

2019-06-12

Another Genuine Lewis Chessman?



Sotheby's

On 3rd of June this year new tidings from Sotheby sent out a wave of excitement among chess historians and collectors: A new piece belonging to the Lewis chessmen had surfaced. Estimated price goes up to 1 mill £. Here is a link that contains both images and a film:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-48494885>

In the narrative following the images we are told: «A family spokesman said in a statement: "My grandfather was an antiques dealer based in Edinburgh, and in 1964 he purchased an ivory chessman from another Edinburgh dealer".» This states that none of two Scottish antique dealers in 1964 had any knowledge about the shape of the Lewis chessmen, of which 11 are to be found in the National Museum situated in the same town as they had their business. And the narrative further states: «It was catalogued in his purchase ledger that he had bought (as) an 'Antique Walrus Tusk Warrior Chessman'.» How could the dealer manage to classify it as a warrior chessman without knowledge about the Lewis chessmen? On Scottish soil, the Lewis chessmen are the only chessmen remotely similar to this piece. And why did they travel all the way to Sotheby in London for an evaluation of the figure when they were situated in Edinburgh? In fact – why did they not choose the National Museum of Scotland, which have renown expertise on medieval chessmen? I cannot imagine that two antique dealers in Scotland was unaware of the shape/existence of the Lewis chessmen, and that the whole family remained in the dark for 55 years, especially at a time when Scottish politicians campaigned in order to force the British Museum to give the chessmen to Scotland. These figures were close to front page news in Scotland. In conclusion: There are

reasons to question the recent history of the chess figure.

However, that is not the main question – which is the authenticity of the figure: We are promised some kind of authentication made by Sotheby before the auction in July. In the meantime we may do some research of our own:

The most important reasonably recent scholarly achievement in the research around the Lewis chessmen was made by Annette Hillringhaus in 1996: She made a thorough comparison of the faces of the figures, and was thereby able to tell whether the figures were made by one or several hands/craftsmen («Die Schachfiguren von Lewis, Stand der Forschung und Diskussion» dissertation, Bamberg 1996). This was a major accomplishment, and she revealed that the figures were indeed made by several hands, ie. made in a workshop, not by a single craftsman. Hillringhaus was (is) situated in Germany, and she did not have access to all the objects, other than as images. Her idea though, was brilliant, and in 2009 Hall, Caldwell and Wilkinson published an improved version of her work (unfortunately without crediting Hillringhaus for her concept). Caroline Wilkinson was the one who performed the improved face comparison. Hillringhaus ended up with 4 craftsmen, Wilkinson with 5. However, the differences are at times slight, and this uncertainty is well within acceptable limits. I have used the work of Wilkinson, edited an image of the 'Sotheby' rook and included it in a facial comparison with 3 rooks of the A group: The face of the piece is indeed similar to rooks in group A1 and A2 in Wilkinson's facial recognition project. There are only 2 rooks in group A1 in Wilkinson's article - ie. 2 rooks may be missing if we assume that one hand/craftsman made most of the pieces for a single set - meaning that this hand should have made 4 rooks. Meaning: The figure fits in ...



Sotheby's

-



Trustees of the British Museum

•



Trustees of the British Museum

•



Trustees of the British Museum

Now - is it genuine or not? I have decided to sit on the fence until I see the authentication-attempts made by Sotheby. It looks really, really great. Now I have checked everything, compared it with my collection of images of the other pieces, and it is in perfect harmony with the rest of the figures - it fits right in. It is even possible to identify the craftsman who made it. However, here millions are at stake and the images of the Lewis chessmen have been known for almost 190 years, free for everyone to copy. Money talks, so it is necessary with some sort of authentication besides an (ie. my!) inspection of the surface. I hope we will get both a radiocarbon dating and some expertise explaining the differences in the (material) surface between

this figure and the Lewis chessmen in general (which are usually in better condition than this one).

Even if I hesitate, I have found no faults with the figure. Which means that I expect to be convinced. Hopefully future interviews with the family of sellers will explain the contradictions in their behavior and story ...

Morten Lilleören

More information:

- Sotheby's: [A Newly Discovered Lewis Chessman Comes to Auction](#)
- Chessbase: [The Lewis Chessmen on a Fantasy Iceland](#)