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Some comments to the Sothesby Catalogue about the "Lewis chessman" auctioned in July 2019.

Sotheby's

by Morten Lilleören

Regarding the Lewis chessman up for sale at Sotheby's 02 July: Here is a link to the catalogue:

https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2019/old-master-sculpture-works-of-art/attributed-to-the-lewis-chessmen-workshop-probably

[The Lewis Chessmen sold at auction for £735000: The Guardian]

I will give a few comments about the catalogue note here, but more facts and arguments about the Lewis chessmen are contained in the attached articles. These articles were originally published in 2011/12 on the websites of ChessBase and the Chess Cafe. However, the articles are now either completely or partially inaccessible. They are therefore republished. They contain lots of facts around the Lewis chessmen and their origin. The articles were a part of a polemic. Their main criticism was the lack of historiographical craftsmanship behind the notion about an Icelandic origin - claiming that the authors of the 'theory' took the liberty of suppressing inconvenient facts while at the same time adding fiction when regarded necessary.

It is necessary to point out that the Icelandic hypothesis referred to in the Sothesby catalogue is thoroughly refuted. Unfortunately, the initial promotion of the hypothesis resulted in its inclusion in a work that otherwise is used as reference, so that one easily could be led to believe that the incorrect statements therein are based on facts, while they are clearly incorrect. Concerning this notion, the articles are essential, as almost no other articles addressing the mistakes in the Icelandic hypothesis have been been written in English.

An example of the first type of unconventional methods - suppressing inconvenient facts - is the question about the term 'bishop':
The Icelandic hypothesis is primarily based on the incorrect assumption that only Iceland and England used the term bishop for that piece (take note that it is nowadays also used in Faroese, Irish, Welch and Scottish Gaelic, to name the most relevant languages), and it states that Norwegians allegedly always called it runner (loeper). Runner is a late term adopted in Denmark, Norway and Sweden in the period 17th to 19th century. For a long period both terms - bishop and runner - existed simultaneously. The Icelandic hypothesis is thus based on an incorrect assumption of some kind of exclusive use of the term bishop in chess. That is not correct. We find the term in a Danish-Norwegian dictionary from 1626, Coldings Ordbog. And one hundred years later the 'bisp' is again mentioned in another dictionary, Moths Ordbog. (D-N was one kingdom 1388-1814). The inclusion in *dictionaries* must be the ultimate falsifying evidence.

The saga that is referred to as the first mentioning of the term bishop for a chess piece, Magus saga jarls, belongs to a genre associated with King Haakon Haakonsson of Norway (1217-1263) and his court. Under his patronage chivalric romances were translated into Old Norse but with Norse characters and the translators who supplied the court offered an independent rewriting of their sources. The majority of 13th century Norse chivalric sagas are of Norwegian origin. Even the origin of Magus saga jarls is disputed, and it has not been established with certainty whether the first manuscript was written by an Icelandic or a Norwegian as we only have later manuscripts. Undoubtedly, Icelanders and Norwegians collaborated about the production of several sagas. Iceland was in fact a part of the Kingdom of Norway when many of the sagas were written - and transcripts were taken. The language in Iceland and Norway was the same at the time the Lewis chessmen were made - Old Norse - and the language did not diverge noteworthy until the 14th century.

An example of the second kind - added fiction - is the alleged workshops used by the craftsmen who built the church at Skálholt. The Skálholt medieval church was an impressive wooden building, one of the largest wooden buildings in Northern Europe during the medieval age. However, anyone who have seen images of the Icelandic countryside cannot have avoided to notice that there are no trees there. Consequently, the timber must have been imported from somewhere else. Indeed it was – it was shipped from Norway. The documentary evidence is sparse, but this we know. Do we know more? Yes – the timber must have been prefabricated to planks before it was shipped. There are two reasons for this deduction:

1. While there were no professional carpenters in Iceland (remember – not a forest in sight) there were hundreds, possibly thousands of them in Norway: The stave churches of Norway is famous today: Out of ca.1500, around 30 is still standing. https://www.visitnorway.com/about/history-traditions/stave-churches/
   These are wooden buildings which are up to 850 years old. They are unique. In fact most of the buildings in medieval Norway was made of timber, and a lot of local and wandering craftsmen were put to work. Consequently, the craft and the skill to handle carpentry was in Norway, not Iceland. (The medieval Icelandic buildings were partly dug into the ground. Drywalling, similar to the way we make stone fences was used to raise the height of the walls, and turf was used to make

the roofs. No medieval Icelandic building is still standing).

2. The weight: Timber is heavy. If the boats had to carry the timber all the way across the Atlantic, it would have been necessary to use a lot of extra ships in order to carry the cargo. Consequently, the Skálholt church must have been prefabricated in Norway before it was taken apart again and sent as planks to Iceland. Another reason why we know this, is because archaeologists have researched the ground around several still standing stave churches in Norway: There are no signs of any workshops around the wooden churches here in Norway either: it is therefore an accepted fact among archaeologists that the planks of the stave churches were cut somewhere else, probably in the vicinity of the place where the trees were cut. And this means that they did not raise workshops when they put up stave churches, neither in Norway, nor in Iceland.

I have to add that even if the medieval wooden churches of Iceland were prefabricated in Norway, it still took a lot of skill to raise such buildings at the spot. Therefore Norwegian craftsmen were on board on the ships which carried the planks across the sea, and they must have been in charge when the buildings were raised. Indirectly this can be seen because one of the contemporary sagas complains that the bishop spent too much money paying the craftsmen for raising the church. Undoubtedly, Icelanders too were engaged, both as handymen and volunteers. However, the core of the builders had to be a group of skilled craftsmen. From Norway: Norwegians are called 'Austmenn' - eastmen - in the Icelandic sagas. The «the old Skálholt workshop» is therefore pure fiction, made up by two Icelanders. There were no towns or cities in Iceland, no carpenters or stone cutters, no group of professional craftsmen with the combined skill to make the Lewis chessmen.
Notice also that the fact that there were no trees in Iceland had another consequence: They could not build any ocean-going vessels. Consequently, the island and its inhabitants were totally dependent of a fleet of ships from foreign shores if they wanted to go abroad or send away cargo. Back when the Lewis chessmen were made, only Norwegian vessels visited Iceland («Austmenn»). No Icelandic merchant could leave, no cargo could be sent abroad without being on a Norwegian ship. So when Nancy Brown writes " "Ships captained by bishop Pall's kinsmen (ie. Icelanders, my remark) routinely traveled to Greenland to purchase walrus ivory..."(p. 18) she writes fiction: The Icelanders did not have these alleged ships back then.
It is stated in the catalogue note that the crozier found in the tomb at Skálholt has been identified as the work of Margret the Adroit. I would like to see evidence for that. Margret the Adroit was a woman briefly mentioned in a saga. It's hardly possible to «identify» her as the maker of anything, least of all the Lewis chessmen.
It is known that the Lewis chessmen were made by 4 or 5 craftsmen. Annette Hillringhaus in her dissertation from 1996 believes there were 4 craftsmen. Caroline Wilkinson believes there were 5. Margret the Adroit is 1 person. So, she is not the maker. This makes Nancy Brown's sequel to the 'Icelandic theory' problematic in the extreme - in order to keep her heroine in the race as the maker of the chessmen, she dismisses this modern day scholarly achievement about the chessmen. In a paragraph (half a page) containing no less than 8 "perhaps" (p.152) she 'manages' to turn knowledge (the facial recognition) into her kind of uncertainty (ignorance?) and 'restore' fiction as fact again.
It is a risky business to write 'history' if you have an agenda, whether it is nationalistic/ patriotic, as the Icelanders' - or feminist, as Nancy Brown's attempt: The temptation to switch facts for wishful thinking every now and then may become too strong. I will refrain from further comments, but I do believe there is reason to be more critical even in auction catalogues and avoid citing clearly incorrect and misleading statements regarding the history of these very fine, important and (above all nowadays) expensive items.

Morten Lilleören

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