

II.

NOTES ON THE LEWIS CHESSMEN. BY CAPTAIN F. W. L. THOMAS, R.N.,
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In the spring of the year 1831 a large number of ivory chessmen were found in the sands of Uig, in Lewis. They were made the subject of a very learned essay by Sir F. Madden, in the 24th volume of the "Archæologia;" and Dr D. Wilson has a condensed account of them in his "Prehistoric Annals of Scotland." Sir F. Madden appears to think the chessmen to be of Icelandic origin, while Dr Wilson supposes them to have been manufactured nearer home.

In some manuscript volumes of legends and traditions of the Lewis, there is an account of the way by which these ivory figures came into the Lewis, but, unfortunately, there is not a hint as to the place

from whence they were brought. The tradition is to the following effect:—

THE UIG CHESSMEN.

“George Mor Mackenzie was tacksman of the farm of Balnakill and other lands, in the parish of Uig; and at one time he had yeld cattle at a remote shieling in the southern end of the parish, called Aird Bheag, near the entry to Loch Resort. Mackenzie employed a young man to herd the cattle there; and on a stormy night a ship was driven ashore at Aird Bheag.

“On the following morning, Mackenzie’s herd saw from a hiding-place a sailor swimming ashore with a small bag upon his back. The herd pursued the sailor, overtook and slew him without ceremony, hoping to find riches and money on him. Burying the sailor in a peat-moss, he went to Balnakill to inform his master of the fate of the ship, advising him to kill the crew, and possess himself of the wealth the ship was supposed to contain. But Mackenzie reprimanded his herd for this barbarous advice, and directed him by no means to do them harm, but to conduct the survivors to his house. So the crew all safely arrived at Balnakill, excepting the sailor whom the herd had murdered. Mackenzie showed all manner of kindness to the strangers, who stayed about a month with him, and in that time they saved as much from the ship as more than satisfied Mackenzie for their keep.

“When the shipwrecked seamen left the country, the wicked herd, always afraid of detection, though living in a remote corner of the parish, went to where he had concealed the bag for the sake of which he had murdered the sailor, to examine the contents. These turned out to be carved relics of various descriptions, and fearing the figures might be turned to proof against him, he travelled not less than ten miles in a dark night, and buried the carved images in a sand-bank in the Mains of Uig. This herd never prospered thereafter, but went on from bad to worse, until, for his abuse of women, he was sentenced to be hanged on the Gallows Hill, at Stornoway. When he was brought forth for execution, he told of many wicked things which he had done, and, among others, how he had murdered the sailor, and where he had buried the images.

“Thereafter, in A.D. 1831, Malcolm Macleod, tenant of Penny Donald, in Uig, found upwards of eighty of these carved relics; and those images were sold in Edinburgh by the late Captain Ryrie, for L.30, for the above Malcolm Macleod.”

Such is the tradition noted by Mr Morrison of Stornoway, who was for many years a resident in the parish of Uig, and was intimately acquainted with the folk-lore of that district. From another part of the manuscript I learn the George Mor was one of those to whom the Tutor of Kintail gave encouragement to settle in the Lewis after its subjugation by the Mackenzies. George Mor was one of the principal tacksmen, a rich as well as a valiant man, a powerful swordsman, and a dexterous marksman with a bow.

The final conquest of the Lewis took place about 1613 or 1614, so that an interval of about 200 years must have occurred between the traditional shipwreck and the finding of the chessmen in the Sands of Uig.

There seems to have been a considerable trade passing the islands at that time, as is proved by the frequent complaints of piracy; and without implicitly accepting all the circumstances of the narrative, it gives probably a correct explanation of how the chessmen were brought into the Lewis.

Mr JOHN STUART thought that Dr. D. Wilson had been entirely successful in rescuing these relics from the Scandinavian origin attributed to them, on considerations touching the style of ornamentation, which seemed so like that of the Norman era, as well as relating to the armour, dress, and contour of the figures, which resembled other remains of art in this country of the twelfth century.