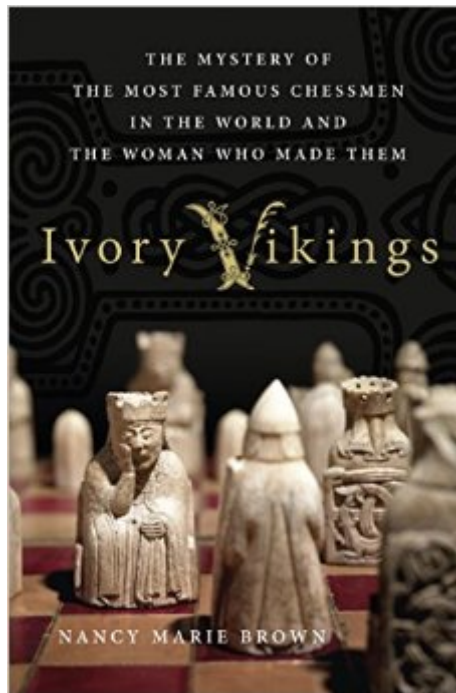


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# Ivory Vikings: The Mystery Of The Most Famous Chessmen In The World And The Woman Who Made Them



## Synopsis

In the early 1800's, on a Hebridean beach in Scotland, the sea exposed an ancient treasure cache: 93 chessmen carved from walrus ivory. Norse netsuke, each face individual, each full of quirks, the Lewis Chessmen are probably the most famous chess pieces in the world. Harry played Wizard's Chess with them in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. Housed at the British Museum, they are among its most visited and beloved objects. Questions abounded: Who carved them? Where? Nancy Marie Brown's *Ivory Vikings* explores these mysteries by connecting medieval Icelandic sagas with modern archaeology, art history, forensics, and the history of board games. In the process, *Ivory Vikings* presents a vivid history of the 400 years when the Vikings ruled the North Atlantic, and the sea-road connected countries and islands we think of as far apart and culturally distinct: Norway and Scotland, Ireland and Iceland, and Greenland and North America. The story of the Lewis chessmen explains the economic lure behind the Viking voyages to the west in the 800s and 900s. And finally, it brings from the shadows an extraordinarily talented woman artist of the twelfth century: Margret the Adroit of Iceland.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Lewis Chessmen are the Mona Lisa, the Nefertiti, the Elgin Marbles, the Ur-chess pieces of the "modern" game of chess. Renowned for their skilled and delightfully charming carving, these walrus ivory game pieces are considered to be among the finest known examples of 12th century Nordic-Romanesque miniature sculptural work. Discovered under uncertain circumstances in a horde of 93 carved ivory pieces buried in the sand on the Bay of Uig, the Isle of Lewis, Scotland in

1831, the pieces have been divided up between the collections of British Museum of London and the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Despite these objects' fame, and cultural ubiquity, most of what is known about their origins is clouded in mystery and hotly debated. Scotland, Norway, Denmark, England, and Iceland have all claimed them for their own. Scotland wants them back from England and Norway scoffs at the idea that they may have originated in Iceland. Valkyrie-like, the author, Nancy Marie Brown, forges straight into this fray. Brown has, in the past, written authoritatively on Viking history and culture, particularly of Iceland and Icelandic Sagas. In "The Ivory Vikings" she painstakingly weaves together the various known and available resources of 12th century Nordic Medieval history and culture to postulate on the "who/what/when/why" of these carvings. Employing her impressive knowledge of Icelandic Sagas, and an understanding of the history and rules of the game of chess, Brown overlays existing and current art historical and archaeological writings with theories shared by other Icelandic scholars and chess masters.

"Ivory Vikings" is an investigation into the origins of the famed Lewis chessmen, discovered on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides in Scotland in 1831, and a Viking history. Nancy Marie Brown, a historian of Iceland, lays out the story of the Lewis chessmen, the pieces themselves and the ideas they represent, as a history of the Vikings in the North Atlantic from the 9th through 12th centuries. The Lewis chessmen are 92 game pieces, 78 of which are chessmen. They are in the Romanesque style, with the visage of each figure endowed with a different expression. They might represent 4 chess sets or more, as it's difficult to know how many pieces are missing. Historians agree that the pieces are carved of walrus ivory from Greenland -except for 4 pieces of whale's tooth- and that they were made after 1140 due to the type of miter the bishop wears, but they agree on little else. The prevailing theory of their origin is that the chessmen were created in Trondheim, Norway, which was relatively cosmopolitan and is proven by archeological evidence to have had an ivory carver's workshop. While it is possible the pieces originated in Trondheim, other possibilities are Lund, in Denmark at the time, and Skalholt, Iceland. The Iceland theory was proposed by Gudmundur G. Thorarinsson, the civil engineer who was the organizer of the Boris Spassky vs. Bobby Fischer World Chess Championship match in Reykjavik in 1972, who believes the Lewis chessman were created by an ivory carver called Margret the Adroit at the behest of Bishop Pall Jonsson, probably as a gift for a distinguished friend abroad. His hypothesis, though flawed in places, brought some different information to bear on the question of origin, which intrigued Nancy Marie Brown.

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