and absconded with the bundle, burying it for recovery at a later date. But he was taken into custody for other offenses and confessed to these crimes as he was led to the gallows at Stornoway.

Tales about the discovery were so incongruent that in 1833, only two years after the find was first announced, Scottish academic David Laing reported to the Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland: “It is evident, that to serve some purpose, contradictory statements were circulated by the persons who discovered or who afterwards obtained possession of these Chess-men ...” Those contradictory statements may have also included the find-date, which is assumed to be 1831; but, based on other historical clues, the hoard might have been uncovered as far back as the 1780s. As for the traditional find-spot near Uig Bay, a more likely candidate is Méalasta, eight miles to the southwest.

But not everything is so wildly uncertain. A broad spectrum of evidence points to the

pieces having been carved somewhere around 1150-1200 A.D. And that is quite a long time ago. It represents roughly the halfway point between the dawn of chess, as archaeologists currently believe, and today. Some of the rules were different back then: queens were the weakest pieces on the board; the scope of bishops’ moves was very limited; pawns did not have an option of hopping two squares on their initial moves. Castling was an invention for the future. Nevertheless, it was indeed chess, the brand of chess that perhaps our ancestors played. And if so, then based on the centuries elapsed, they would have been our great-great- (insert 22 more greats here) -great-great-grandparents!

Back to our present day. Modern scientific studies are chipping away at the unknowns. Professor Caroline Wilkinson, a specialist

PIECES FROM THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SCOTLAND’S COLLECTION. THE MUSEUM HAS DISPLAYED A SELECTION OF ISLE OF LEWIS CHESS PIECES SINCE 1888.

in facial anthropometry and reconstruction, has undertaken an in-depth analysis of the Lewis pieces, using relative size, precise measurements of facial features, and artistic skill of the artist(s). Such distinctions are important, notes the study, because "... [the] craftsmen carving chessmen, day in and day out, would tend to give them the same faces, in the same way as a cartoonist nowadays, or the carver of holiday souvenirs."

Based on these facial characteristics, Dr. Wilkinson was able to categorize the pieces into four major groups (and one small additional group). These four groups align with the hypothesis that the hoard consisted of four separate sets. Dr. Wilkinson concludes in part: "The chessmen may be the work of at least five craftsmen of differing skill, probably operating from the same workshop"

The Lewis hoard is considered priceless, an irreplaceable heirloom of our human history. But what is the value of "priceless"?

An economic answer is insufficient. Based on purchasing power, the Bank of England estimates that one British pound (GBP, or £) in the year 1200 A.D. would be equivalent to 2,050 GBP today. (Yes, the pound existed back then, in Anglo-Saxon England.) If the cost of a top-tier ivory chess set was roughly equal to, say, two gold rings with diamonds, then according to medieval price lists, the entire group of Lewis chess pieces would have been valued at £60. That amount translates to \$158,000 in today's dollars. What a deal! Yet the solitary piece sold in June for \$925,000. If each Lewis chess piece were similarly valued in today's market, the sum-total would come to \$73 million!

Why such a vast difference? Because the "priceless" aura of the Lewis pieces is not based on economics. It is based on cultural value: a shared bond of the human experience, the bond between who we are today and whom we were long ago. To look at the Lewis pieces is to feel the same sense of awe, wonder, gravitas, and alarm that was felt by our ancestors, and indeed, that seems to be felt by the pieces themselves.

And not only with emotions, but also with intentions. The pieces come equipped with their potential powers of movement and function. After all, they're chess pieces. The knights, bishops, and rooks stand ready to spring into action, to defend their sovereigns and attack the enemy. So in a chess sense, the pieces are just as relevant today as when they were carved, 850 years ago.

With such powerful symbolism and worldwide recognition, it's no wonder that the Lewis pieces have made cameo appearances in many of the hallmarks of our own modern culture. Movies, for example. Ingmar Bergman's

masterful film, *The Seventh Seal*, portrays the hero challenging Death itself to a game of chess; the set in this epic game includes Isle of Lewis knights. The Lewis pieces, in all their allegorical glory, are featured in the Academy Award-winning movies *Becket* (1964), *The Lion in Winter* (1968), and the Disney-Pixar movie *Brave* (2012). Their most notable appearance on the silver screen, to date, was in the 2001 blockbuster *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (released in the U.S. as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.) At school, Harry and Ron honed their skills in Wizard Chess with a magical Isle of Lewis set; those chess skills proved to be of vital importance when they encountered a deadly giant chess set guarding the Philosopher's stone.

Cultural fashion comes and goes: bell-

bottoms turn into designer jeans, which turn into baggy pants, which turn into high-waist trousers. But those fashions have no common thread, if you will, to bind us together within the shared human experience. By contrast, the Lewis pieces will always be in fashion. They evoke from us the raw emotions of the human spirit, as they did from our ancestors, and as they will do from our future descendants.

Somewhere out there in the world are the missing Lewis pieces: a knight, three warders, and 45 pawns. They might still be hidden in the sand on the Isle of Lewis, or perhaps stashed away in another family's household drawer. We may never know. But if these pieces are ever found, we can be certain of two things: that their monetary value will be sky-high, and that their cultural value will be priceless. 📌



THE STAR OF THE ARTICLE: THE NEWLY-DISCOVERED ISLE OF LEWIS PIECE, A WARDER, COURTESY OF SOTHEBY'S.