

DATASHEET 35

Medieval Stylised Chess Pieces

by

Andy Chapman

*Northamptonshire Archaeology, 2 Bolton House, Wootton Hall Park,
Northampton, NN4 8BE*

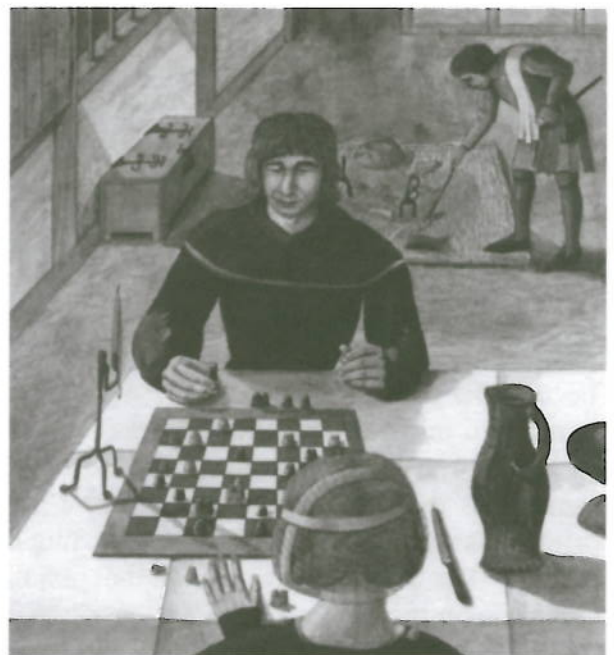
The object of this *Datasheet* is to bring together some of the dispersed data on medieval stylised chess pieces, to illustrate the range of forms and decorative styles, and also to examine some simple pieces that appear to represent the most basic level of chess piece manufacturing. A comprehensive bibliography is also provided.

The game of chess had originated in India by the 6th century AD, and spread through the Islamic world to reach northern Europe via the Arabs in the later 10th century (Stratford 1997). It directly supplanted the popular Scandinavian war-game of *taefl* or *hnefatafl* (MacGregor 1985, 137-9), and rose rapidly in popularity as the war-game of the educated; it would have been played in every manor house (see Fig. 1).

The characters of chess

Chess is unique among popular board-games in possessing a complex group of characters that require at least five distinctively shaped pieces to portray them: king/queen, bishop, knight, rook and pawn. In the medieval period, as today, this was achieved in one of two ways. Firstly, there were large and finely carved anthropomorphic figures, often in elephant or walrus ivory, depicting the characters of the medieval court of the day.

These may be typified by the famous Lewis chessmen, which probably date to the 12th century (Stratford 1997).



*Figure 1: Playing chess in the medieval hall at Tempsford, Bedfordshire
(reconstruction drawing by Alex Thorne)*

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Secondly, there were the smaller and more simply fashioned stylised pieces in bone, antler, jet and wood that form the subject of this *Datasheet* (Fig. 2). When chess moved from India into the Moslem world, the prohibition on figurative imagery made it necessary to produce distinctive stylised images, and these forms were adopted and modified in the European stylised pieces. As the origin of these designs comes from a different set of chess characters to those familiar to us, a summary of their characteristics is a necessary starting point to the identification of individual pieces.

King and queen (vizier)

The Arabic representation is of an Indian king mounted on an elephant, with the upper part of the piece representing a throne or *howdah* and the lower part the elephant. The basic form comprises a cylindrical or square base with the upper part cut back to form a throne represented by an inverted, flat-topped V-shape (Pieces 1, 5 & 9). They are also fitted with a small knob on top, frequently elaborated and given stylised or even naturalistic facial features. The queen, or vizier in Indian and Moslem pieces, is identical in shape but slightly smaller.

Bishop (Indian elephant)

The Arabic word for this piece, *Alfil*, was westernised into *aufin* or *alfin*. It was only in the 17th century that it became referred to in literature as the bishop, although it had been portrayed as such on figurative pieces much earlier. The Arabic portrayal of the Indian elephant comprised two forward projecting humps, presumably representing stylised tusks, set on a cylindrical body (Pieces 2 and 6).

Knight (horseman)

The abstract horse of the Arabic piece is quite easily recognised. It comprises a shield-shaped head, often with the addition of ring-and-dot eyes, set on a plain cylindrical body (Pieces 3, 7 & 11). This stylised design still forms the basis for classic modern knights.

Rook/castle (chariot)

The Arabic *Rukhkh* was a camel-mounted soldier but the piece was represented as an abstract form of the Persian chariot, depicted by a deep V-shaped notch on a plain rectangular block (Pieces 4, 8 & 12). This turreted top may have resulted in Europeans mistaking it for a castle.

Pawn (foot-soldier)

Even in otherwise ornately carved sets, the pawn was portrayed as a simple block or pillar with minimal elaboration (Pieces 13-15).

Excavated chess pieces

Stylised chess pieces are uncommon but not rare finds. Over fifty examples are known from England and there are numerous comparable pieces from the Continent. They made their first appearance in archaeological literature nearly 160 years ago, with the illustration of a rook in bone from Woodperry, Oxfordshire (Archaeological Journal 1846, 122) and a knight and pawn, both in jet, from excavations at the Mote Hill, Warrington (Kendrick 1852, 62-4). Other discoveries followed through the later 19th century. These included a bishop in antler from Northampton Castle (Piece 2), which prompted the publication of a brief overview illustrating pieces of both English and continental origin (Dryden 1882). A more comprehensive summary was provided in the catalogue of ivory carvings at the British Museum (Dalton 1909).

The most significant single find to date is the group of several figures from a single set of exceptional size, carved in whale bone, from Witchampton Manor, Dorset (Dalton 1927; Stratford 1997, fig. 46). Further individual finds were made through the mid 20th century, including examples from York (Piece 12, Waterman 1959, 94 & fig. 21) and Rievaulx Abbey (Piece 8, Dunning 1965, 61 & fig. 8), but from the mid 1960s onward the number of known pieces has doubled.

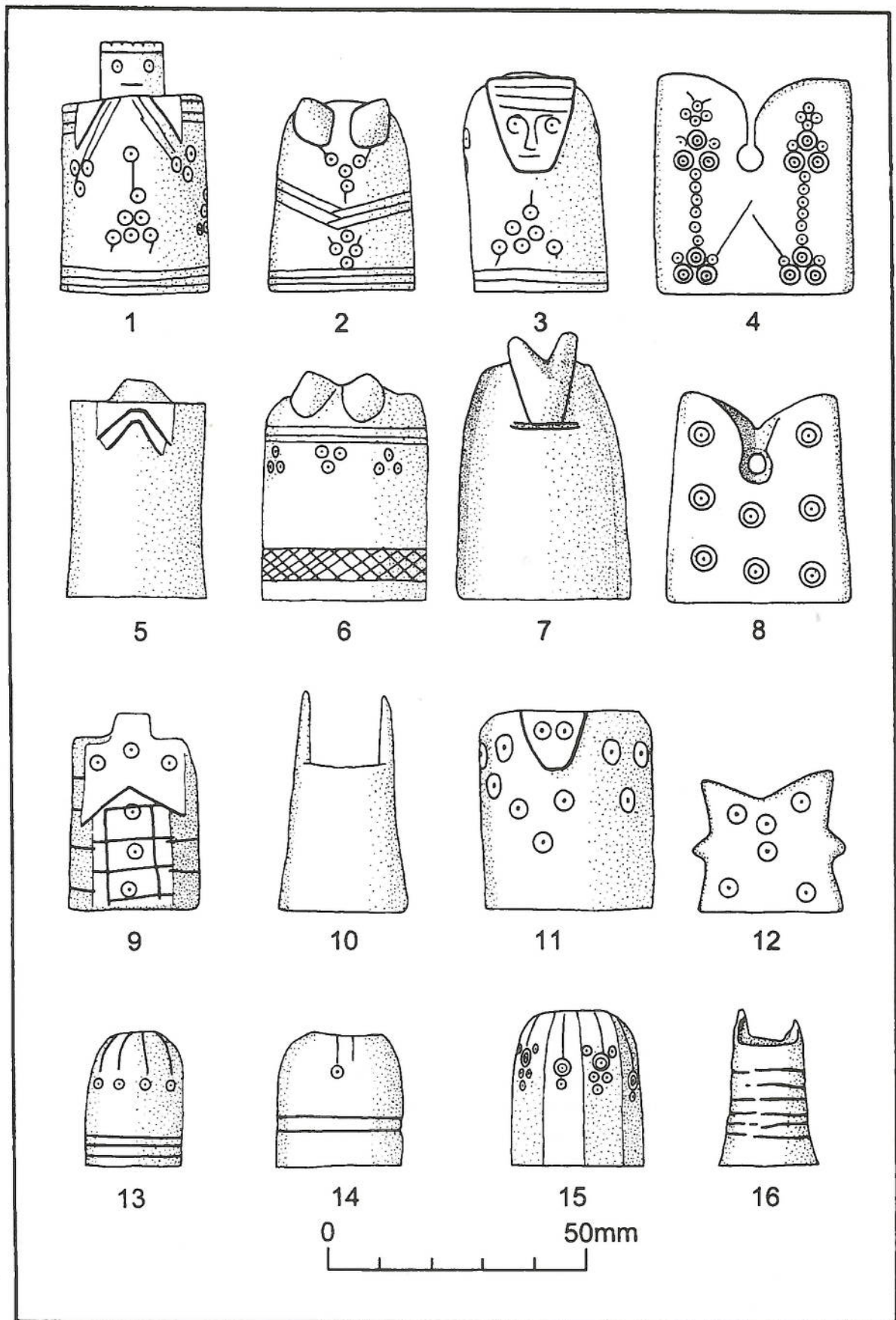


Figure 2: Chess pieces discussed in text. Kings/queens: Pieces 1, 5 & 9; bishops: Pieces 2, 6 & ?10; knights: Pieces 3, 7 & 11; rooks: Pieces 4, 8, 12 & ?16; pawns: Pieces 13-15. See List of Illustrations, below, for full details.

Excavations in the major cities and towns, including London (Egan 1998), Winchester (Biddle 1990, 704) and Gloucester (Brown 1983; Sue Byrne pers. comm.), have produced many of these finds. Others have come from rural manorial sites or deserted settlements, including examples from Northamptonshire (Piece 11, Bryant and Steane 1971, 66-8, fig. 19; Chapman 1998-9; and Piece 16, Chapman forthcoming), Buckinghamshire (Piece 5, Levenson Gower 1993 and 1994) and Bedfordshire (Piece 4, Chapman 2000). Others are still recovered as chance finds, such as a pawn from Gloucestershire (Piece 13) found in a lorry-load of gravel (Sue Byrne pers. comm.) and a king/queen from Habrough, South Humberside found in the upcast spoil from a pipe-trench in the churchyard (Leahy 1988).

whale bone pieces from Witchampton Manor, Dorset, and a rook from Tempsford Manor, Bedfordshire (Fig. 3, Piece 4, Chapman 2000).

Materials, manufacturing and decoration

The illustrated pieces have been chosen to display both the standard forms and the range of variations in form and decoration that may be present. At one extreme there are elaborate pieces, such as the king from London or the knight from Gloucester (Pieces 1 & 3), which leave no doubt as to their identity. At the other extreme, the king/queen from Milton Keynes and the knight from Gloucester (Pieces 5 & 7) have reduced both form and decoration to an extreme level of abstraction.

The majority of pieces are worked on lengths of bone or antler, in the range of 25-35 mm diameter and standing 40-45 mm high. The pawns are of smaller size, 20-30 mm diameter and 25-33 mm high. Pieces are generally circular in section, respecting the raw material, although some rooks show an attempt to form a squarer block (e.g. Egan 1998, 293, fig. 222, no. 959). With bone and antler pieces the soft cancellous tissue may be removed and the hollow core filled with hard plugs of bone or antler inserted in both the base and the top, although sometimes these have been subsequently lost. In kings/queens the upper plugs are raised to form the knob or head. Only a few pieces are formed on solid blocks of bone, including the exceptionally large

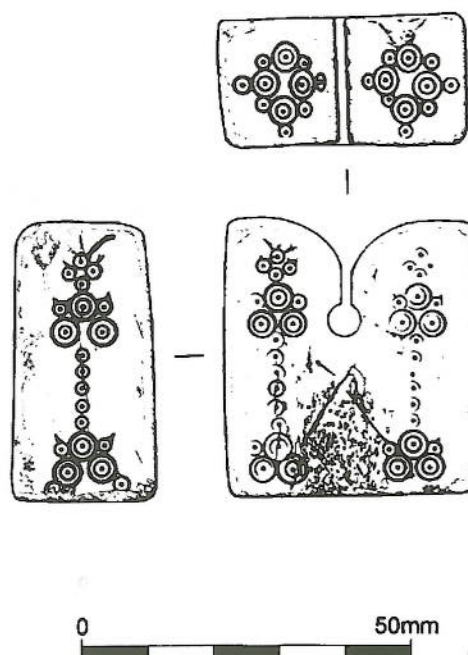


Figure 3: The bone rook from Tempsford Hall, Bedfordshire (drawn by Mark Roughley)

The typical bone or antler piece is decorated to varying degrees of complexity with patterns of ring-and-dot decoration, and with encircling and vertical incised lines. Illustrations 1-3 show closely comparable schemes, comprising triangular groups of ring-and-dot motifs, with short incised horns projecting from some, and multiple incised lines encircling the base and the central or upper part of the body. These decorative schemes are usually repeated on the sides and back, with incised lines often running across the plugged top - a particularly common feature on pawns (Pieces 13-15). The multi-faceted pawn from Winchester (Piece 15) must come from a particularly elaborate set. The Tempsford Manor rook (Piece 4) also has an exceptionally complex decorative scheme repeated on both faces and both ends, with a further pattern on the curving upper surfaces, giving a total of 156 ring-and-dot motifs (112 single and 44 double). A couple of pieces have incised latticework panels encircling the base, such as the bishop from London (Piece 6).

The heads of the kings/queens and the knights may have blank facial outlines (Pieces 5 & 7), simple stylised ring-and-dot eyes (Pieces 1 & 11), or more fully realised features in incised line work (Piece 3). A king/queen from Habrough, South Humberside is exceptional in possessing boldly carved facial features framed by a mail coif and surmounted by a crown; in imitation of figurative pieces.

The pieces in jet (8, 9 & 12) have been fashioned on rectangular or square blocks, sometimes with chamfered corners, and they often display evidence of the original knife trimming. There is a similar use of ring-and-dot decoration, and some pieces have elaborate patterns of incised line work, such as the square grid pattern on the king from Milton Keynes (Piece 9). Pieces in wood from London tend to be undecorated, possessing only the essential diagnostic elements, such as the stylised elephant tusks (Egan 1998, 293, fig. 222, no. 957).

A final point to consider is the practical need to be able to differentiate between the opposing pieces during a game. A simple suggestion would be to assume that bone and antler pieces formed the white sets and jet the black. This may have occurred, but from an aesthetic point of view this would have been unsatisfactory as they are stylistically and decoratively quite distinct. It is perhaps more likely that sets were worked in a single material with one half being artificially coloured. A pawn from Ludgershall Castle, Wiltshire retained traces of red colouring material in the incised decoration (MacGregor 1985, 137) and it was suggested that two pieces from Witchampton, Dorset may have been deliberately blackened by scorching (Dalton 1927, 77), but such examples are rare and the incised decoration would need to be carefully examined for the presence of such colouring material prior to any vigorous cleaning of newly discovered pieces.

Possible sheep bone chess pieces

A knight from Lyveden, Northamptonshire was worked on cattle bone, but while the

cancellous tissue had been removed it was not plugged (Piece 11). This piece appears to represent a simpler level of manufacturing and provides a link with a series of even simpler gaming pieces worked on lengths of sheep bone.

A bone object from the manor house at West Cotton, Raunds, Northamptonshire, is interpreted as a chess piece on the basis of the stylised shaping of its top and the incised decoration on the body (Piece 16 & Chapman forthcoming). The bifurcated top suggests that it represented a rook. A second similar, unfinished piece had longer projecting horns set on the front, and may be interpreted as a bishop. These had both been knife-cut, with the scars still clearly visible even after much polishing through handling. A piece from Deddington Castle, Oxfordshire (Richard Ivens pers. comm.) provides a very close parallel to the West Cotton pieces, as does a worked bone object from Thetford (Rogerson and Dallas 1984, 182, fig. 199, 96) published as a possible cord-making tool (Piece 10). It is suggested that these simple sheep bone pieces form the very basic level of chess piece, home-made with minimal diagnostic features and little if any decorative elaboration. Given the simplicity of these pieces, it seems likely that other examples may have been overlooked during excavation or been left to languish in the realm of unidentified, and unreported, bone objects. As the examples offered are all based on bifurcated tops, it would be useful to find other pieces represented in similarly simple fashion to confirm this interpretation.

Status and date

Stylised chess pieces are typically smaller and less well finished than early figurative pieces and appear to represent a secondary level, perhaps used in the lesser manors or on less formal occasions at higher social levels. Uniquely, the stylised pieces in whale bone from Witchampton Manor, Dorset stand around 110 mm high (70 mm for the pawns), showing that stylised pieces could occasionally match figurative chessmen in terms of scale and status.

Many of the pieces with a secure provenance come from sites of evident status: e.g. Old Sarum, Hampshire; Northampton Castle; Ludgershall Castle, Wiltshire; Deddington Castle, Oxfordshire; Rievaulx Abbey, Yorkshire; Witchampton Manor, Dorset; Tempsford Manor, Bedfordshire and The Prebendal Manor, Nassington, Northamptonshire. A few examples are from sites at the lower end of the manorial system, such as the simple pieces from West Cotton, Raunds, Northamptonshire. Others come from rural settlement sites, such as the simple bone knight from the potter's workshop in the village of Lyveden, Northamptonshire or the jet king/queen from a croft at Great Linford, Milton Keynes. These latter pieces do suggest that the game was played at lower levels of society.

Very few pieces come from securely dated contexts, but a range spanning the 11th to 14th centuries is indicated. At present there are too few dated examples to determine any chronological variations by decorative style.

Conclusions

While the presence of chess pieces provides a simple statement of education and status, it has been suggested that there may be very simply fashioned stylised pieces providing evidence for the playing of chess in the minor manor houses and within the villages and towns. It would therefore be of interest for finds

researchers to look again at unidentified worked bone objects as there may be further examples awaiting recognition. The likelihood of this can be seen in the representation of pawns, which must have comprised half of all manufactured pieces but provide only 20% of those recovered, probably as result of both a lower survival rate and a lower incidence of recognition.

Hopefully, this *Datasheet* may prove useful in aiding identification. The author would be particularly interested to hear of any further pieces, particularly possible examples of simple, sheep bone pieces, and would also be grateful for a copy of any illustrations and reports on any pieces not listed in the bibliography.

Acknowledgements

Whilst working on the finds from the deserted medieval hamlet of West Cotton, Raunds, Tora Hylton drew my attention to the key publications relating to chess pieces, and these have provided the core of the material presented in this *Datasheet*. In addition, a number of individuals were more than helpful in providing access to pieces or illustrations of pieces. They include Jane Baille (Prebendal Manor, Nassington, Northamptonshire), Sue Byrne (Gloucester pieces), Richard Ivens (Deddington, Oxfordshire), Kevin Leahy (North Lincolnshire Museum, Scunthorpe) and Ros Tyrrel (Milton Keynes pieces).

List of illustrations

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| 1 King/queen | Body: London, Seal House (Egan 1998, 292 & fig. 221, no. 956)
Head: Salisbury (MacGregor 2001, 15-16 & fig. 1) |
| 2 Bishop | Northampton Castle (Sharp 1882, 248 & pl. 5) |
| 3 Knight | Gloucester, East Gate (Brown 1983, 190 & fig. 109) |
| 4 Rook | Tempsford Manor, Bedfordshire (Chapman 2000) |
| 5 King/queen | Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire (Levenson Gower 1994, 33-5 & fig. 18) |
| 6 Bishop | London (London Museums Catalogues 1927, 46-7 & fig. 26.2) |
| 7 Knight | Gloucester, Southgate (Sue Byrne pers. comm.) |
| 8 Rook (jet) | Rievaulx Abbey, Yorkshire (Dunning 1965, 61 & fig. 8) |
| 9 King/queen (jet) | Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire (Levenson Gower 1993, 167-8 & fig. 76) |
| 10 Bishop ? | Thetford, Norfolk (Rogerson and Dallas 1984, 182 & fig. 199, no. 96) |
| 11 Knight | Lyveden, Northamptonshire (Bryant and Steane 1971, 66-8, fig. 19 & pl. 18) |

12 Rook (jet)	York (Waterman 1959, 94 & fig. 21)
13 Pawn	Gloucester (Sue Byrne pers. comm.)
14 Pawn	London, Swan Lane (Egan 1998, 294 & fig. 222, no. 960)
15 Pawn	Winchester (Biddle 1990, 704-05 & fig. 196)
16 Rook ?	West Cotton, Raunds, Northamptonshire (Chapman forthcoming)

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