

NOTICE OF AN ANCIENT CHESS-PIECE

Found at Ashwelthorpe, Norfolk.

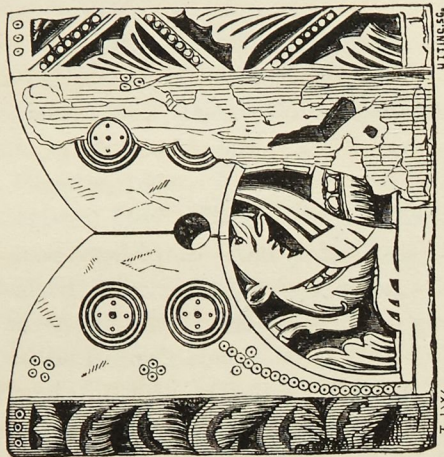
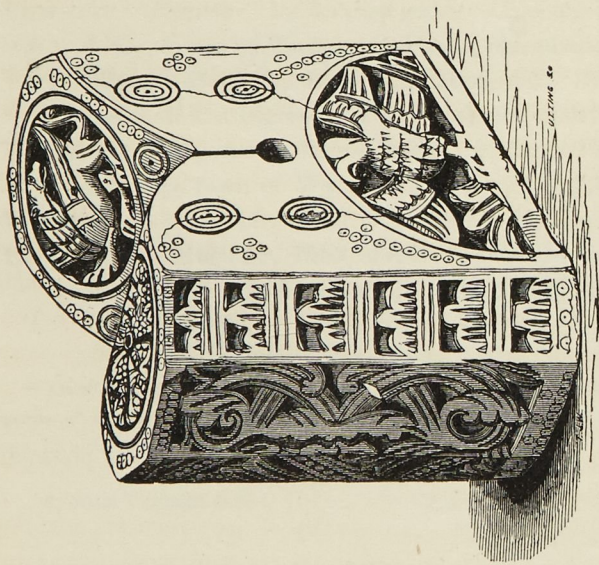
COMMUNICATED BY

THE REV. GREVILLE J. CHESTER, B.A.

Two causes combine to render objects of ancient art carved in ivory of rare occurrence in England. First, the peculiar nature of the material itself, which commonly makes a relic, which may chance to have been deposited in the earth, very liable to decay; and, secondly, the difficulty experienced in early times in procuring a sufficient supply of elephants' tusks.

But the *northern* nations of Europe were not compelled to depend for their supplies of ivory upon the far-off regions of Asia and Africa alone. A kindred and more durable substance was produced nearer home. The vast and unwieldy rosmar, walrus, or morse, which inhabited the northern seas, and which was without doubt anciently of far commoner occurrence than it is at present, contributed his formidable tusks to the carvers and artificers of the Scandinavian peoples, who shaped them into articles of use and luxury. Amongst the objects made from this material which were held in highest esteem were chessmen, of which a very remarkable collection, found in the Isle of Lewis, is preserved in the British Museum.

It would be a question worthy of investigation, whether the northern nations in ancient times ever made use of the



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fossil tusks of the *Elephas primigenius*, or mammoth, of which the remains are so numerous in the more recent deposits of Norfolk, and in other parts of England and on the Continent. The tusks of these extinct animals are frequently found so little impregnated with mineral or earthy matter, that it would be an easy matter to carve them, and I believe they have been actually imported into this country from Siberia, where they are most of all abundant, for this very purpose.

But to return. The relic to which I have now to direct attention is a Chess-piece of rare, if not unique form, and made, if I mistake not, of the tusk of a walrus. It was found some years since in the garden of Ashwelthorpe Hall, the ancient seat of the Knyvet family, and the property of Lord Berners, in a parish whose name is itself suggestive of the Scandinavian North.

This singular Chess-piece has been pronounced by that competent judge, Sir Frederick Madden, to be a rook or castle; the depressed and bifurcated top, which at first sight looks like a mitre, being intended to represent the oriental form of battlement. Of this "swallow-tailed" battlement familiar examples exist upon some of the ancient buildings at Verona, Mantua, and other Italian cities. Those who have not seen the originals may find plates of good and characteristic specimens in Mr. G. E. Street's delightful work, "Brick and Marble Architecture in Italy."

The Chess Rook is about two and a quarter inches in height, and two and a half inches in length, by nearly one inch and a half in breadth. Upon the one side is sculptured a winged dragon or wyvern; on the other, an eagle. Over each of these devices, which are placed in arched recesses, are four annular ornaments arranged in pairs. Each of these encloses a cross, formed by a large dot placed in the midst of four small ones. The ends are decorated with sculptures, resembling those upon ancient Runic pillars and crosses, of

interlacing branches and foliage, and at one end there is a

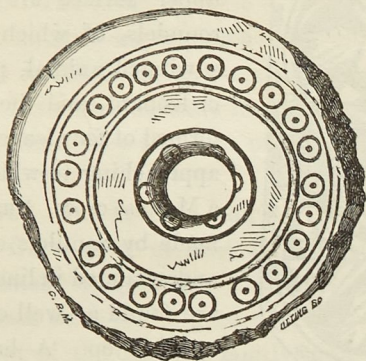


couching dragon with trifoliated tail. The two divisions of the upper surface are occupied by roundels, of which one contains a winged animal, perhaps a lion or leopard, and the other a cross, formed of four leaves and in shape approaching to what is known as a Maltese cross. Small ornaments, made by annulets enclosing dots, and arranged in lines and clusters, are found as well on the sides as on the top. A hole is pierced through the centre of the piece,

which may probably have been hung up with its fellows, now unfortunately lost. This specimen belonged to the red set, and portions of red colour are still observable on the top and at the ends. The date of this rare and curious object of ancient art is probably the twelfth century. Notwithstanding the very northern character of its ornamentation, it has been considered the work of a Norman French artist; and I am informed that it was stated by Sir F. Madden to be the only Norman chessman he had ever met with. The illustrations which accompany the present notice are from drawings which were placed at my disposal by the kindness of Mr. Albert Way.

Mr. Fitch has lately added to his splendid collection of Norfolk antiquities a draughtsman of bone. This curious specimen, of which an engraving is given on the next page, was found in the churchyard of St. Stephen, Norwich. It is probably of Danish workmanship; an interesting circumstance, as, with the exception of the sword found in the Wensum, and given by me to the British Museum, no other relics of that people have been found in the city of Norwich

or its neighbourhood. The annular ornaments upon the draughtsman should be compared with those upon the Ashwelthorpe chessman, which they strongly resemble.



Since writing the above, I have received the new number of the "Journal of the Archæological Institute,"* at page 278 of which are engraved two bone draughtsmen found at Lincoln. These strongly resemble Mr. Fitch's Norwich specimen in the character of their ornaments, and, like it, are probably of Danish workmanship. The same remark will apply to a draughtsman in my own collection, which was found in Aran-more, an island lying off the west coast of Ireland.

* Archæological Journal, Vol. XIV. p. 278.