A DRAWING OF A MEDIEVAL IVORY CHESS PIECE FROM THE 12th-CENTURY CHURCH OF ST OLAV, TRONDHEIM, NORWAY (Fig. 3)

Recently, while records of excavations which took place in the ruin of St Olav's church 100 years ago were being examined, a drawing of a small fragmentary human figurine recovered from the church came to light. The excavator, Major Otto Krefting, provides only the leanest of information about the object:

> In the gravel were found burnt fragments of a small sculpture of a Madonna with the Christchild, beautifully carved in ivory.[1]

Unfortunately, Krefting's drawing and description are all that survive, the piece itself being now apparently lost. Probably as a result of its absence, and the obscurity of the publication containing the drawing, no further thought appears to have been given to the object's function, age or iconography. However, on renewed appraisal, it can be seen as one of the most important finds of its kind. The drawing undoubtedly portrays, however fragmentarily, the characteristic form and details of a chess queen of the type so familiar from the sets of walrus-ivory chess pieces discovered in 1831 on the Isle of Lewis.

The illustration comprises front, right side and rear views of the fragmentary head and upper torso of a small human figurine, with, in addition, two apparently separate fragments of rather more ambiguous form and origin. Krefting's reference to a 'Christchild' is clearly fanciful, and can be disregarded.

The figurine is directly comparable with the queen pieces from the Isle of Lewis chess sets in terms of raw material, size, form and sculptural details. Regarding raw material, Krefting states that the piece consisted of ivory, and the probability is that it comprised walrus ivory. The eight Lewis queens vary considerably in size; however, the dimensions of the Trondheim figurine's surviving portion, at 4.5 cm high, would be compatible with an original height somewhere in the region of *c.* 9 cm (an additional 4.5 cm would accommodate a suitably proportioned lower body and throne), comparing favourably with the two tallest Lewis queens.[2] The most striking and evocative trait, however, is the characteristic, indeed, idiosyncratic, pose adopted by the figure, where the right hand rests against the right cheek. This is the most eloquent clue to the piece's particular iconographic and functional status, and, with the design of the folded shoulder-length kerchief, places it conclusively in the company of the chess queens from Lewis. The precise manner in which the Trondheim queen's kerchief is folded and arranged over the shoulders is reproduced almost exactly on the two tallest Lewis queens, while the band of beaded decoration along its hem is repeated on one of the smaller queens.[3] The decorative band encircling the head of the Trondheim queen clearly comprises part of the decorated base of a former crown. This band is also composed of beaded ornamentation, and in this the Trondheim queen appears to be unique, the Lewis queens bearing bands with punched dots here, or nothing at all. The provision of a decorative band around the head perhaps suggests that the Trondheim queen formerly possessed a crown of the type worn by the two tallest Lewis queens. Although the face is damaged, the staring eyes and strong eyebrows are consistent with the emphatic facial features and intense expression characteristic of the Lewis queens.

The absence of the lower part of the body and the throne is regrettable as the throne panels were undoubtedly decorated in intricate style. There is only one surviving ornamental motif, an encircled lozenge, situated between the queen's shoulder-blades. No Lewis queen bears such an apparently isolated geometric motif in this particular position, although most of the bishops bear similarly simple motifs on this part of the back. Likewise, the knights and warders bear isolated simple geometric designs (including lozenges) on their shields. However, more extensive and intricate geometric patterns do occur on the panels of the thrones of some kings, bishops and queens, and it is possible that the Trondheim piece's seemingly isolated encircled lozenge originally formed part of a more extensive geometric pattern.

The fragments illustrated with the figurine are more ambiguous. Krefting's description implies that they too were of burnt ivory and were found together with the figurine. The

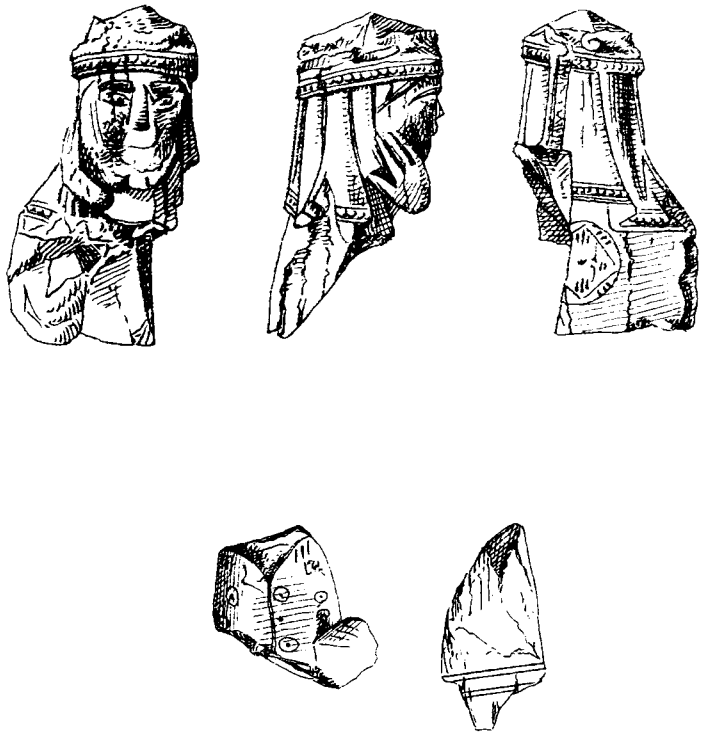

FIG. 3
Drawing of a fragmentary ivory chess queen discovered in the chancel of St Olav's Church, Trondheim. Scale 1:1 (photographically enlarged from original publication by O. Krefting, 1890)

fragment on the right may conceivably have broken off the front of the queen, the two pairs of parallel lines perhaps originally forming part of the decorated hem of her robe. The fragment to the left is even more enigmatic, and the ostensible presence of small dot-and-circle motifs, a form of decoration almost wholly absent from the Lewis pieces, raises some doubt as to whether these fragments actually derived from the queen.

The illustration was included among published drawings of objects, almost exclusively fragments of masonry, recovered from the church ruin buried beneath Trondheim's baroque Town Hall (the present public library). This ruin has traditionally been identified (though not conclusively) as the church of St Olav, reputedly built on the spot where, in 1030, the body of King Olav Haraldsson was hidden briefly following his martyrdom at the Battle of Stiklestad.

The ruin was reinvestigated in 1988.[4] Much of this stone church remains, the walls surviving to a height of 1.5 m in parts, although most associated archaeological deposits have been removed.[5] It was built in at least two phases: the chancel was probably finished by the middle of the 12th century, while the nave was built subsequently, probably in the third quarter of the 12th century.

The Romanesque stone church, if it is indeed St Olav's, must have replaced an earlier wooden building on the site, since Snorre records that a St Olav's church was built by Magnus the Good in 1040. No trace of this has yet been found, although the lowest graveyard levels pre-date the surviving stone building. St Olav's served as a parish church until the

early 14th century, functioning thereafter as the Franciscan friary church. Following the Reformation in 1537, the building was used as a secular dwelling, and, in 1669, it became the Town Hall. It burned in 1681 and was finally demolished in 1702 to make way for a new Town Hall, the present building above the ruin.

The chess queen seems to have been found in gravel within the chancel, a deposit which apparently also produced a broken and burnt Romanesque carved stone fragment which can probably be dated to the third quarter of the 12th century.[6] This is all the information we have, and the piece's archaeological context must consequently be regarded as insecure. If the queen lay *in situ* in a layer which accumulated within the chancel a tentative *terminus post quem* for its deposition might be drawn at *c.* 1150, the date at which the chancel is thought to have been finished. Since the church probably did not enter into full use prior to the completion of the nave, it might be possible to push this earliest limit for the queen's deposition forward into the third quarter of the 12th century. The stone fragment is perhaps supportive of this, although deposition may have taken place later, perhaps, given these items' burnt condition, during one of a number of fires which possibly affected the church.[7]

In his authoritative reassessment of the Lewis chess pieces, Taylor assigns them, on the evidence of parallels in monumental and minor sculptures, to the period 1135–70, proposing furthermore that the design of the bishops' mitres makes it unlikely that they were manufactured before *c.* 1150.[8] Unfortunately, the uncertain archaeological context of the ivory queen from St Olav's prevents any conclusive independent archaeological confirmation of Taylor's dating of its sister pieces from Lewis. None the less, the dating of the stone church's two construction phases is commensurate with the broadest date-range proposed for the Lewis pieces. Unless the queen was already an antique at the time of the chancel's construction and completion, its presence within the Romanesque chancel does not seem to contradict Taylor's estimate, and indeed it might be said to provide some qualified support for it.

Taylor confidently ascribes the Lewis pieces to a Scandinavian workshop, the decorative motifs on their throne panels (notably their panels of foliage, some inhabited by beasts) facilitating their inclusion within 'a group of carvings which employs the same motifs and in the same manner (which) was centred in Scandinavia and dates from the middle years of the twelfth century'.[9] For his part, Goldschmidt sees their ornamentation as being distinctly Norwegian, as opposed to English, in character.[10] Blindheim sees no reason to differ, and details the overwhelming range of ornamentative parallels present amongst Norwegian minor and monumental carvings in ivory, wood and stone. He draws particular attention to Norwegian Romanesque stave-church portals and mid 12th-century ornamental masonry in Nidaros Cathedral which, with a number of ivories including some of the Lewis pieces, bear strikingly similar depictions of lions and fleshy foliage.[11]

There can be no doubt that the Trondheim queen derives from the same workshop which produced the Lewis pieces.[12] By virtue of its art-historical dating, it is almost certainly the earliest chess piece yet found in Norway, and is possibly one of the earliest representational forms of chess piece known from Scandinavia.[13] The presence of this new member of the 'Lewis family' on Norwegian soil in the very heart of one of the country's most important 12th-century cities also serves to focus attention on contemporary developments in and around the city of Trondheim itself. These may have some relevance to any discussion relating to the location of the workshop in question. The manifest competence, inventiveness and interaction of local schools of Romanesque minor and monumental carving is well documented: the long-established presence in the town of professional woodcarvers and boneworkers who produced items of superior quality;[14] the characteristic 'Trondheim Group' of stave-church portals;[15] the local strain of ornamental stone carving in the district's Romanesque stone churches, centred particularly, from *c.* 1120, on the cathedral workshops;[16] and, if the inferences implicit in the motifs common to a number of carved ivories, including a possible crozier head found on the nearby island of Munkholmen, can be trusted, the range of skills and motifs shared by local sculptors also extended to the intricate carving of walrus ivory.[17]

A potential catalyst uniting home-grown talent with an assured source of appropriate raw material may be sought in the city's establishment as the seat of the Archdiocese of Nidaros in 1152/3, the resulting influx of walrus ivory as payment of tithes from the diocese of Greenland[18] possibly engendering the local production of sophisticated carved ivories, perhaps under the aegis of the archbishopric itself. Such a workshop, drawing on a pool of indigenous skills and techniques, an abundant supply of ivory, and located in an appropriate and dynamic cultural setting, might conceivably have produced objects as extraordinary and as expressive of their time as the Lewis and Trondheim chess pieces.

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NOTES

[1] 'I Gruset fandtes her forbrændte Brudstykker af et lidet Mariabillede med Kristusbarnet, smukt udskaaret i Elfenben ...'. O. Krefting, *Undersøgelser i Trondhjem*. Foreningen til norske fortidsmindesmærkers bevaring (Kristiania, 1890), 4. This sentence is included within a paragraph beginning 'In the chancel's interior were found ...', followed by a series of finds including this one.

[2] A. Goldschmidt, *Die Elfenbeinsculpturen aus der Romanischen Zeit XI–XIII Jahrhundert*, 4 (Berlin, 1926; reprinted 1975), Pl. LXV, nos. 188a/b and 190a/b; M. Taylor, *The Lewis Chessmen* (British Museum Publications Ltd., London, 1978; reprinted 1986), Pl. 1. The former has a comprehensive series of plates depicting the Lewis pieces and other medieval ivory chess pieces.

[3] Goldschmidt, op. cit., Pl. LXV, nos. 188a/b, 190a/b and no. 191b; Taylor op. cit., Pl. 6a.

[4] A comprehensive survey of work on the ruin, including a reappraisal of its dating, has been conducted: Ø. Ekroll, *Olavskyrkja: 8 fragment blir monument* (Arkeologiske undersøkelser i Trondheim nr.3, Riksantikvaren, Utgravningskontoret for Trondheim, Trondheim, 1989).

[5] About a third of the chancel remains unexcavated, so more finds of this character may await discovery.

[6] Krefting, op. cit. in note 1, Pl. III, Fig. 4, and Ekroll op. cit. in note 4, Fig. 3.

[7] There are eight relevant recorded fires: 1199?, 1219, 1282, 1313 (or before?), 1531, 1598, 1651 and 1681.

[8] Taylor, op. cit. in note 2, 14–15.

[9] Ibid., 9 ff., and Pl. 6 (a and b).

[10] Goldschmidt, op. cit. in note 2, 49–50.

[11] In M. Blindheim (ed.), *Middelalderkunst fra Norge i andre land/Norwegian medieval art abroad* (Universitets oldsaksamling, Oslo, 1972), 20, 44, 74.

[12] Other scattered products of this workshop are an unprovenanced knight from the Bargello, Florence, and a warder from Gräsgård, Öland, Sweden: Taylor op. cit. in note 2, 14.

[13] Chess is likely to have been new to Scandinavia in the mid 12th century. The fine ivory pieces are well documented, though this strand of Scandinavian representational carving for the chess board spawned a number of derivative items in humbler materials, notably a number of seated wooden chess kings from 13th-century Norwegian contexts, one of which was found on the Library Site in Trondheim, neighbouring St Olav's: C. McLees, *Games People Played. Gaming-pieces, boards and dice from excavations in the medieval town of Trondheim, Norway* (Meddelelser 24. Prosjektet Fortiden i Trondheim bygrunn: Folkebibliotekstomten. Riksantikvaren, Utgravningskontoret for Trondheim, Trondheim, 1990), 56–58.

[14] S. Horn Fuglesang, 'Woodcarvers — professionals and amateurs — in eleventh-century Trondheim', *Economic aspects of the Viking Age* (British Museum Occasional Paper No. 30, eds. D. M. Wilson and M. L. Caygill, London, 1981), and 'Woodcarving from Oslo and Trondheim and some reflections on period styles', *Festskrift til Thorleif Sjøvold* (Universitets oldsaksamlings skrifter nr. 5, Oslo, 1984), 93–108. A carved wooden chair from Tyldal church, probably produced in mid 12th-century Trondheim, bears lions comparable with those used in connection with local churches in wood and stone, and is further illustrative of the sophistication and interconnections evident within local carving traditions: D. Fischer, 'Tyldalstolen', *Viking*, 26 (Oslo, 1963), 161–77.

[15] E. Bergendahl Hohler, 'Stavkirkene — den dekorative skurd', *Norges kunsthistorie*, 1 (Oslo, 1981), 295–302.

[16] P. Anker, 'Høymiddelalderens skulptur i sten og tre', *Norges kunsthistorie*, 2 (Oslo, 1981), 133–44.

[17] As postulated already by Goldschmidt, op. cit. in note 2, 50, and Blindheim, op. cit., 8, 17. The Munkholmen 'crozier' is illustrated in Taylor op. cit. in note 2, Pl. 6d, and Blindheim op. cit., 75, together with other related ivories.

[18] Goldschmidt, op. cit., 50 and Blindheim op. cit. in note 11, 8, 17 and pers. comm.

[19] Riksantikvarens utgravningskontoret, Trondheim.