

NOTICE OF A SINGULAR SCULPTURED OBJECT, PROBABLY
A CHESS-PIECE, FOUND AT KIRKSTALL ABBEY.

COMMUNICATED BY MR. JOHN DIXON, OF LEEDS.

THE remarkable example of the skill of early mediæval artificers in the sculpture of ornaments of bone or ivory, here submitted to the readers of the *Journal*, presents one of the most singular relics of its class hitherto brought under our notice. It was found, about twenty years since, amongst the ruins of Kirkstall Abbey, in Yorkshire, with two circular pieces of lead, supposed to have been Papal *bullæ*. Our best thanks are due to Mr. Dixon for the communication of so interesting an object, and especially for the facilities kindly given in transmitting this valuable relic to be exhibited at the meetings of the Institute, as also for the purpose of being drawn by the able pencil of Mr. Henry Shaw.

The original intention of this singular object, at first sight, appeared inexplicable. It has been supposed, with much probability, that it is one of those ancient pieces for the game of chess, formed from the fine-grained tusk of the rosmar, or rostungr, of the northern seas, known as the walrus, morse, or sea-horse; they were sculptured in the Scandinavian countries, and highly esteemed, from an early period. This material, the "huel-bone" of Chaucer, the "whale's bone" of ancient English song, well suited to form a substitute for ivory in times when difficulty of communication with the East must have rendered the tusk of the elephant a rarity of costly price, was largely used by the skilful sculptors of the north for various purposes of ornament or convenience. Amongst these, as we learn from the treatise of the Archbishop of Upsala on the antiquities of the northern nations, as also from Olaus Magnus, chessmen, very artificially carved, were so esteemed as to be included with royal gifts.

In a former volume of the *Journal*, some curious examples of ancient chess-men, one of them formed of the rosmar's tusk, were described and represented.¹ The remarkable collection, discovered in the Isle of Lewis, and now preserved in the British Museum, is doubtless well known to many of our readers; as also the memoir upon that interesting discovery, and on the introduction of the game of chess into Europe, contributed to the *Archæologia* by Sir Frederic Madden.²

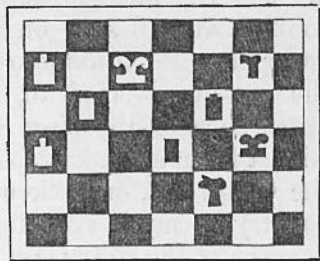
¹ Archæol. Journal, vol. iii., p. 241.

² Archæologia, vol. xxiv., p. 203.

CHESS-PIECE OF WALRUS' TUSK FOUND AT KIRKSTALL ABBEY.



We must refer our readers to his valuable treatise for full information upon this curious subject. Neither in that collection, nor amongst the pieces preserved in the "King's Library" at Paris, nor in any representations of other existing examples of early forms of chess-men, has been found one precisely similar in type to the object now under consideration. The conjecture, however, suggested by close examination, which connects it with the game of chess, is not altogether hypothetical. It will be observed, that a striking feature of the form of this object is a peculiar narrow ridge, forming the prominent portion of the upper side. (See woodcuts.) What this might be originally intended to represent, is an enigma to be solved only by a detailed comparison of the forms of ancient chess-men, and especially those of eastern countries, whence doubtless the original types were derived. In default of such means of information, recourse must be had to the minute delineations of mediæval MSS., in which representations of the game of chess are often found. An illumination in a volume of German poetry, at Paris (Bibl. du Roi, No. 7266), exhibits pieces of a form analogous to that found at Kirkstall. The drawing represents Otho, Marquis of Brandenburg, who died 1298, playing at chess with a lady. He holds a knight in his hand, and in her's is a captured rook. On the board appear, of the Count's game, two pieces with a small projection at top, probably the king and queen, a rook and a pawn. Of the lady's pieces, one of like form, a rook and two alfyns, or bishops, are left. The drawing, it will be observed (see woodcut), is not strictly accurate, the squares on the board being insufficient in number. This curious illustration has



Chessboard of the Fourteenth Century.

been copied by Willemin; and the learned editor of his work, M. Pottier, of Rouen, describes these pieces with projecting peaks as kings and queens. He observes, however:—"Leurs caractères différentiels sont imparfaitement prononcés; le roi se terminait carrément par une espèce de tête aplatie, et la reine portait sa tête en pointe." He considers the drawing to be of the early part of the fourteenth century.³ It appears, then, fairly to be concluded, that the Kirkstall piece presents

³ Willemin, Monum. Ined. tom. i., pl. cxxix.

an early type of the form of one of these royal pieces in the game of chess. The projection probably may have been reduced in size ; it appears to have suffered some mutilation, as, also, the under side of the piece has been hollowed out, to adapt it possibly for some other use. It is, therefore, now impracticable to discern whether its original form presented the "tête aplatie" of the king, or the "tête en pointe" of his consort.

It may be added, that amongst the pieces discovered by the Rev. John Wilson, at Woodperry, Oxfordshire, which we hope hereafter to lay before our readers,⁴ one occurs with a projection at top, presenting a certain analogy in fashion ; but the piece is round and the projection is broad and strongly marked on one side, gradually decreasing as it traverses the head of the piece, and wholly lost at the other side.

In regard to the ornaments sculptured on the Kirkstall relic, it must be observed that they present many features of analogy with the sculpture of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and may perhaps be safely attributed to the latter period, a century later than the supposed introduction of the game of chess by Canute. The zig-zag border around the base, with a triangular foliation in each compartment,—the beaded border surrounding the upper edge,—the square eight-foiled ornaments,—the leopard and the winged monster, dragon, or wyvern, with foliated tails, here represented in fierce conflict, are all seen on the pieces found in Lewis. They occur likewise on numerous sculptures of larger dimension, of the period adverted to, as also in illuminations. On the upper face of the piece appears the leopard-lion, and fishes with a human head, probably the fabulous siren of the north, the wasser-nix, or nacken of Denmark, the nykyr of our own country, a myth still dimly to be traced in the turbulent "eager" of the river Ouse and the Nene, or the "higre" of the Avon. Of the import and origin, however, of these devices, as also of the singular figures of a man and woman mounted pillion-wise upon a goat, the former wielding an object which might remind us of the hammer of Thor; no satisfactory explanation has at present been offered, and the subject must be left for the further consideration of archaeologists better versed in the fables of northern mythology, or the singular types of mediæval ornament.

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⁴ See one of these, a bishop, *Archæol. Journal*, vol. iii., p. 121.