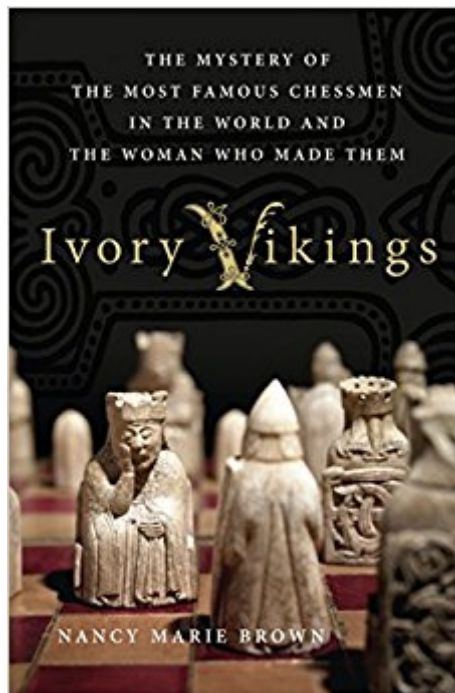




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# **Ivory Vikings: The Mystery Of The Most Famous Chessmen In The World And The Woman Who Made Them**



## 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

"Intriguing." *New York Times* "Full of exciting detective work, along with absorbing excursions into the history of the Vikings, of chess in the Middle Ages, and of walrus ivory (known as 'arctic gold')." *The New Yorker* "A fascinating tale of discovery and mystery." *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* "The absorbing story of long-ago links between the British Isles and Scandinavia that puts the Lewis chessmen into a vivid and much

broader cultural context of Viking trade, plunder and sophisticated gift-giving. An engaging, accessible tale.

The Economist: "A delight...for gamers of all sorts as well as anyone interested in the intricacies of the provenance of art and in endlessly fascinating minutiae-the strength and uses of walrus skin, how to carve walrus ivory, and so much more.

Booklist: "Fascinating ... Brown successfully crafts an Icelandic history of chess while tracing the possible movements of 92 remarkable carved figures found in the early 19th century on the Isle of Lewis in Scotland....

Publisher's Weekly: "Even if you've never played a game of chess in your life, this book is bound to fascinate.

Matthew Driscoll, senior lecturer in Old Norse philology, Arnamagnafélag Institute, University of Copenhagen: "Nancy Marie Brown's book is a true cornucopia, bursting with delicious revelations. Whether your passion is chess, art, archeology, literature or the uncanny and beautiful landscape of Iceland, Ivory Vikings offers rich and original insights by a writer who is as erudite as she is engaging.

Geraldine Brooks, author of CALEB'S CROSSING: "Ivory Vikings is an erudite and accessible treatment of the world of the Vikings. Focusing on the famous Lewis chessmen, it suggests they might have been created in Iceland by a woman. Fascinating history for lovers of Old Norse society and chess.

Marilyn Yalom, author of BIRTH OF THE CHESS QUEEN and HOW THE FRENCH INVENTED LOVE: "A lively introduction to the world of the Vikings and medieval Scandinavia, seen through the story of the Lewis chessmen. Brown does a superb job of exploring the personalities and personal connections that underpinned political and cultural relations across the North Atlantic and the North Sea. Her informed, even-handed reassessment of the origin of the chessmen certainly changed my mind.

Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, FSA, Reader in Scandinavian History, University of Cambridge: "I enjoyed the hell out of Ivory Vikings.

Renowned Norse scholar Nancy Marie Brown follows the Lewis chessmen's trail back to a 12th century master named Margret the Adroit. Piece by piece, Brown also peels back a millennia of history to explore the Norse world's interlocking social facets -- kings, queens, berserkers, nobles, bishops and poets -- that populated Viking society much as these carved ivory pieces populated a chessboard. The result is part mystery, part history, and wholly engrossing.

Scott Weidensaul, author of THE FIRST FRONTIER: "Nancy Marie Brown has used skillful writing and her deep knowledge of the medieval Viking world to bring us a mysterious tale of the most appealing game pieces ever made, the Lewis chessmen.

Pat Shipman, author of THE INVADERS: How Humans and Their Dogs Drove Neanderthals to Extinction: "A wonderful read. Brown knows how to hold the reader's attention as she digs deep into Icelandic

sagas, archaeology, forensics, and art history to solve a mystery about the Lewis chessmen, the North Atlantic's most famous medieval treasure.

Prof. Jesse Byock, author of *VIKING LANGUAGE: Learn Old Norse, Runes, and Icelandic Sagas* "Always lively, engaging, thoughtful, humorous, and to the point, ... She draws a colorful picture of what life may have been like at the time and brings the fate of known but long-gone men and women close to the heart of the modern reader."

Gisli Sigurdsson, The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies "With obvious linguistic skill and respect for historical detail as well as a passion for travel to unearth the truth, Brown offers a tantalizing trail of plausibility."

Patrick J. Stevens, Librarian/Curator, Cornell University Library "An intriguing work that should find a readership among history lovers."

Library Journal

NANCY MARIE BROWN is the author of highly praised books of nonfiction, including *Song of the Vikings*. She is fluent in Icelandic, and spends her summers in Iceland. She has deep ties to the Scandinavian cultural institutions in the U.S. Brown lives in East Burke, VT.

Back in 1831 a collection of 92 chessmen was discovered on the Isle of Lewis in the Hebrides. Carved from ivory taken from walrus tusks, each piece was individual and idiosyncratic, with differing faces, expressions, clothing, and weaponry. Debate over the Lewis chessmen's creator(s) and place(s) of origin began shortly after their discovery and has carried on without end. In this well written and fascinating volume Nancy Marie Brown tells us what is known or surmised about the chessmen, and in so doing she has revealed the complex civilization centered around the North Atlantic Ocean from which they came. In the 10th and 11th centuries the North Atlantic bustled with an active sea-going society. The Northmen or Vikings carried on trade between Scandinavia, Russia, Ireland, Britain, Iceland, and Greenland. Gifted craftsmen created beautiful art work out of stone, wood, and ivory, which was obtained from the large walrus herds to be found in Iceland and Greenland. Kings jostled for power while missionaries carried Christianity throughout the region, leading to the erection of beautifully constructed and decorated churches and cathedrals. It was in this setting that the Lewis chessmen were most likely carved. Debate is ongoing over their place of origin, with strong arguments being made for Norway, but the weight of the evidence seems to point towards Iceland, where there were many talented ivory carvers, including a remarkable artist called Margret the Adroit. The surviving art known to have been produced by her bears strong resemblances to the Lewis chessmen, and it is to her that Brown looks for the most likely creator of the pieces. Brown structured her book by focussing on the principle chess pieces. Chapter One,

titled *The Rooks*, looks to the origins of the game of chess and to the development of the trade in and art of walrus tusk ivory. The second chapter is on *The Bishops* and covers the spread of Christianity to Iceland and Greenland. In those early days bishops often held temporal powers as rulers in place of kings, maintaining law and order over a society dominated by warring chieftains. Eventually religious and political power separated, but the bishops still held sway over much of the territory through their great wealth. Chapter Three is on *The Queens*, and it is here that we learn as much of the story of Margret the Adroit as can be pieced together. Norse women had to be strong, resolute, and determined to survive in their harsh environment, and Brown tells us their stories too, including Queen Gunnhild the Grim, who may well have been the model for the Lewis chess queens. Chapter Four deals with *The Kings* and gives more details on the combative monarchs who strove for power and encouraged exploration and trade. The *Knights* in the fifth chapter were not the warriors in shining armor the term invokes for us today. These knights rode small horses or ponies and wore a variety of gear and weaponry. The Lewis knights display a wide range of helmets, some with nose and ear guards and others without, while some seem to wear precursors of the modern bowler. It is in this chapter that Brown relates the many stories of how the Lewis chessmen came to be discovered, for as with so much else to do with them, there are disputes as to who found them and where. The *Pawns* are the least elaborately carved of the chessmen and thus they are relegated to the Acknowledgements. This is a rich and fascinating history which focusses on an often overlooked or neglected region and reveals its complex and wonderful history. We may never know whether Margret the Adroit was indeed the chessmen's carver, but we now know much more about her and about the society from which she sprang.

Her last book, *Song of the Vikings*, was a (London) Times Literary Supplement Book of the Year 2012, so you know she can write well. Nancy Marie Brown's new book is a scholarly but highly entertaining investigation of the provenance of the famous chess pieces known as the Lewis Chessmen found at Uist, the Isle of Lewis, Hebrides, Scotland. They are probably the most famous chess pieces in the world, having been used as the models for various chess interpretations, such as in the Harry Potter movies, and they are listed as number 61 in BBC Radio 4's *History of the World in 100 Objects* (also excellent). Brown's wonderfully conversational style hides the fact that she is giving us a detailed history of these remarkable pieces of carved walrus ivory. Along the way, we are introduced to most of the players in the later Viking period (1000 AD-1300), some with great names like King Eirik Blood-Axe, the original Valdemar King of Denmark, King Magnus Bare-legs (who like the Scots he conquered so much he decided to

wear kilts), and Earl Erling Skew-neck. She shows us how Greenland, Iceland, the Hebrides, the Orkneys, Norway, Sweden and Denmark had vibrant trade routes, in many ways an advanced culture. She limns the progress of Christianity as it replaces the ancient Norse bedrock. And she brings to life Margaret the Adroit of Iceland, master ivory craftswoman working for Bishop Pall. Nearly every page has something interesting or surprising on it (for example, the fact those famous war steeds of the knights were pony size until the late 1200s, calling into question Scott's depiction of Ivanhoe on a charger). While the Viking chieftains and kings and bishops can be dizzying, they never overwhelm. Brown tells us early that "more medieval literature exists in Icelandic than in any other European language except Latin" and many of the Sagas have not been translated." Brown, however, reads Icelandic, so her sources for all the Nordic world, including its incursions in France and England, are extensive. And she draws from architecture, art, tapestries, papal documents a whole world of emerges, a real world of real people. For me this is a five star book for those with no interest in such things, take off a half star.

Nancy Marie Brown takes the Lewis chessman as a starting point into the manners and society of early Scandinavia. The discussion ranges through the authority of kings and clerics, to clothing styles, the size of horses, the economics of walrus and wool, and more. She builds an appreciation of the sophistication of society during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Norway, Iceland and the northern British Isles (including Lewis where the chessman were found). Her case for Margret the Adroit as the artist that made them is weak at best, but is also a minor piece of this wide-ranging exploration of viking culture. Very enjoyable reading, and highly recommended. Why then only four stars? The book suffers from a lack of photographs to complement the vivid descriptions of the pieces and places. To overcome this, have a copy of *The Lewis Chessmen Unmasked* (Caldwell, Hall, and Wilkinson -- also available from ) handy to which to refer. That book, while very short and offering a contrary argument as to the origins of the pieces, has a photograph of every piece of the Lewis chessmen! If you are interested in Norse society, Nancy Marie's Brown's *Ivory Vikings* is well worth reading!

This book was all I had hoped for. I goes into detail about the history of the Isle of Lewis chess pieces as well as a detailed discussion of the historical context of the times of the carving of these exquisite works of art. Some people may be put off by the detail but I found the text extremely captivating and feel that most readers will find the narrative interesting and worthwhile as well. It

also serves as a wonderful reference book to be kept in one's library.

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