

# Scandinavian Myth on Viking-period Stone Sculpture in England

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## I

Some 20 years ago I tried to assemble together illustrations of Norse mythology on Viking-age sculpture in England (Bailey 1980, esp. 101-42). In so doing I drew heavily on the work of a series of nineteenth-century scholars. Some, like Bishop G. F. Browne and Professor George Stephens, were national, indeed international, figures but the essential pioneering investigations were often the unsung achievement of local antiquarians like the Cumbrian doctor, Charles Parker (1896) and the Aspatria vicar, W. S. Calverley (1899). That 1980 publication was followed by two papers to the 6th International Saga Conference (Lindow 1987; McKinnell 1987) in which the carvings were used to examine - and reject - the case for an insular Northumbrian locale for the shaping of Norse mythology. Much of the same material was subsequently invoked by Ohlgren (1988) in an article in *Mediaevastik* which was concerned with conversion methodologies. Since then, however, these sculptures have not attracted any further detailed attention; it is perhaps therefore time to re-visit

some of the issues involved, particularly now that the survey work (if not full publication) of the British Academy's Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture is so far advanced.

## II

The first point to make is a comfortingly negative one. Apart from a major find at York Minster showing scenes from the Sigurd story (Lang 1991, ill. 145), no new pieces which might be interpreted as depicting mythology have emerged. The English stone carving corpus of mythology remains therefore relatively small - a conclusion which is not perhaps very surprising given that the overall incidence of figural sculpture represents a minute proportion of the totality of Viking-age carvings in England.

More positively, however, we do now have further examples of secular martial statements involving depictions of armed warriors. Apart from geographical erratics like the man on a shaft from Brailsford in Derbyshire (Kendrick 1948, pl. XLVI), these figures can now be seen to occur in geographical clusters, often reflecting the work of a single sculptor. To the well-known Middleton group (Lang 1991, ill. 676, 686, 688) we can now add another example from Old Malton (Lang 1991, 37, 197; ill. 736) - where the disputed 'throne' element suspected at Middleton is more clearly depicted - together with a seated figure from Holme upon Spalding Moor near York which is clearly linked to the iconography of the familiar Nunburnholme portrait (Lang 1991, 38, ill. 483, 721). There is nothing new to report in the Sockburn/Brompton/Kirkleavington area of North Yorkshire (Bailey 1980, pls. 54, 59; Lang 1991, 37) but, in the Wharfe valley, the Ilkley warrior (Collingwood 1915, 228) is now joined by an impressive armed man from Weston, carved on a re-worked Anglian monument (Bailey 1981, 92). Though we now recognise that secular portraits did exist in stone carving of the pre-Viking period (e.g., Bewcastle: Bailey 1996, 67-9; Karkov 1997), the popularity of this warrior theme in the 10th century undoubtedly reflects an assertion of distinctive aristocratic military ideals on the part of the new economic and political leadership in Northumbria.

Depictions of Sigurd and Weland have long attracted attention (for earlier studies see: Lang 1976; Bailey 1980, 103-25; Margeson 1980; 1983). For some time it has been recognised that there was a distinct 'winged flight' Weland iconography in England which echoed the organisation of elements seen in Scandinavia (Lang 1976; Bailey 1980, figs. 16, 17). That there was an equivalent widespread Sigurd iconography can now no longer be disputed. In English art, as in Scandinavia, we are dealing with a very narrow selection from the complete Sigurd narrative but, allowing for the constraints imposed by the restrictive format of the insular cross-shaft, it is clear that the constituent elements of certain scenes were represented in a consistent manner across

England, the Isle of Man - and, later, into Scandinavia (Bailey 1980, pl. 30; Margeson 1980, figs 9, 10). Thus the main figure from the heart-roasting scene is always shown in profile, sucking his thumb, even when the roasting element is not present (Malew, Halton, Ripon, Kirby Hill, York, Jader: Bailey 1980, figs. 15, 21, 22, pl. 30; Lang 1991, ill. 145); at Kirk Andreas, Halton and York portions of the dragon's heart are held over the fire in the same 'kebab' fashion (Margeson 1980, figs. 1, 6; Lang 1991, ill. 145); the accompanying headless figure of Reginn at Halton, Kirby Hill and York is repeated in Sweden (Bailey 1980, figs. 15, 22, pl. 30; Lang 1991, ill. 145); a horse with a lumpy burden on its back appears at York and in Sweden (Lang 1991, ill. 145; Bailey 1980, pl. 30; Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1981, pl. LXI); and there is even an abbreviated Sigurd-less version of the dragon slaying which is common to both England and Viking-age Russia (Bailey 1980, figs. 19a-b). Such standard forms were presumably transmitted through perishable media like fabric decoration, or the shield paintings and wall carvings described in texts like *Ragnarsdrapa*, *Haustlong* or *Húsdrápa*. Whatever the means of circulation, however, Northumbrian sculpture shows that there was a recognised Sigurd iconography available by the first half of the tenth century.

Other claims of mythological depictions inevitably remain disputed. Tyr's binding of Fenrir, however, still seems the best interpretation of a scene on a Sockburn hogback (Lang 1972; Bailey 1980, 134-6; Cramp 1984, pl. 146). And there can be no doubt about Thor's fishing expedition at Gosforth (Bailey 1980, 131-2; Bailey and Cramp 1988, 108-9). More difficult are Northumbrian sculptural scenes for which no explanatory literary equivalent is available but whose elements can be paralleled in Scandinavia. The armed encounter on the side of a hogback from Lowther provides a good example; its composition, set above a (world-?) serpent enclosing the complete monument, is so like a scene on a stone from Larbro St Hammars that it is reasonable to suggest that both depict the same story (Bailey and Cramp 1988, ills. 444, 447; Bailey 1980, fig. 28, pl. 35). And the curious symbols which accompany the decoration on another hogback from Lowther are so closely paralleled on figural textiles from Oseberg as to suggest that the busts on the Cumbrian sculpture carried a significance beyond the purely ornamental (Bailey and Cramp 1988, ill. 450; Bailey 1980, fig. 29, pl. 34).

In yet other cases there is now no reason to believe that we are dealing with Scandinavian mythology at all. Thus many of the snake-wrestling scenes such as those from Gosforth and Great Clifton, often identified with the encounters of Ragnarøk, are more likely to be Hell scenes allied to the type seen in pre-Viking sculpture at Rothbury (Bailey and Cramp 1988, ills. 323, 326; Cramp 1984, ill. 1224; Bailey 1980, 140-2) - or draw upon the encounters with dragons and leviathans familiar from Isaiah, Job, the Psalms and the Book of Revelation. Even more clearly Christian is the figure from Kirklevington on whose shoulders perch two birds (Bailey 1980, pl. 57). Snorri describes Odin's

attendant ravens in this position but the character's dress is hardly appropriate to that god and the iconography can be readily matched on a 5th-century Christian tomb at Tabarka in Tunisia and on an 8th-century Augustine manuscript in the Vatican (Bailey 1996, 91).

### III

Scholarly interest in the range of mythological depictions on English sculpture has focussed mainly on the story of Ragnarøk at Gosforth (Bailey 1980, 125-31; Bailey and Cramp 1988, 100-104; Bailey 1996, 85-90). In 1980 I attempted to draw two other carvings into this discussion, a graffito from Skipwith in Yorkshire (Bailey 1980, pl. 35, 134; Lang 1991, 214-5) and a panel on a cross shaft from Ovingham in the Tyne valley with Heimdallr and the sun-swallowing wolf (Cramp 1984, ill. 1199; Bailey 1980, 133-4; Dronke 1996, VI, 71). Looking at all three together it is reasonable to argue that, though the evidence is thinly spread, it is geographically well distributed; this is a theme which seems to have caught interest across the whole of Northumbria. What is also noticeable is that this widespread interest remains very selective in terms of the total Ragnarøk narrative - as that full story can be inferred from *Völuspá* or as it was later codified by Snorri. The stress is always on the climactic encounter. And the third point to emerge from this grouping of the three English sculptures is that, unlike the case of Sigurd and Weland, there is little sign of an established iconography for Ragnarøk.

I begin with a dating issue. Neither Ovingham or Skipwith can be closely dated but for Gosforth we have a series of chronological pointers. In the 1970s Jim Lang and I recognised that the sculptor of the main cross at Gosforth also produced other carvings at the site; this conclusion was based on identities in handling of knotwork, figural depictions and zoomorphic themes, and included an analysis of cutting profiles and techniques such as the combination of chisel and punch (Bailey and Lang 1975; Bailey and Cramp 1988, 33). This identification of the 'Gosforth master', who worked for no-one else in the region, is significant for chronological purposes - as we will see. It also helps emphasise the fact that either the same patron, or someone associated with him, had a second sculptor working contemporaneously on related themes on the 'Warrior's Tomb' (Bailey and Cramp 1988, ill. 313-22); this evidence suggests that the local dynasty, controlling an important routeway, was intent on visually establishing its identity by reference to Scandinavian-based narratives.

Armed with the recognition of several works from the same hand we are in a strong position to establish the date of the Gosforth cross. It is, first, unlikely that it can date much before the middle of the second decade of the 10th century. The few hints we have in the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, a Durham document whose material goes back to the 10th century, indicates that the

region was relatively stable through the late 9<sup>th</sup> century but that there was both civil and ecclesiastical disruption in that south-west Cumbrian area in the 915-920 period (Bailey 1980, 35). Nor do I believe that we can put the carving very far into the second half of the 10th century. There is, first, the fact that the same sculptor carved the 'Saint's Tomb' hogback; Jim Lang's study of that form of monument strongly suggests, on both ornamental and distributional grounds, that the bulk of hogbacks were the product of a thirty-year period leading up to c. 950 (Lang 1984; 1991, 29). This dating is supported by the use of various forms of vertebral ring-chain on the cross. A recent Newcastle thesis on the Borre style has rightly shown that the ring chain, though often claimed as a Borre-style characteristic, is in fact not a Scandinavian-based motif but is essentially an insular phenomenon - but linked to that style (Richardson 1993). The Borre identification is still therefore relevant and, indeed, the multiple ring chain on the cylindrical section of the shaft gives the impression of differing planes of ornament which is characteristic of that style. The implication of this stylistic link is that the Gosforth cross must belong to the first half of the 10th century, when that style flourished. If we add to this catalogue of dating indicators the fact that the partial jaw-outlining of the cross's animals seems to be a local feature of the tenth-century 'circle-head school', then it seems reasonable to argue that the Gosforth master was working in the period c. 920-950. That dating, of course, carries some interesting implications in relation to our literary documents, whose recorded history begins much later and in other countries. Vitharr's rending of the wolf's jaw, for example, which figures in *Vafþrúðnismál* but not in *Völuspá*, can thus be traced back to at least the early tenth century (Dronke 1997, 149).

I noted earlier that placing Skipwith and Ovingham alongside Gosforth emphasises the apparent lack of a consistent Ragnarøk iconography. There is, perhaps one exception to this statement for, as Lang (1991, 214) has noted, the position of the foot of the ?Odin figure at Skipwith in relation to the beast attacking him is exactly matched at Kirk Andreas in the Isle of Man, though the Yorkshire graffito has none of the symbolism which accompanies the Manx figure (Graham-Campbell 1980, fig. 534a). This element apart, however, what distinguishes the three thematically-linked carvings is their lack of iconographic identity.

At Ovingham and Skipwith we cannot see how the selected pieces of the narrative are exploited because we lack the complete monument. At Gosforth this is not a problem and it is to Gosforth that I now turn (Bailey and Cramp 1988, ills. 288-308).

Here there is general agreement that, among the teeming ornament, it is possible to recognise the Ragnarøk themes of Vitharr's jaw rending, the bound Loki with his faithful wife Sigyn, and Heimdallr with his horn. Other elements are more difficult to identify. But I do wonder whether we are being too cautious in dismissing the figure of Tyr from the shaft's repertoire. The

horseman on the south side is distinguished by the fact that he has a bridal which is held by what appears to be a very short (admittedly left) arm. That figure occurs on the only side of the cross where a beast's jaws are bound, and he is set below a canine beast who has broken free from its bonds. All this strongly suggests that the ornament alludes to Tyr and the bound Fenrir, and that the beast immediately above is the figure of Garmr whose escape is a threatening refrain throughout the central stanzas of *Völuspá* - which Snorri tells us will slay the god at Ragnarök.

What I find interesting about this monument is the fact that it works by suggestions and gaps. It responds indeed to that approach which has proved so fruitful in examining pre-Viking Christian art, an approach which is based upon *ruminatio* - the monastic skill in reading, contemplating and digesting texts on which Dom Leclercq has written illuminatingly (Leclercq 1961; Bailey 1996, 61, 63). This skill is that of reflective reading of the scriptures, probing the implications of narratives and words, weighing all, in Dom Leclercq's words, 'in order to sound the depths of their full meaning' (Leclercq 1961, 90). This reflection is stimulated by reflecting on the puzzles posed by juxtapositions and is encouraged by thematic and verbal echoings. Studies of Anglian monuments, such as Ruthwell, have responded to the application of this contemplative methodology to visual 'texts' (see e.g.: Schapiro 1944; Henderson 1985; Meyvaert 1992; O Carragain 1986; 1987; 1988). At Gosforth we are clearly not presented with depictions of a straight sequential narrative. The monument works, rather, by suggestive juxtapositioning of scenes and thematic echoes (pigtailed attendant women; repeated horsemen; snakes; curved objects). This deliberately puzzling organisation is made even more complex by the fact that there is no panel division to define the boundaries of the depictions.

Where, then, are the puzzles and the unexpected juxtapositions at Gosforth? First there is the crucifixion scene. I have elsewhere suggested that its crossless figure of Christ derives from a metal openwork model circulating in Cumbria (Bailey and Cramp 1988, 103, 140-2) but the more intriguing feature of the composition is that it is set so low on the shaft. This is not the position in which that scene appears across the rest of Northumbrian sculpture in the 10th century; its unusual placing thus thrusts it into prominence and demands our thoughtful attention. Once focused on this highlighted scene, the reflective onlooker is then confronted by the unparalleled combination of its subsidiary figures. Normally Longinus, the spearman, would be partnered by Stephaton, the sponge bearer. Here, as I have argued, he is set against Mary Magdelene, carrying her alabastron with its long tapering neck. The manner in which she is drawn, with pigtail and trailing dress, is one which has a long history in Scandinavian art (e.g., Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1981, pls. XXIV, XXVI) but, to the ruminating onlooker, what would be more significant would be the challenge she presented to interpret her significance when paired with Longinus. Among the various meanings attached to this complex figure by the liturgy and the commentators,

she was a symbol of the converted gentiles who recognised Christ's divinity; this is the interpretation given by Bede in both his commentary on Luke and in one of his homilies (Hurst 1955, 227; Hurst 1960, 168). Longinus was a figure who was equally loaded with symbolism for the early Christian world but he, too, represented the recognition of Christ's godhead by the gentiles; in apocryphal narrative his eyes were literally opened by the flow of Christ's blood which, unusually in such scenes, is actually depicted here at Gosforth and thus leads us to this layer of meaning denoted by his presence.

A scene foregrounded by an usual placing thus begins to take on a meaning which relates to the rest of the cross - of conversion from a pagan world. And these links are emphasised by visual 'hooks' reaching out from this panel. The very prominent snakes below the crucifixion no doubt derive from the 'defeated devil' depictions of a serpent below the cross in Carolingian and Ottonian ivories but, in their form, they allude to the numerous serpent-like forms of the Ragnarøk scenes elsewhere on the cross and particularly lead over to the tormenting snake of the Loki scene on the west face. Similarly the caring figure of Magdelene with her ointment container is echoed by the faithful Sigyn with her bowl. And Longinus is not the only belted, spear-carrying figure on the cross.

As the ornamental organisation forces the onlooker to explain and reflect on juxtapositions so the implication of combinations begins to deepen our understanding of the issues being explored by the decoration. Heimdallr is at one and the same time defending the gods against a monstrous onslaught but he is placed above Loki who will slay him in the final encounter - a death which may be signalled by the reversed horseman set between the two scenes. Loki may be bound but, in the same manner as *Völuspá*'s description of his punishment, his significance lies in the threat he will pose, when his release heralds Ragnarøk. Similarly above the crucifixion is the figure of Vitharr, defeating a monster by breaking its jaw; any well-informed observer would know that Vithar, like Christ, was triumphant in the final struggle (Dronke 1996, II, 13).

There is no simple narrative sequence here; events from different times are set alongside each other. We are given selected, and suggestive, juxtapositionings from which we are forced to extrapolate meaning - meanings of conversion from pagandom, and suggestions of parallels and contrasts between the ends of various worlds. The cross sets before us the end of the world of the old gods, the end of the world of the Old Covenant and the end of the world which will come with the Christian Doomsday (in which four horsemen play a part) - that latter end accompanied by many of the signs which marked both Ragnarøk and Christ's death, and which the Christian liturgy constantly evoked in contemplation of the crucifixion (Bailey 1980, 129-30, 163-4).

Gosforth's cross is thus a Christian monument which also signals the

social/political allegiances of its patron. The Fishing Stone, now set inside the church, worked in the same way, with a god struggling with evil in a serpent-like form set below a standard Christian symbol of a stag struggling with a snake, the symbol of Christ and the devil (Bailey and Cramp 1988, ill. 332; Bailey 1980, 131-2. But in neither case are we dealing with syncretism, though the mind is drawn to parallels and contrasts between Christian teaching and Scandinavian-based mythology; the message is Christian.

To interpret the carvings in this manner is, of course, to suggest that Gosforth's patron was capable of thinking in a theologically radical manner. It also suggests that there was an audience to whom the reflective skills of ruminatio were not totally alien. In explanation of the existence of such (seemingly unlikely) patterns of thinking in rural Cumbria it is worth remembering that sculptural evidence suggests that there were two pre-Viking monastic sites close to Gosforth, at Irton and Waberthwaite (Bailey and Cramp 1988, 115-7, 151). The possibility that traditional Christian reflective approaches lived on in the area must be recognised; that such a possibility exists is indicated by the Cumbrian site of Dacre where, from a place with a known Anglian monastery, a Viking-age shaft combines two scenes whose significance can only be unlocked by a ruminative approach (Bailey and Cramp 1988, 91-2). But perhaps we ought also to recognise that there was another source where meaning emerges in an allusive and cryptic manner: and that is in the earliest Eddic poetry!

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