

THE MYSTERY OF  
THE MOST FAMOUS CHESSMEN  
IN THE WORLD AND  
THE WOMAN WHO MADE THEM

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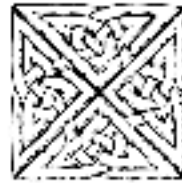


Ivory Vikings



NANCY MARIE BROWN

# Ivory Vikings



The Mystery of the Most Famous Chessmen in the World and the Woman Who Made  
Them

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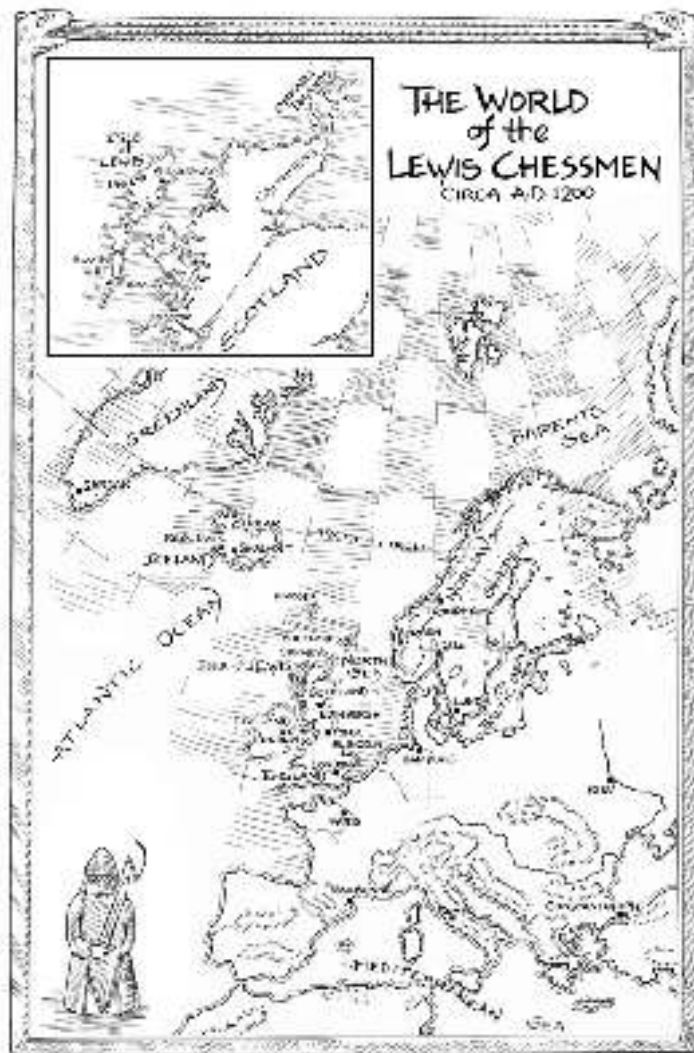
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*For Will and Mel, who made me appreciate games*

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## The Missing Pieces



In the early 1800s, on a golden Hebridean beach, the sea exposed an ancient treasure cache: ninety-two game pieces carved of ivory and the buckle of the bag that once contained them. Seventy-eight are chessmen—the Lewis chessmen—the most famous chessmen in the world. Between one and five eighths and four inches tall, these chessmen are Norse **netiske**, each face **individual**, each full of quirks: the kings stout and stoic, the queens grieving or aghast, the bishops moon-faced and mild. The knights are doughty, if a bit ludicrous on their cute ponies. The rooks are not castles but warrior some going berserk, biting their shields in battle frenzy. Only the pawns are lumps—simple octagons—and few at that, only nineteen, though the fourteen plain disks could be pawns or men for a different game, like checkers. Altogether, the hoard held almost four full chess sets—only one knight, four rooks, and forty-four pawns are missing—about three pounds of ivory treasure.

Who carved them? Where? How did they arrive in that sandbank—or, as another account says, the underground cist—on the Isle of Lewis in westernmost Scotland? No one knows for sure: History, too, has many pieces missing. To play the game, we fill the empty squares with pieces of our own imagination.

Instead of facts about these chessmen, we have clues. Some come from medieval sagas; others from modern archaeology, art history, forensics, and the history of board games. The story of the Lewis chessmen encompasses the whole history of the Vikings in the North Atlantic, from 793 to 1066, when the sea road connected places we think of as far apart and culturally distinct: Norway and Scotland, Ireland and Iceland, the Orkney Islands and Greenland, the Hebrides and Newfoundland. Their story questions the economics behind the Viking voyages to the West, explores the Viking impact on Scotland, and shows how the whole North Atlantic was dominated by Norway for almost five hundred years, until the Scottish king finally claimed his islands in 1266. It reveals the struggle within Viking culture to accommodate Christianity, the ways in which Rome's rules were flouted, and how orthodoxy eventually prevailed. And finally, the story of the Lewis chessmen brings from the shadow an extraordinarily talented woman artist of the twelfth century: Margret the Adroit of Iceland.

The Lewis chessmen are the best-known Scottish archaeological treasure of all time. To Day Caldwell, former curator at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, where eleven of the chessmen now reside, they may also be the most valuable: "It is difficult to translate that worth in

money,” he and Mark Hall wrote in a museum guidebook in 2010, “and practically impossible to measure their cultural significance and the enjoyment they have given countless museum visitors over the years.” Or, as Caldwell phrased it to me over tea one afternoon in the museum’s cafeteria: “If you knew what they were valued at, you wouldn’t want to pick one up.”

Too late for that. I’d already spent an hour handling four of them. Out of their glass display cases they are impossible to resist, warm and bright, seeming not old at all, but strangely alive. They nestle in the palm, smooth and weighty, ready to play. Set on a desktop, in lieu of the thirty-two-inch-square chessboard they’d require, they make a satisfying *click*. The king, queen, and rook I chose are all about the same size: two and three-quarters to three and a quarter inches tall. The bishop is much bigger—over three and a half inches to the peak of his pointed miter—obviously from a different set, though it’s hard to sort the fifty-nine face pieces by size. You can make two sets—then the system falls apart. The Lewis hoard may represent more than four chess sets. There may be more pieces missing than we think.

Perhaps some—broken or decayed—were left behind in that sandbank or cist by whoever discovered them. Written accounts of the find are contradictory. But the collection does seem to have been sorted. The chessmen we have are remarkably well preserved for having lain in the ground for six hundred—some years. Except for the spider web of surface cracks no one can explain (worm channels? etching by acids secreted by plant roots? damage by marine gastropods?) and a dark mottling to his creamy color, the bishop in my hand looks brand new. Dressed in chasuble and miter, he clasps his crozier close to his cheek and raises his right hand in an awkward blessing. He has an enormously long thumb. His nose is straight, his eyes close set, his mouth crooked with a bit of an overbite. He’s a jowly fellow, too—no ascetic here. He’s carved from a prime section of walrus tusk, I see, turning him upside down: I can barely tell where the smooth ivory surface of the tusk gives way to its darker, grainier core.

The rook, too, was made of quality ivory. He’s uniformly shiny, though he sports the same speckling of fine cracks as the bishop. He brandishes his sword and bites his kite-shaped shield in berserk fashion. His buck teeth aren’t straight. His nose isn’t either: It looks broken. Like the bishop, his garment is simple. It seems to be just a long coat, perhaps of leather. A few strong grooves mark the fabric’s folds; a line of dots on his cuff suggests ornament. His helmet is a plain conical cap.

Neither rook nor bishop displays the carver’s skill. Their strength comes from the design, not the details. The opposite is true of the king and queen I examined next. Seated on richly decorated thrones, they have terrible posture. Their spines hunch, their heads jut forward; they look old and almost all done in. She is brooding, her jaw clenched. He is morose, gloomy, defeated—I would not want to play with this fey monarch. The carving is incredibly fine. His beard is neatly trimmed; his hair twists into four long locks. Hers is plaited into braids, looped up under a veil that is clipped in the back, very fancy, under an open fleurs-de-lis-topped crown. His heavy robes fall in cascades of folds. She wears a pleated skirt, a short gown, a robe with embroidered or fur-trimmed edges, a jewel at her



throat, her wrists ringed with bangles. He grips a sheathed sword athwart his knees. She claps her right hand to her cheek, cradles her elbow with the left: Her left thumb curves back like mine does.

To me, they are clearly a pair—even the scrolls of foliage on their throne backs are similar. Yet Caldwell's colleague Caroline Wilkinson, a professor of forensic art, believes they were carved by two different artists. Analyzing all fifty-nine face pieces from the Lewis hoard using a computerized grid system, she concluded in 2009 that Artist C carved this queen and fourteen other chessmen; Artist D carved the king. Caldwell, intuitively, lumped together groups B and D and split group C into several artists, since the pieces, to him, ranged from competent to “crudely carved.”

I would not call this queen crude. I chose this particular royal pair to examine because I knew the materials were substandard. The sections of tusk they were made from, as you can see by turning the pieces upside down, were defective. Their bases are C-shaped: The smooth ivory rim rings only three-quarters of the pocked and pitted core of the tusk. The king's carver simply made do: One side of the king's face, body, and throne are darker and rougher, as if poorly polished. The queen's carver carefully attached an ivory plate to improve the looks of the throne. The fit is so delicate it's difficult to see, even under a magnifying lens. Not until I blew up my photographs did I notice the four tiny ivory pegs that fasten the plate.

Still, the queen's right hand, the hand pressed to her cheek in worry or grief, shows the irregular pattern of the walrus tusk's core. Over the centuries, a bit has flaked off. There's a hole in her hand. A little longer in that cist or sand dune and she would have lost her wrist where it was cut away, so carefully, from her body. It's an exquisite piece of work using shoddy materials. It speaks to me of thrift, pride, determination, and skill. I can imagine the artist calling out “Don't toss that lump away” then putting all her art into the carving of this, the smallest of all fifty-nine face pieces.

Hold this thoughtful little queen in your hand and it's easy to become enthralled.

## AN ARTIST NAMED MARGRET

At the British Museum in London, which owns forty-eight face pieces, the octagonal pawns, the plain discs, and the buckle, the Lewis chessmen are “ideal gateway objects”: “Visitors actively seek them out and are drawn to them when they enter gallery spaces,” say experts on museum design.

In *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, the museum's popular series on BBC Radio 4, the Lewis chessmen are, chronologically, Number 61, but their curator at the time, James Robinson, admits on the show that “few objects compete with the Lewis chessmen in terms of their popular appeal.” Elsewhere he likens them to the marble friezes from the Greek Acropolis: “These Lewis chessmen,” Robinson says, “are my Elgin Marbles.” He adds, “Despite their miniature size, they might be seen to embody truly monumental values of the human condition.”

Chess players are also enamored of the Lewis chessmen. As the earliest sets to include bishops among the first with queens, and the only ones to use Viking berserks as rooks, they are “the most famous and important chess pieces in history,” writes Dylan Loeb McClain, the chess columnist for

the *New York Times*. A Lewis knight is embossed on the cover of H. J. R. Murray's nine-hundred-page treatise on the history of chess, published in 1913 and still considered *the* authority on the game. When robotics engineers in 2011 were looking for a chess set to test Gambit, "a custom, mid-cost (DoF) robot manipulator system that can play physical board games against human opponents in non-idealized environments," they chose the Lewis chessmen—using resin replicas, of course.

The chessmen are icons of the Viking Age—despite having been made a hundred years or more too late. *Viking Age Iceland* (2001), *The Viking Age: A Reader* (2010), *The Vikings and Their Age* (2013), and other histories of the Vikings sport Lewis rooks on their dust jackets. Curators of Viking exhibitions favor the Lewis chessmen too. At the Danish National Museum in 2013, three shield-biting Lewis rooks shared exhibit space with a skull with filed teeth (a Viking beauty treatment), miniature swords, axes, and spears (possibly magical amulets); full-sized weapons, including shields, bosses, a bow and arrows, helmets, and swords; and a collection of folding combs (Vikings were notoriously fussy about their hair).

Generations of British children grew up calling the chessmen "Nogs," the name given them by animators Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin, whose *Saga of Noggin the Nog* aired on the BBC from the 1950s to the 1990s. They are Harry Potter's chess set: Before a life-or-death match in the 2001 film *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry learns wizard's chess from the Lewis chessmen—which come to life, a queen rising from her royal throne to throw it at her opponent. They come to life, likewise, to whisk a little girl off on a mythic adventure in *The Sleeping Army*, a 2011 children's book by Francesca Simon of "Horrid Henry" fame, and in the 2012 Disney-Pixar film *Brave*, to teach a feisty princess about "war and chaos and ruin."

In Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal* (1957), Max von Sydow plays chess against death using Lewis knights. The chessmen appear in *Le Bossu* (1959), *Becket* (1964), and *The Lion in Winter* (1968).

They grace the cover of an Agatha Christie mystery. They figure in the plots of a 2012 story in the Doctor Who series and a 2013 thriller set on Lewis, *The Chessmen* by Peter May.

Poems have been written about them, and songs. Sings Scottish balladeer Dougie MacLean: "Out an age when time was young / Across the silver ocean's floor . . . / They come with tales too dark to speak / But the fascination holds / Compels us on to search and seek . . ."

No one disputes the cultural importance of the Lewis chessmen.

No one disputes that they were made of walrus ivory from Greenland (except four made of whale tooth), and the consensus is pretty firm that, based on the type of miter the bishops wear, they must have been carved after 1140, when episcopal fashions changed.

But ask where the Lewis chessmen come from—or who carved them—and fists start to fly.

In 1832, in the first scholarly account of the find, Frederic Madden of the British Museum zeroed in on "one peculiarity" of the rooks: "the singular manner in which they are represented *biting the shields*." Such behavior was typical of berserks, stock characters in the Icelandic sagas and said to be the warriors of the Norse god Odin by the thirteenth-century Icelandic writer Snorri Sturluson. For the

and other literary reasons, Madden concluded that the Lewis chessmen “were executed in Iceland about the middle of the twelfth century.”

His argument held until 1874, when Antonius Van der Linde of Norway attacked him on (ostensibly) philological grounds. As Willard Fiske noted in *Chess in Iceland* in 1905, the real reason was nationalistic fervor: “The mention of Iceland, or Icelandic chess,” wrote Fiske, “is the red rag which is always sure to excite the critical rage of Dr. V. d. Linde. On such occasions, he assumes a sort of ox-eye glare, and proceeds at once to toss the object of his wrath high into the air.”

Since then, art historians have compared the elaborate looping scrollwork on the backs of the kings, queens’, and bishops’ thrones to four ivory carvings in museums in Copenhagen and London. One was found on an island near Trondheim, Norway, in 1715; the provenance of the other three is unknown. The scrollwork also resembles English manuscript illuminations, wood carvings from Norway and Iceland, and stone carvings from England, Scotland, Sweden, and Norway, specifically from twelfth-century Trondheim.

Archaeologists have also turned up evidence. In the 1880s, a broken ivory figurine thought to be the Virgin Mary was unearthed in the rubble of Saint Olav’s church in Trondheim. In 1990, it was identified as a Lewis chess queen—based on a sketch, since the figurine itself has vanished—and the researchers posited “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” at the nearby archbishop’s palace in Trondheim, where the Lewis chessmen could have been made.

Yet, a few years earlier, a bit of ivory looking like the front feet of a Lewis knight’s horse was found in Lund, Sweden, without claims for a chess-carving workshop there. Nor is a workshop proposed for the similar chess queen found in a bog in Ireland in 1817, a broken (and perhaps unfinished) chess queen recovered from an Inuit camp in Greenland in 1952, or three chess pieces without any provenance at all—a broken bishop in the British Museum, a knight in the Bargello in Florence, and a king in the Louvre in Paris—all of which resemble the Lewis chessmen as closely as does the sketch of the broken Trondheim queen.

Strangely, none of the physical tests archaeologists now standardly use have been tried on the chessmen. Asked why not, Caldwell, of the National Museum of Scotland, told me, “As curators, we have a responsibility to not damage our objects.” Even taking samples the size of a fingernail paring—all that’s needed—from the undersides of a selection of chessmen would be doing damage and so anathema to a museum curator. Nor would the results, Caldwell believes, settle any argument. Carbon dating, which relies on the amount of radioactive carbon-14 in a sample, gives a range of dates, usually spanning fifty years or more; the debate over the Lewis chessmen swings on twenty to twenty-five years. An analysis of the strontium isotopes in the ivory could pinpoint Greenland as the source of the tusk, but that’s already generally assumed.

When in 2010 Caldwell and Hall wrote that “the limited evidence favors Trondheim,” their main argument was that “most scholars would at present expect to locate the manufacture of such pieces

a town or large trading centre. The craftsmen who made such prestigious items were, perhaps, more likely to thrive in such a setting.”

That same year, Icelandic chess aficionado and civil engineer Gudmundur G. Thorarinsson resurrected Frederic Madden’s thesis that the Lewis chessmen were carved in Iceland. At the cathedral of Skalholt in southern Iceland between 1195 and 1211, he pointed out, a woman was hired to carve luxury items out of walrus ivory for Bishop Pall Jonsson to send to his colleagues in Denmark, Norway, Scotland, and Greenland. The thirteenth-century *Saga of Bishop Pall* records that he sent the archbishop of Trondheim “a bishop’s crozier of walrus ivory, carved so skillfully that no one in Iceland had ever seen such artistry before; it was made by Margret the Adroit, who at that time was the most skilled carver in all Iceland.” Margret, Thorarinsson concluded, could have made the Lewis chessmen under a similar commission from the bishop.

Thorarinsson posted his theory about Margret and Bishop Pall on the Internet. It was not well received. “The Lewis chessmen were never anywhere near Iceland!” sniffed a Norwegian chess master on the website [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com). Hearing of a seminar planned for Edinburgh, tied to a traveling exhibition of the Lewis chessmen, Thorarinsson attempted to present his idea there. When an invitation to speak did not materialize, he and a friend went anyway. “These two characters came up from Iceland, turned up unannounced, and crashed the seminar!” Caldwell told me, laughing about it in retrospect. “We didn’t know how to handle it.” In a prepared statement to the press, Caldwell reiterated his belief that the chessmen were made in Norway, adding, “I am pleased that our own research and our extremely popular exhibition *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* is reigniting debate and discussion.”

Alex Woolf, a medievalist from the University of Saint Andrews in Scotland, was less diplomatic. As the *New York Times* reported, “The walrus tusk used to make the chessmen was expensive, and the pieces would have had to have been made where there were wealthy patrons to employ craftsmen and pay for the material. ‘A hell of a lot of walrus ivory went into making those chessmen, and Iceland was a bit of a scrappy place full of farmers,’ Dr. Woolf said. The pieces are also exquisite works of art, he said, adding, ‘You don’t get the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Iowa.’”

## THE ICELANDIC SAGAS

It was Woolf’s snide “a scrappy place full of farmers” that caught my eye. Thorarinsson, I saw, had overestimated his audience. He thought they knew the history of Iceland and Norway in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. He thought they knew about the influential Bishop Pall.

But why would they? The primary texts are in Icelandic. Not all are available in English translations, and, of those that are, the easiest to find are dismissed as fiction. The *Saga of Bishop Pall* is rarely read. The Bishops’ Sagas as a genre, says one expert, are “backwards, stilted in style, and schlocky in hagiographical excess.”

Non-Icelandic sources do exist. Clerics writing in Latin in the twelfth century knew about Iceland

powerful bishops. In his *Description of Ireland* of 1185, Gerald of Wales wrote:

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Iceland, the largest of the northern islands, lies at the distance of three natural days' sail from Ireland, toward the north. It is inhabited by a race of people who use very few words, and speak the truth. They seldom converse, and then briefly, and take no oaths, because they do not know what it is to lie; for they detest nothing more than falsehood. Among this people the offices of king and priest are united in the same person. Their prince is their pontiff. Their bishop performs the functions of government as well as of the priesthood.

Adam of Bremen, writing his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* about a hundred years earlier, said much the same: "They hold their bishop as king. All the people respect his wishes."

For both Adam and Gerald, travel to Iceland was commonplace (if uncomfortable). To situate Ireland on the map, Gerald placed it halfway "between the cold of Iceland and the heat of Spain." Wrote Adam of the North Atlantic (which he poetically dubbed "the Ocean Called Dark"):

It is of immense breadth, terrible and dangerous, and on the west encompasses Britain to which is now given the name England. On the south it touches the Frisians and the part of Saxony that belongs to our diocese of Hamburg. On the east there are the Danes and the mouth of the Baltic Sea and the Norwegians, who live beyond Denmark. On the north that ocean flows by the Orkney Islands and then encircles the earth in boundless expanses. On the left there is . . . Ireland. On the right there are the crags of Norway, and farther on the islands of Iceland and Greenland.

To other writers, Iceland was a land of eager historians. The Norwegian chronicler Tore the Monks described the process of compiling his *History of the Ancient Kings of Norway* in about 1180 as "making the most diligent inquiries I could among those whom we in our language call Icelanders. It is well known that they without doubt have always been more knowledgeable and more inquisitive in matters of this kind than all the other northern peoples." In his *History of the Danes*, written around the year 1200, Saxo the Grammarian concurred:

The diligence of the men of Iceland must not be shrouded in silence; since the barrenness of their native soil offers no means of self-indulgence, they pursue a steady routine of temperance and devote all their time to improving our knowledge of others' deeds, compensating for poverty by their intelligence. They regard it a real pleasure to discover and commemorate the achievements of every nation; in their judgment it is as elevating to discourse on the prowess of others as to display their own. Thus I have scrutinized their store of historical treasures and composed a considerable part of this present work by copying their narratives, not scorning, where I recognized such skill in ancient lore, to take these men as witnesses.

Both Saxo and Tore had met Bishop Pall.

In Bishop Pall's day, around the year 1200, Iceland was at the peak of its Golden Age: rich, independent, and in a frenzy of artistic creation. Though its population, at 40,000, was one seventh that of Norway, Iceland had long provided the *skálds*, or court poets, of the Norwegian kings; now Icelanders became the official biographers of kings Sverrir (who ruled Norway from 1184 to 1202), Hakon (1217–1263), and Magnus (1263–1280). From 1118 through the 1300s, medieval Icelanders produced prose works at an enormous rate; measured against the handful of medieval Norwegian texts we have, Iceland's literary output was prodigious. First came a law book; next, a history of the island.

commissioned by Iceland's two bishops. After this *Book of the Icelanders* came chronicles of the kings of Norway and Denmark and the earls of Orkney; stories of Iceland's first settlers; treatises on grammar, astronomy, medicine, poetics, and mythology; annals; saints' lives, sermons, and collections of miracles; biographies of bishops and the history of Christianity in the country; translations of Bede, Isidore of Seville, Sallust, *Elucidarius*, *Physiologus*, Saint Gregory's *Dialogues*, and *The Prophecies of Merlin*; romances and fantastical tales of trolls and dragons, werewolves and sorcerers; stories of Greenland, of Viking raids, of voyages to Constantinople or to the New World, of famous feuds and love affairs, of poets and outlaws; even a *Guide to the Holy Land*. More medieval literature exists in Icelandic than in any other European language except Latin.

Confusingly, 140 of these Icelandic texts are labeled "sagas." Derived from the Icelandic verb "to say," *saga* implies neither fact nor falsehood. Today we place the sagas in several genres—Family Sagas, Sagas of Ancient Times, Kings' Sagas, Contemporary Sagas (including the Bishops' Sagas and Knights' Tales (some original, some translated from other languages), and Saints' Lives. Most of these distinctions were unknown in Bishop Pall's day.

The best, the ones people usually mean when they say "the Icelandic sagas," are the Family Sagas. "The glory of the sagas is indisputable"; they are "some sort of miracle," scholars gush. "In no other literature is there such a sense of the beauty of human conduct." Others praise the sagas' "earnest straightforward manner," their crisp dialogue and "simple, lucid sentence structure," their individualistic characters, their gift for drama, their complex structure, "the illusion of reality which they create," and their sophisticated use of "the same devices that we are accustomed to from modern suspense fiction." The Family Sagas are "a great world treasure," comparable to "Homer, Shakespeare, Socrates, and those few others who live at the very heart of human literary endeavor."

Not all critics have waxed so rhapsodic. An eighteenth-century writer dismissed their themes memorably, as "farmers at fisticuffs," and farmers—not knights or kings—do take center stage in these stories. In *Njal's Saga*, a farmer on an ungovernable horse rides down another farmer sowing his grain; a feud escalates. In *Egil's Saga*, two farmers argue over grazing rights. In *Laxdaela Saga*, one farmer steals another's horses. Saga heroes feud over dowries, ship ownership, the cutting of firewood, the price of hay, and stolen cheese. But they also go on voyages to Greenland; take part in Viking raids throughout Western Europe; interact with the kings of Norway, Denmark, Sweden, England, various Baltic principalities, and Russia; trade with merchants in Dublin and Hedeby and a dozen other market towns; make pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem; and hire themselves out as bodyguards in Constantinople.

Taken together, the forty or so Family Sagas describe Icelandic society from its settlement in about 870 through the conversion to Christianity in 1000 and up until about 1053, when the first Icelandic bishop was elected. Dense with genealogies and overlapping character sets, they paint a believable picture of a country in which complex laws and a strong sense of personal honor let people live with a good deal of freedom and comfort in a harsh environment.

## DRAGONS

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How faithful the sagas are to history has bedeviled readers for hundreds of years. Icelandic themselves are dubious. One writing in 1957 considered the sagas too good to be true: “A moderate historian will for several reasons tend to brush these sagas aside as historical records. . . . The narrative will rather give him the impression of the art of a novelist than of the scrupulous dullness of a chronicler.”

Archaeologists, too, dismiss the sagas as fiction, though there are notable exceptions. Jesse Byock, an American who has led excavations in Iceland for twenty years, and his colleague Davide Zori wrote in 2013, “We employ Iceland’s medieval writings as one of many datasets in our excavations, and the archaeological remains that we are excavating . . . appear to verify our method.” Of their team’s discovery of a Viking Age church and graveyard, they said, *Egil’s Saga* “led us to the site.”

Like any medieval source, sagas have to be read critically to sift fiction from fact. Dialogue is always fiction. Chronology is usually confused. Rituals and customs are tainted by those of the writer’s own times, which could be the vigorous and independent Iceland of 1180, the war-torn new colony of Norway in 1280, or the soon-to-be-forgotten outpost of Denmark in 1380. Poems embedded in the sagas may better preserve the views of an earlier age—but only if we can parse their meaning.

Even scrupulously dull medieval texts are generally more reliable the closer they were penned to the era they describe. When the authors’ names are known, or when they cite their sources, we can more easily assess their biases.

Then we hunt for dragons.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* has dragons. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* has dragons. Adam of Bremen and Gerald of Wales both have dragons. Discard every text that mentions dragons and we’d have no medieval histories at all.

The Family Sagas, on a dragon scale of one to ten, rank about four or five. All of these sagas are anonymous, though one of the greatest, *Egil’s Saga*, may have been written by Bishop Pall’s foster brother, Snorri Sturluson, perhaps as early as 1202. By Pall’s death in 1211, several Family Sagas had been composed. In these sagas, omens are common. Sorcerers conjure up snowstorms and cause shipwrecks. The dead come back to haunt. *Egil’s Saga* hints at werewolves, though we aren’t really sure what happens to the man named “Evening-Wolf” after dark. There are no actual dragons.

One early saga in this genre, the *Saga of the Heath-Killings*, is especially pertinent to the history of the Lewis chessmen. In it, a chess-playing berserk woos a girl over the game while her father pretends it is just not happening. (Berserks were not good sons-in-law.) The word translated as “chess” is *tafl*, cognate to our word *table*, meaning any game played on a board. Some sagas refer to *hnefatafl*, roughly “fist-table,” a game in which a single king, protected by his band of warriors, fights against a horde of enemies that outnumbers them two to one—a very Viking scenario. A few sagas say *skátafl*—*skák* is still the Icelandic word for chess—or make it clear which board game is meant by referenc

to knights or bishops or the word *checkmate*. Here's where interpretation gets tricky. At the time the *Saga of the Heath-Killings* was written, it's safe to say that "chess was already associated with romance in Scandinavia as in the rest of Europe," as historian Marilyn Yalom concludes, "although chess was probably unknown in Iceland, circa 1000, where the story was set."

In general, we can think of the Family Sagas as historical novels: They tell us what people of Bishop Pall's time thought was true about Iceland's early days.

The Sagas of Ancient Times, the second genre, score nines and tens on our dragon scale. We would call these sagas fantasy, not history. They have a preponderance of dragons, trolls, ghosts, werewolves, and the walking dead and feature legendary heroes like Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer and Ragnar Lothbrok. But they can still be useful to a historian. The anonymous *Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, for example, revolves around the legend of a flaming sword made by dwarfs. The story begins in a mythical age of Goths and Huns (possibly the fifth century) and ends with the genealogies of Swedish kings down to 1125. It may have been composed in the twelfth century, since it influenced *Egil's Saga*. It contains a marvelous set-piece, in which a valkyrie-like warrior-woman named Hervor magically opens her father's grave and demands his sword. Hervor, we later learn, is also a chess master. Disguised as a man and calling herself Hervard, she is at court one day watching King Gudmund play chess. "His game was pretty much over when he asked if anyone could offer him some advice. Hervard stepped up and studied the board, and after a little while Gudmund was winning." The word used here is *skáktafl*—clearly the writer of the saga (if not the valkyrie) knew chess.

Some of the Kings' Sagas also score tens on the dragon scale. In *Ynglinga Saga*, the beginning of the massive collection of sixteen sagas called *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson, writing between 1220 and 1241, traces the founding of the kingdom of Norway to Odin, a one-eyed wizard who could transform into a dragon, raise the dead, foretell the future, converse with ravens, slake fire, still the sea, turn the winds every which way, and crack open the earth with a song—indeed, a figure very much like the god Odin whom Snorri writes about in his *Edda*, where, to explain the art of the skald, or Viking poet, Snorri compiled most of what we know about Norse mythology.

At the other end of the dragon scale is a King's Saga crucial to understanding the world of the Lewes chessmen, the *Saga of King Sverrir*. It was written by Karl Jonsson, abbot of the Icelandic monastery of Thingeyrar, who was a member of the Norwegian king's court between 1185 and 1190. The abbot wrote the first part of the saga, one manuscript says, "while King Sverrir himself sat next to him and determined what he should say." Karl finished writing before he died in 1212—ten years after the king.

Between these two extremes lie sagas like Snorri's *Saga of King Olaf the Saint*. It includes a famous chess match between Canute the Great, king of Denmark and England, and his captain, Earl Ulf, in the Danish capital of Roskilde on the eve of Saint Michael's day, 1027: "Then the king played a great 'finger-breaker.' The earl put him in check with a knight. The king took his piece back and said that he would try another play. That made the earl angry and he upset the chessboard." The king, already in



foul mood, had the earl killed. H. J. R. Murray, in *The History of Chess*, calls this episode “the earliest appearance of chess in the Norse lands,” if, he adds, “the record can be accepted as historical.” It can’t; Canute probably played the older game, *hnefatafl*. What the record does prove is that chess was the game of kings around 1220, when Snorri Sturluson was writing.

The *Saga of Bishop Pall*, with its story of an artist named Margret the Adroit, falls into the category of Contemporary Sagas. These sagas were composed within a generation of the actions they describe. Like the *Saga of King Sverrir*, they are as historical as any medieval chronicle can be—two on the dragon scale—given the era’s general acceptance of prophetic dreams, omens, miracles, and divine intercession. Their authors, some of whose names we know, were often eyewitnesses to the events they describe. They wrote, as the author of *Hrafn’s Saga* says, to set the record straight: “Many events, as they occurred, fade from men’s memories, and some are otherwise told than how they took place, so that many men believe what is false and doubt what is true. And because ‘Lies flee when they meet the truth,’ we are here going to write about certain events that happened in our own days and concerning men known to us, of which we know the truth.”

## THE CATHEDRAL AT SKALHOLT

Gudmundur G. Thorarinsson, who crashed the seminar on the Lewis chessmen to champion Margret the Adroit, was thought at one time to be a good candidate for prime minister of Iceland. He is patient, soft-spoken, warm-hearted, and, underneath it all, a bit of a showman—it was he who organized the famous chess match between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky in Reykjavik in 1972. Thorarinsson likes to give speeches and is often called upon to provide the after-dinner entertainment for meetings of civic groups. For the hundredth anniversary of the Reykjavik Chess Club in 2000, he wanted to do something grand. “I started looking at the history of chess in Iceland,” he recalled when we met in Reykjavik. “One of our grandmasters said, ‘Have you seen the Lewis chessmen?’”

Thorarinsson read Madden’s 1832 treatise on “the ancient chessmen discovered in the Isle of Lewis.” He read Fiske’s 1905 *Chess in Iceland*. He read Murray’s 1913 *History of Chess*. He read Sveinbjorn Rafnsson’s 1993 *Páll Jónsson Skálholtsbiskup* and Helgi Gudmundsson’s 1997 *Um Hrafn Innan*—neither of which is accessible to scholars who don’t read Icelandic. But mostly he read the sagas, the difference between medieval Icelandic and the modern dialect being negligible. *Íslenska fornrit*, the Old Icelandic Text Society in Reykjavik, has been commissioning definitive critical editions of the sagas since 1933. Twenty-four volumes, most containing several sagas, have been published. The *Saga of Bishop Pall* appeared, providentially, in 2002; reading it, Thorarinsson was intrigued by the story of Margret the Adroit and her patron, Bishop Pall.

Born in 1155, Pall was the great-grandson of King Magnus Bare-Legs of Norway, who conquered northern Scotland, the Hebrides, and the Orkney and Shetland Islands, and took his nickname from his fondness for wearing kilts. King Magnus reigned from 1093 to 1103; his line ruled Norway through 1266, when northern Scotland and the isles returned to the Scottish crown as part of the Treaty of

Perth. During that century and a half, King Magnus's Icelandic kinsmen routinely visited Norway where they were recognized as royalty.

Connections between Iceland and the Scottish isles were equally tight. Bishop Pall's brother Saemund was betrothed to the daughter of the earl of Orkney, but the wedding was never held: The two families could not agree on which had the higher status and which should be forced to sail to the wedding.

Bishop Pall himself became, in his youth, a retainer of Earl Harald, who ruled the Orkney Islands and Caithness in northern Scotland and, sometimes, controlled Lewis and other islands in the Hebrides as well. Pall attended school in England, probably at Lincoln Cathedral, where his uncle, Bishop Thorlak, had studied. Back in Iceland, Pall became a wealthy chieftain. Married and with four children, he was known for the breadth of his book learning and his excellent Latin, the extravagance of his banquets, the beauty of his singing voice, and his love of fine things. He is believed to have written both a history of Denmark (now lost) and the *Orkney Islanders' Saga*, a history of the earls of Orkney.

When elected bishop in 1194, Pall sailed first to Trondheim to be consecrated but found no archbishop there: Archbishop Eirik had quarreled with King Sverrir (who was soon to be excommunicated) and had taken refuge in Denmark. King Sverrir was holding court near Oslo; the archbishop was in Roskilde in Denmark, where he met King Knut. Across the bay in Lund (then in Denmark, now in Sweden), Pall was finally consecrated a bishop by Archbishop Absalon, for whom Saxo the Grammatian was then writing his history of Denmark. Pall was likely one of Saxo's sources.

At Skalholt in southern Iceland, Bishop Pall's predecessors had built the largest wooden church in all of Scandinavia, even though the wood had to be imported. (Iceland has no tall trees.) In the *Saga of Bishop Pall*, thought to have been written by Pall's son, we read that Pall beautified Skalholt Cathedral with imported glass windows and a tall bell tower, splendidly painted inside, and commissioned an altar screen of gold, silver, and ivory. The ivory was carved by an artist named Margret the Adroit; the rest of the work was done by Thorstein the Shrine-Smith, also in the bishop's employ. Thorstein had earned his nickname constructing the shrine of Saint Thorlak, Pall's uncle and predecessor, who was declared a saint in 1198. The shrine, or reliquary, to hold Saint Thorlak's holy bones was four and a half feet long; made of wood in the shape of a house, it was plated with silver and gold and adorned with jewels.

When Skalholt Cathedral burned to the ground in 1309, Pall's windows and tower and altar screen were destroyed. Saint Thorlak's reliquary, rescued from the fire, did not survive the Reformation: In 1550 it was stripped of its gold, silver, and jewels, which were sent to Copenhagen, since Iceland was then a Danish colony.

Yet two works of art from Bishop Pall's time remain: his stone coffin and his crozier. In his *saga*, his son writes, "He had a sarcophagus made with considerable skill, in which he reposed after his

death.” That stone coffin was unearthed in 1954 when a new church at Skalholt was rebuilt. Found inside, along with the bishop’s bones, was a walrus-ivory crozier thought to be the work of Margret the Adroit; a similar crozier was found in a grave in Greenland. Both are exquisite works of art and, Margret’s, prove she was quite capable of creating the Lewis chessmen.

She had plenty of ivory at her disposal. Ships captained by Bishop Pall’s kinsmen routinely traveled to Greenland to purchase walrus ivory and other luxury goods, such as white falcons. These Pall sent as gifts to his friends abroad, once via Bishop Gudmund the Good, who took an unplanned detour through the Hebrides on his way to Norway in 1202, and once by the hand of his own son, who visited the Orkney Islands and Norway in 1208. In return, Pall received gold rings, fine gloves, and a bishop’s miter embroidered with gold.

Researchers have found no sign of an ivory workshop at Skalholt during Bishop Pall’s reign—because they haven’t looked. The church and bishop’s residence were located in the same place for centuries; revealing the twelfth-century archaeological layers would require destroying the seventeenth-century layers, uncovered in large-scale digs from 2002 to 2007. These layers date to the time of another important Icelandic bishop, whose interest in medieval manuscripts led to the rediscovery of Snorri Sturluson’s works and thus the preservation of Norwegian history, Norse mythology, and much of what we know about Viking culture.

Yet a recent archaeological discovery suggests that the making of figural chess pieces in twelfth-century Iceland was common: A warrior-rook made of fishbone was found in a twelfth-century layer of a fishing station at Siglunes in northern Iceland in 2011. Though half the size and partly decayed from long burial in damp soil, it would not look out of place if lined up next to the Lewis rooks.

“There’s a striking resemblance,” noted Thorarinsson, who placed photographs of the Siglunes chessman and a Lewis rook side by side on the cover of his book, *The Enigma of the Lewis Chessmen*. “It’s quite remarkable if the artist who made this one”—the Siglunes rook—“didn’t know about the other one”—found an ocean away on Lewis.

Did Margret the Adroit carve the Lewis chessmen under a commission from Bishop Pall? Unless the Skalholt dig is reopened and proof of an ivory workshop is found, we cannot say yes or no. But “the limited evidence” places Iceland on equal footing with Trondheim as the site of their creation.

With a single chess set, you can play an infinite number of games. So let’s place our pieces on the board: the rooks, who tell us what the Lewis chessmen were made of and, roughly, where; the bishop, who suggest who might have commissioned them; the queens, including Margret the Adroit who could have made them; the kings, for whom the chessman would have been a royal gift; and the knights, who have championed the chessmen from the 1830s to today.



## The Rooks



On the four corners of the chessboard stand the rooks. Ours are not towers. Castles did not come in fashion as rooks until the 1500s. Since the word *rook*, from Arabic *rukh*, means “chariot,” you might expect our rooks to look like the four-horse chariots of another medieval ivory chess set, long identified as Charlemagne’s own, though now thought to come from Norman Italy in the late eleventh century. Along with its chariot-rooks, this chess set has elephants instead of bishops and a vizier, not a queen: Chess originally, or as far back as history lets us see, was an image of the Indian army.

From India, this war game traveled through Persia to Baghdad, by then the capital of the Islamic empire. Islam prohibits the carving of idols; chess *men* became chess *pieces*: beautiful smooth hunks of stone or bone or ivory, with the merest points and projections to indicate which pieces were which. Abstract chess pieces arrived in Christian Spain by at least the year 1008, when a count near Barcelona bequeathed a rock-crystal set to a local church. One made of whale bone, with little faces peering out from polygonal sides, was found at the English manor of Witchampton in Dorset in 1927. It has been dated (through a number of assumptions) to the late eleventh century and is thought to be Norse. Two unfinished pieces, one with two nubs denoting elephant tusks, were found beside rough sections of deer antler during excavations at Northampton, England, in 2014; the archaeologists named the site a carver’s workshop and dated it to the late twelfth century.

Our twelve Lewis rooks, nine carved of walrus ivory and three of whale’s tooth, are not lumps. Neither are they towers or charioteers: They are warriors. Four, as Frederic Madden of the British Museum pointed out in 1832, are rather peculiar: They’re biting their shields. The army the chessmen represent is clearly a Norse one—a late Norse one, with queens, Christian bishops, and Viking berserks for rooks.

Berserks—meaning “bear-shirts” or “bare-shirts”—were the god Odin’s warriors. Foot soldiers in the forefront of battle, they “wore no armor and were as mad as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, were as strong as bears or bulls. They killed other men, but neither fire nor iron could kill them. That called going berserk,” explained the thirteenth-century Icelandic writer Snorri Sturluson.

Sometimes the “bear-shirts” wore shirts of wolf skin instead. Harald Fair-Hair, king of Norway in the late ninth century, had a bodyguard of these “wolf-skins”; sang a skald who lived in Harald’s time

*The berserks howled,  
battle was on their minds,  
the wolf-skins growled  
and shook their spears.*

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In another stanza, a valkyrie, or battle goddess, asks a raven about Harald's berserks. The raven replies:

*“Wolf-skinned are they called. In battle  
They bear bloody shields.  
Red with blood are their spears when they come to fight.  
They form a closed group.  
The prince in his wisdom puts trust in such men  
Who hack through enemy shields.”*

*Harald's Lay* is the earliest known mention of berserks. Here they do not *bite* shields but hack through and bloody them. Yet by Snorri's day, when berserks next appear in literature, shield-biting defines them.

Over the next hundred years, they become stock characters—and ultimately buffoons, as in the *Saga of Grettir the Strong*. One of the last Family Sagas, written in the 1300s, Grettir's is almost an anti-saga, in which the values of the Viking Age are indicted. Grettir takes no guff from berserks. This one was on horseback: “He began to howl loudly and bit the rim of his shield and pushed the shield all the way into his mouth and snapped at the corner of the shield and carried on furiously.” Grettir ran at him and kicked the shield. It “shot up into the berserk's mouth and ripped apart his jaws and his jawbone flopped down on his chest.” End of berserk.

Our Lewis rooks are not yet buffoons, but neither are they Odin's warriors. Instead of animal skins they wear long leather coats or gambesons; on three the coats are cross-hatched, as if depicting chain-mail. All carry kite-shaped Norman shields—not the round shields we envision ranked along the gunwales of a Viking ship. None of our rooks has a spear to shake: They're armed with rather more expensive swords, another sign that these are late-Norse warriors, not Viking Age berserks. All but one have helmets; the odd one wears a chain-mail coif. Nine helmets are pointy caps, most with earflaps; they might or might not have noseguards. Two are quite different: One looks like a bowl-hat, the other, a bucket. Some rooks are mustached and bearded, some clean-shaven. Their hair is cropped at the shoulders. Most glare straight ahead, one looks askance. They are stalwart, gruff, bold-looking bluffers, not terribly fierce, except for those four who are biting their shields. Beware: They are going berserk.

That one little detail, the berserk battle frenzy, marks these ivory warriors as men of the North: No other culture claims shield-biters. That and the material most are made of. “Fish teeth,” the sagas call it. We call it walrus tusk.

## TOOTHWALKERS

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In the farthest north, at the edge of the Ocean Called Dark, lie long sloping beaches where walrus haul themselves out of the sea in the thousands. The story of the Lewis chessmen originates here where these elephantine relatives of fur seals congregate to this day, heaping themselves upon each other, tumbled so tight that some snooze sitting up, grunting and sighing, while others, roaring the annoyance, lash out at their neighbors to gain more space. Some laze on their backs, their long tusks pricking the sky. Up to twelve feet long and ten in circumference, each walrus weighs a ton or more. Their hides are, in places, three inches thick, wrinkled and scarred and infested with ticks; beneath is a four-inch layer of fat. Their color varies from almost white, when they first wriggle out of the icy sea to a warm cinnamon brown, to pinkish if they overheat. Their heads are small, with wide, whiskery lips and tiny eyes; both male and female are tusked. All in all, they're silly-looking beasts, a favorite of cartoonists, who dress them in top hats.

They feed, for the most part, on clams. In 2001, for the first time, scientists filmed them eating in the wild: The beasts dived down to the seafloor and stood on their heads, "with their tusks resting like a sledge on the bottom." Waving one flipper over the sand, or squirting water jets from their lips, and grubbing with their whiskery vibrissae in the sediment, they uncovered clams' siphons, then sucked out the soft parts, leaving the clamshells, for the most part, behind. While bivalves make up most of their diet, walruses also eat worms, snails, soft-shell crabs, shrimp, sea cucumbers, and slow-moving fish. Some acquire a taste for seal, or small whales. Others eat seabirds or scavenge dead carcasses.

They are "filled with malice and curiosity," say twentieth-century walrus hunters, and highly dangerous at sea or on land, being prone to attack unprovoked. Startle them on their sunning grounds and they will stampede, humping panic-stricken into the sea to bob and duck and peer, blowing spray and sniffing the wind for an enemy to attack. In the sea their bulk is no handicap. They are streamlined killing machines. They will grab a seal and squeeze it to death. "After that they rip off the blubber fat and then eat the lot, skin and all," a hunter wrote in 1958. "I heard of a herd of walrus chasing a bear on to a rotten ice-floe. They then attacked the ice with their tusks, smashing it to pieces so that the bear fell into the water. The rest was a gory turmoil."

Said an eyewitness from 1914, "Our fragile craft would not have lasted a second if they had come for us."

And they are known to go for boats: "Up they came again immediately around the boat," wrote the polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen in the late 1800s. "They stood up in the water, bellowed and roared till the air trembled, threw themselves forward toward us, then rose up again, and new bellowings filled the air. . . . Any moment we might expect to have a walrus tusk or two through the boat, or to be heaved up and capsized."

One hunter's brother in the 1950s was taken right out of the boat: "He was standing in the prow of his boat, harpoon at the ready, when a great brute leapt out of the sea, struck at him viciously, and

carried him off to sea. They never saw any more of him.”

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Even if you are not hunting them, they might be hunting you; wrote the same author:

A Dane I knew came across some walruses one autumn in Germania Harbour. They caught sight of him and disappeared. Cursing his luck, our friend started to walk on, when to his surprise and horror there was a rending crack under his very feet, and a huge tusky head broke through the ice and stared at him. For a moment he stood rooted to the spot, then made off as fast as his feet could carry him towards the safety of the shore. As he ran, his footsteps were dogged, and even anticipated, by more resounding ice-cracks as a succession of hairy heads raised themselves from the depths to stare at him.

The Dane gained the land, but even a beached walrus can move fast and kill efficiently. “A eyewitness says that he once saw a polar bear stalk a young walrus and imprudently spring within reach of the maternal guardian,” reports the hunter from 1914. “One drop of her mighty head buried the long tusks in his body and a few more blows ended the combat before his teeth or claws could seriously damage her thick hide.” In his *Description of the Northern Peoples* of 1555, the Swedish antiquarian Olaus Magnus remarked of the walrus, “If it glimpses a man on the seashore and can catch him, it jumps on him swiftly, rends him with its teeth, and kills him in an instant.”

Viking walrus hunters had no harpoons. In the absence of any historical sources, we can only guess how they hunted these dangerous beasts. Most likely not at sea, as dead walruses sink. If wounded on the ice, a dying beast will, with one twist, reach the water—and sink. On land the odds are highest in recovering the kill. Hunters in 1775 used lances and big dogs—both of which the Vikings possessed—and waited for a dark night and a wind from the sea. Then, with the help of their fearless elkhound, sixteen men “cut” a herd of seven or eight thousand walruses, pushing into its midst, driving some of the beasts into the sea and the others farther inland, up the slope of the beach until “the darkness of the night deprives them of every direction to the water, so that they stray about and are killed at leisure, those that are nearest the shore being the first victims.” Once the walruses’ escape to sea is blocked by a wall of carcasses, the hunters can take their time spearing the ones trapped on land. The best attack is a blow to the back of the head, just behind the tiny earhole—then the lance will pierce the brain and the walrus will drop down dead. Otherwise the writhing, bellowing, thick-skinned monster is very difficult to dispatch. It can suffer any number of jabs to the body and still fight back. This group bagged fifteen hundred. A hunt recorded in 1603 killed between seven hundred and a thousand walruses in under seven hours. An observer in 1858 noted that “when drenched with blood and exhausted,” one group of hunters returned to their ship, had their dinner, resharpened their lances, and went back to the killing fields refreshed; their final tally was nine hundred dead walruses. “In all my sporting life,” he says, “I never saw anything to equal the wild excitement of these hunts.” The men had gone berserk.

Our word *walrus* comes from the Old Norse for whale, *hvalr*, and horse, *hross*. In the Icelandic sagas, the walrus is called a small whale, but it’s hard to see what’s horselike about this sea mammal—it weighs twice as much as a Viking Age steed. The “whale-horse” was renamed “toothwalker” *Odobenus*, by taxonomists in the 1700s who thought walruses used their ten- to thirty-inch-long tusks



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