

A Brief History of Chessmen

The exact origins of the game of chess are lost to the sands of time. There are references to the predecessor of the game we play today from around 600 CE in Sassanid, Persia. Written descriptions of the game, *chatrang*, leave no doubt this was an early incarnation of chess. However, actual physical chessmen only exist starting from the 11th century with the **Charlemagne** chessmen.



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The Charlemagne chessmen, c. 11th century

The set originally contained 30 pieces (kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, France), but after the French Revolution, only about half of them have survived. The chariot at left is today's rook, the elephants are now bishops. Note the detail, each of these chess pieces is a miniature work of art! The king seems to come with his own throne room!



The Lewis chessmen, c. 12th century

Another candidate for oldest chess set is the **Lewis** chessmen. These chessmen were discovered in 1831 on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. They date back to the 12th century. There are 78 chessmen, along with other game pieces. Most are currently housed in the British Museum, the remainder at the National Museum of Scotland. Most of the men are represented by standing or seated figures (except the knights, which are mounted on diminutive horses). The bishops look like bishops! Only the pawns are faceless objects.

Almost all of these chessmen are carved from walrus ivory, with a few made from whale teeth. Four of the rooks are shown as wild-eyed berserkers biting their shields with battle fury. Some pieces bore traces of red stain when found, possibly indicating that red and white were used to distinguish the two sides, rather than the black and white generally used in modern chessmen.



French Regency chessmen, c. 17th and 18th centuries

Preeminent style of chess pieces dating back to the 18th century, and associated with the French Regency period (the days of Richelieu and Mazarin). This style was also adopted in several other countries. No weights, no felted bottoms. The knights are two piece (as opposed to being carved from a single piece of wood), and the bishop is just a tall pawn.

The 19th century - a mixture, then a standard

From here we jump to the 19th century. Chess was becoming increasingly popular, there were tournaments being organized, and there were unofficial "world champions" springing up. It was during the first part of the 19th century that many similar chessmen made their debut. Most of these sets were made of wood or ivory that was turned on a lathe (and had hand carved horse heads for knights).



Thomas Lund chessmen, c. 1820

Many chess sets from this era was designed by Thomas Lund. Thomas Lund manufactured chess sets from the early 1800's until his death in 1843. One thing all of these sets had in common, was a tall, narrow king and queen. Note the flag on the rook's parapet, with cannons extending outward. At this time, King's are topped with either a cross or a bead.



Thomas Lund chessmen c. 1830

Another Thomas Lund chess set, this one made from ivory and involving scrimshaw work. The tall, slender pieces are readily identifiable. Since chess clocks had not yet been invented, there was little chance that this set could be damaged in a game of blitz chess.



Biedermeier chessmen, c. 1838

The Biedermeier chess set was a luxury set produced in Germany and Austria during the Victorian era, starting in the late 1830's. Brass weights at the bottom helped keep these from being top heavy.



Grand Cigar Divan chessmen c. 1840

The Grand Cigar Divan was a London coffee house that served as an important venue for chess in the early 19th century. These chessmen were created for use in that club. Note that while these pieces are tall and narrow (the approach to chessmen in the first half of the 19th century), they have a slightly lower center of gravity than other sets from this era.



Barleycorn chessmen, c. 1820-1845

These elaborate chessmen were hand carved from bone. Once again, the pieces are tall and slender. This British pattern was introduced when trade declined between France and England. Once again the rook has a flag and the king has a cross. Note that the queen is slightly taller than the king.



St George chessmen c. 1848

The St George chessmen was designed by John Calvert for the St George Chess Club in England. It was very popular before being displaced by the Staunton pattern.

The year is **1849**. People realize that the vast number of different chessmen patterns makes it problematic to switch between sets. Further, the sets of the day tend to be top-heavy and unwieldy in actual play, frequently toppling over and even breaking. And, they were expensive! A journalist, Nathaniel Cook, set about to design a new chess set that would:

- Be easy to manufacture
- Be sturdy
- Be difficult to tip over
- Have quickly recognizable pieces
- Be cost effective

He came up with this:



Original Staunton Pattern chessmen, c. 1849

Cook took this pattern to John Jaques of London, purveyors of fine games for manufacture. Cook also went to Howard Staunton, considered the best player in the world at that time, and got him to endorse the pattern (much like someone would get Tiger Woods to endorse a golf club today). The pattern was an instant success and quickly took the world by storm. The pattern became synonymous with the name Staunton. Today, all serious chess is played on Staunton pattern chessmen.



Contemporary Staunton chessmen, c. 2000

Today, the best wood chessmen in the world are manufactured in India. There are other countries producing as well, but India is where the artisans seem to be.

Tournament chessmen are made from two basic materials: plastic and wood. While bone was used in the 19th century, it, along with glass, stone, metal, ceramic, etc, is no longer used in tournament chessmen.

Club and portable sets (a set is both the chessmen and the board) are typically made from plastic. The king in a tournament grade set is *about* 3 ³/₄" (95mm), and the rest of the pieces are in proportion.

Sets for the home, or for national and international tournaments, are made from wood. The white pieces are made from boxwood, and the black pieces are made from either boxwood (stained, dyed or painted black), rosewood (a nice red grained wood) or ebony (the best, the same black wood piano keys are made from). Genuine ebony is very pricey, but is really nice if your wallet can afford it.

David Zechiel
david@zechiel.com
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