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The "Volsung legend" in Norwegian Stave Church Portals – meaningless decoration or conscious use?

Abstract

Already in 1980, Sue Margeson opened her article *The Volsung¹ legend in medieval art with the righteous question "Why Sigurðr yet again?"* (Margeson 1980, p. 183). But there are still a few things left to be mentioned. Most of the discussion so far has primarily been concerned with the question of what pictures might or might not be illustrating the Volsung legend. The supposed "pagan" content of the Volsung legend has generally posed a problem, and great efforts have been made to interpret a hidden Christian message in the pictures. Paralleling with the iron-mounted church doors and chests of the Rogslösa group, Sweden, I propose that the "pagan" connotations did not pose a problem in the 13th century, but rather were parts of a conscious use of the past.

The "Volsung-portals"

Among the vast corpus of preserved Norwegian stave church sculpture there are a small number of portals decorated with scenes from the Volsung legend. The best known, and also the finest, is the one from **Hylestad** in Aust-Agder (Hylestad I, fig. 1). Read from the bottom and up and from right to left, the scenes have been interpreted as follows: 1: Regin forges a sword for Sigurðr, 2: Sigurðr breaks the false sword, 3: Sigurðr kills Favne, 4: Sigurðr roasts Favne's heart, 5: Grane with the treasure, 6: Sigurðr kills Regin, 7: Gunnarr in the snake pit. A similar portal, but of lesser quality, is preserved from **Vegusdal** church in Aust-Agder. The figures are here treated very much as in Hylestad, but the scenes with the killing of Favne and Gunnarr in the snake pit are absent. From **Austad** church, also in Aust-Agder, comes a third one, which judging from the figurative motifs and the details of the ornament is closely connected to the above mentioned portals. This portal is however showing only two, rather confusing scenes from the Volsung legend: Gunnarr in the snake pit, and Gunnarr's brother Hogné Gjukesson having his heart cut out.

Other Volsung portals are from **Lardal** in Vestfold, **Mael** and **Nesland** in Telemark, and **Uvdal** in Buskerud. All in all, seven preserved portals are decorated with possible Volsung motifs (table 1). There has been some dispute over the dating of the portals, but the Hylestad group is probably from the beginning of the 13th century, Lardal and Mael from the first half of the 13th century, and Nesland perhaps from the middle of the same century. Uvdal is the youngest portal, most likely from the first half of the 14th century (Hohler 1999). Only Uvdal church is still standing today, while the other churches were demolished in the 17th and 19th centuries. This of course causes difficulties concerning dating, but also obstructs every certain contextual conclusion, except that the portals for some reason were considered worth preserving.

Stylistically, all of these portals are derivations of the large "Sogn-Valdres" group, with the distinctive feature that some of the figures are framed with medallions. The figure scenes placed in medallion frames are, along with a certain type of vine composition found on another portal from Hylestad, frequently found in English manuscript illustrations. But only 7 of 13 portal figure-scenes are framed with medallions, which suggests that the Volsung motifs were independent of the medallions. More interesting is the fact that all the portals are of a

¹ For the sake of convenience, I here use the name of the 13th century Volsunga Saga instead of the various incomplete versions of the story found in other sources.

clear Romanesque character, showing certain foreign influences combined with presupposed native and "pagan" motifs. This unorthodox mixture has caused a great deal of trouble to several scholars, and has resulted in a number of different interpretations of which I shall comment on some of the more recent ones.²

The interpretatio Christiana-model

Of course, one has to be very careful when making connections between pictures and texts. There is an obvious will among scholars to interpret medieval pictures through written sources, though there often is a considerable time span between the pictures and the known texts. Making these kinds of connections are quite hazardous, since we can assume that some of the preserved pictures are referring to other texts or oral versions of the stories that have been forever lost. The will to make connections between pictures and known texts can also lead to the neglecting of important details in the pictures, while focusing on others more in line with the preferred interpretation. A good example of this is the rather vast amount of "new" Sigurðr-interpretations that was generated after Martin Blindheim in 1973 had published the whole corpus of known images from the Volsung legend (Blindheim 1973, ICO 1974:2, 1974:3).

The Volsung pictures on the Norwegian stave church portals are however quite unambiguous concerning their iconographic interpretation, even though some of them differ slightly from known texts. More disputed, and definitely of deeper interest are the iconological interpretations, the meaning of the pictures in a broader sense (on the concepts of iconography and iconology, see Panofsky 1982, pp. 26 ff.). All of the Volsung pictures that Blindheim presented in his catalogue are from Christian times. This of course raises the question why a "pagan" story at all came to be illustrated. Two principally different models of interpretation have been presented. The first one is focusing on different types of *interpretatio Christiana* of the Volsung motifs, while the second model is stressing that the "pagan" pictures must have been deprived of their religious content to be accepted in Christian contexts.

The *interpretatio Christiana*, or Christian translation-model is based on the idea that stories of non-Christian origin could be used in order to illustrate Christian themes, very much like the concordance between the Old and the New Testaments. A hero killing a beast is of course somewhat of a universal topic, but perhaps Sigurðr was meant to be an illustration of Christ overcoming Evil. In the two Norwegian stone churches Lunde and Nes, the killing of Favne is depicted alongside with Samson and the lion. Samson was certainly well known and accepted by church authorities as a *praefiguratio Christi*, and according to Lise Gotfredsen, the notion of Sigurðr as a "God's warrior" might explain why there are no known examples of Sigurðr's death being depicted (Gotfredsen & Frederiksen 1993, p. 223). Oddgeir Hoftun goes much further in his arguments about the "pagan" pictures, as he asserts that a careful selection of "pagan" myths were used to codify the pagan religion and thus facilitate missionary activities. Hoftun envisages an interpretation scheme of the Hylestad portal where the paganism is battled by its own means. The sword Gram becomes a cult utensil from Oðinn, which Sigurðr uses to kill paganism itself in the shape of Favne. The eating of the heart is placed side by side with the Eucharist, and Gunnarr in the snake pit is, according to Hoftun, showing what happens those who do not follow the Christian faith (Hoftun 2000). Hoftun's arguments are however quite complicated, and indeed, one must ask whether the artist or the common churchgoer could grasp such intricate thoughts. Klaus Düwel argues

² For a more complete research history concerning the different iconographic interpretations of the stave church portals, see Hohler 1999:II, pp. 22 ff.

against such speculative interpretations, and is more of the opinion that Sigurðr should be viewed as a *typus* in the allegorical sense, quite like the Archangel Michael slaughtering the dragon (Düwel 1986, pp. 234 ff.).

The contextual dependence of interpretation: the Gosforth Cross example

The *interpretatio Christiana*-model is however dependent of the contexts of the pictures, which can be illustrated by the Gosforth cross from Cumbria, England (fig. 2). The cross is made of stone and is about 4,5 meters tall, furnished with engravings that might be depicting Ragnarok. Since it undoubtedly is a cross, the "Ragnarok" scenes are usually interpreted as a case of *interpretatio Christiana*, where the pictures could have been read both as pagan and Christian. Vikings colonised Cumbria in the early 10th century, the cross is dated to the middle of the same century, and thus it could have been a tool for facilitating missionary activities (Danbolt 1989). However, this traditional interpretation has been questioned by Jørgen Haavardsholm's careful study of the history of Gosforth. He makes a point of the fact that Cumbria was a Christian territory when the Norsemen settled there, and argues that Gosforth might well have been the place of a monastery, and that the cross could have been marking the grave of a saint. As a part of the argument, Haavardsholm also gives an alternative interpretation of the pictures, questioning whether they really are depicting Ragnarok at all (Haavardsholm 1996).

The *interpretatio Christiana*-model implies that pagan motifs were chosen to make the Christian religion intelligible to illiterate pagans only familiar with their own mythological stuff. When the general view of the Gosforth cross context is changed from missionary milieu to monastery, the interpretations of the pictures also changes, because "pagan" pictures no longer seem to fit in such a context. I do not know whether this is necessarily true, but it demonstrates an important principle that has been guiding for the questioning of the traditional *interpretatio Christiana*-interpretations of the Volsung portals, since they are of a comparatively late date.

The profane alternative

Among the many writers who have discussed the stave church portals in Norway, I know only of one to whom the late dating of the Volsung portals has posed a problem. Erla Bergendahl Hohler points out that there are no known "pagan" motifs on the stave churches from the 12th century, and since Norway in the 13th century was a Christianised country where purely Christian iconography had been known for long, there could not have been any religious needs for the sudden appearance of pagan pictures. Therefore Hohler argues that the Volsung portals could not have been carrying any religious symbolism. Noting the independence between the Romanesque forms on one hand and the figural compositions on the other, she suggests that the origin of the Sigurðr scenes on Hylestad I might be found in profane contexts, perhaps a local nobleman's hall, which according to Hohler "(...) might explain the extremely un-ecclesiastical choice of motif" (Hohler 1999:II, pp. 57 f., 101 ff.). The popularity of the motif can then be explained by its possible purpose as propaganda for the Norwegian royal family, which according to Ragnar Lodbrok saga were heirs of Sigurðr through his and Brynhild's daughter Aslaug (Hohler 1973, p. 32).

Another scholar rejecting the *interpretatio Christiana*-model is Sue Margeson. She stresses that the Volsung legend was well known, and that just like the *Skáldskaparmál* in Snorri's Edda, the Volsung portals are manifestations of the eagerness of "cultivated circles" to retain their native traditions while at the same time absorbing European fashions. Assuming there must have been a large corpus of Volsung-related pictures from profane contexts, Margeson is of the opinion that one should not make too much fuzz about the motif being present in churches. Using medieval literary sources to throw light on the contemporary view

of the Volsung legend, she concludes: "In literature, the heroes Sigurðr and Gunnarr are not seen as part of any moral framework nor as part of any allegorical scheme, they appear as neither damned pagans nor as Christian heroes, though it is possible that their deeds were related in a general way to the theme of good fighting evil in the shape of dragon and serpents." (Margeson 1980, pp. 208 ff.).

I am inclined to agree with Hohler and Margeson concerning their implicit critique of the *interpretatio Christiana*-model. A crucial but seldom asked question is to whom the interpretation was valid. As noted above, the grand interpretation scheme envisaged by Hofnun was probably accessible only to a limited number of trained theologians. On the other hand, Düwel's statement that a Sigurðr picture only is a "naive Typologie" (Düwel 1986, p. 271) is contradicted by the fact that the woodcarver who made the Hylestad portal clearly was a professional, able to unite the Romanesque style with pictures of a well known story. I would also like to suggest that the narrative structure of the Hylestad portal goes well along with the linear structure of the high medieval Volsunga saga, while the 150-200 years older Ramsund carving is more freely composed, perhaps in line with a more associative way of telling the story before it had been written down. Margeson's view then seems plausible, that "(...) the Volsung legend in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was not a subject for conservative or isolated wood-carvers in the depths of Telemark and Aust-Agder. This just happens to be where the iconography survives." (Margeson 1980, p. 209).

But there are still some weak points in the arguments of Hohler and Margeson. I will here first comment on Hohler's arguments with a minor digression into the subject of the relationship between Christendom and "paganism". Then I will return to Margeson and the late dating of the portals, concluding with a parallel example from 13th century Sweden, the iron-mounted doors and chests of the **Rogslösa group**.

If the Volsung legend on the stave church portals was meant to legitimise the royal family through Sigurðr and Brynhild's daughter Aslaug, one could think of better scenes for illustrating this. For instance, the "love scene" with the valkyrie on Hindarfjell, which actually seems to be depicted on a chair from Heddal church (Blindheim 1973, p. 18), would have referred more directly to the royal family's heritage claims. But instead, the scenes with Regin, the killing of the dragon and the heroic death of Gunnarr and Høgne are depicted. Viewing the different portals, it seems that the main point was the heroic ideology, mediated only by a few key scenes that were needed to make the onlooker think of the right story. But still, possible heritage claims of the royal family may of course have been one of several causes to the popularity of the motif.

More questionable is Hohler's general notion of profane, purely decorative church portals, best summarised by her statement that they were made in a time when one simply did not expect religious motifs on a stave church portal (Hohler 1993:II, p. 103). I believe this is an unnecessary and anachronistic division between sacred and profane, which only is valid in a modern secularised society. Widespread popularity, political purposes and absent Christian iconology does not necessarily leave out religious connotations in the pictures, and it seems unlikely that the woodcarver or his commissioner would not have thought of the fact that they actually were decorating a church with pictures of persons who could be considered as pagans. Even though the idea that the portals simply depicts a well known story seems more likely than some of the more sophisticated interpretations, Sigurðr may also quite easily have been viewed as a "God's warrior", or perhaps more likely a hero of the past, whichever suited the onlooker. The Volsung legend is a grim story of heroism and greed, friendship and betrayals, love and inevitable destiny. This would probably have gone along quite well with the pre-gothic Christ; betrayed, stoically facing death as a glorious victor, and finally shattering the gates of hell and conquering Satan (the Gospel of Nichodemus, Cross 1996, pp. 200 ff.). Hohler's need to make the Volsung portals profane seems to derive from a notion of

the story being dangerous in some way, or in need to get the approval of the church. This leads to the question of the status of "paganism" in 13th century Scandinavia.

The concept of "paganism"

The Christianising of Scandinavia is usually described in terms as "shift of religions", but it should not be understood as conversion in our modern sense between, say, Christendom and Islam. Whatever the Nordic pre-Christian faith was, it was not a formalised confessional religion with a corpus of holy texts. One might even ask whether the Scandinavian paganism should be viewed as a religion at all. I do not doubt that there were pre-Christian religious structures, as can be comprehended by place-names and archaeological evidence, but only with the aid of written sources, it is extremely difficult to say something about paganism in itself. The texts speak of *síðr*, or custom, and a few rites were condemned in the law texts while other survived in Christianised shape (Hultgård 1992). So the input of Christendom, rather than shift of religion was perhaps never, or at least seldom as dramatic as the hagiographers claimed.

Virtually all of the more elaborate descriptions of pre Christian mythologies and rites suffer either from a severe Christian bias or were written by non-Scandinavians like Ibn Fadlan. Law texts, hagiographies, the Edda and the sagas were either written by Christians or preserved in Christian milieus. One can therefore seriously question whether the pagan themes were problematic to the Christian writers. In a recent study, Guðrun Nordal has shown that the skaldic poetry was used as a tool for the academic training on Iceland. The pagan skalds from older times were not at all problematic in this context, but could be used just like the likewise pagan poets Vergil and Ovid. In that way, the skaldic poetry established a link between the native tradition and the study of *grammatica*. References to paganism were thus legitimised in the very heart of the Christian culture (Nordal 2001, pp. 339 ff.)

It was probably of little importance to most people, if rigorous thinkers meant that Sigurðr belonged to hell. Without suggesting any other parallels, it is worth mentioning that some hundred years after the Hylestad portal was made, Dante even placed Aristotle in the first circle of hell. But the fact that Aristotle was a pagan did not in practice pose an insurmountable problem to the scholastic philosophers (Tranøy 1987, pp. 258 ff.). Sigurðr could of course have been given allegorical interpretations, but there was probably no need for a complicated apology for depicting the "pagan" hero. Further, even if there were some instances where Sigurðr was given historical authenticity (Margeson 1980, p. 210), the Volsung legend belonged to the *fornaldarsögur* : far away enough in time and space to be a good story with diffuse boundaries between reality and fiction. It was of course no coincidence that the story was laid to the Continent, and that the North (Norden) is not mentioned until chapter 43 (Völsungasagan 1991). Therefore it can certainly be disputed whether Sigurðr should be viewed as a "Norwegian hero" as Hohler states (Hohler 1999:II, p. 103). Perhaps the core of the Volsung legend even was imported along with early Christian influences in the 9th century. In any case, the Volsung legend was hardly troublesome in spite of its many pagan connotations, and even to a priest it could have appeared as a natural choice of motif. It was a story from the past, reaching out to the present. A profane origin of the Volsung portals is possible, but not necessary to explain the motifs.

Why the 13th century?

One question remains, and that is why the Volsung portals were made in the 13th century and not earlier? Sue Margeson is of the opinion that this should be explained only by source-critical causes. But still, we do not know of any older Volsung pictures from churches, and Hylestad I could have been one of the first portals using the Volsung motifs. The motif was well known, and even accepted in the "cultivated circles" in the 12th century, but it seems that

it did not come to use in churches until the 13th century. This does not fit with Margeson's description of the cultivated circles as being anxious about taking in European fashions while at the same time retaining their own traditions. It is not so much a question of retaining as a reuse or rebirth - a renaissance. Could it after all have been unfitting or even dangerous before the 13th century? I do not think so, since the skaldic poetry had been in use by the "cultivated circles" during the entire 12th century. Was it a case of the learned culture pouring down to small-scale rural churches, or was it in fact new motifs in these contexts, intended to meet with new needs?

A Swedish parallel? The Rogslösa group

It should not be altogether dismissed that the Hylestad portal, combining the Romanesque medallions with pictures from the Volsung legend, might have been an innovation, if not perhaps the very first of its kind. Another Romanesque church entrance that has been described as a first hand attempt to translate a tale into pictures is the iron-mounted door from Rogslösa church in Östergötland, Sweden (fig. 3). In the lower panel of the Rogslösa door there are some figures that might be referring to the fall, the Devil's punishment and Michael defeating the dragon. In the upper panel there is a hunting scene, which also is present in the other works of the Rogslösa group, consisting of three chests and a door from the churches of Rydaholm, Ryssby and Voxtorp, all in Småland. Despite, or perhaps because of extensive scholarly interest, it has not been possible to reach a consensus concerning the iconography of the hunting scenes. The legends of S. Giles, Theodoric of Verona or S. Eustace are some suggestions, but Karlsson has clearly pointed out that there is simply not enough information in the pictures to establish what legends they are meant to depict (Karlsson 1988:I, pp. 329 ff.). The Rogslösa door is Romanesque, but with an interesting layout and some stylistic features that hark back in time. The silhouette figures, the plaited frame and the division into panels makes the Rogslösa door look rather much like some Gotlandic picture-stones from the early Viking Age. Also note the Urnes-style arabesque in the uppermost panel. These archaic traits have led some scholars to the conclusion that the door was something of a relict of the Viking Age, and thus dating it to the 12th century. Lennart Karlsson, who is an authority on medieval ironwork, dates the Rogslösa group to "c. 1200". But on the other hand, he calls it a "vivid wrought-iron folklore" (Karlsson 1988:I, pp. 335 f.), thus suggesting that it was rather conservative and backwards. But other preserved doors from the 12th century are of a quite different character, mainly decorated with pan-European Romanesque motifs, and if the building history of Rogslösa church is taken into the account, it seems hardly likely that the door was made before the 1240's (Bonnier 1996). This date is consequently a good deal later than what any stylistic analysis says, and it might also apply to a preserved chest and a presumed but lost door from Rydaholm church, even though it is not quite clear yet. Not much information can be given about the churches of Ryssby and Voxtorp, which both have been torn down. Hopefully, a more precise dating of the Rogslösa group will be established through dendrochronological examinations.

If the revised dates are correct, it means that both the Rogslösa door and the Rydaholm chest were made in connection with extensive rebuilding and enlarging of these churches, where their character were changed from private churches to regular parish churches with naves able to house large congregations. It should also be mentioned that Rogslösa parish was under considerable influence of the Cistercian Order through the abbey of Alvastra, while Rydaholm functioned as a bishop's church and regional centre of Finnveden (Holmström & Tollin 1990, Lindhe 1978, p. 122). As to the hunting scene, it might be of some importance that Rogslösa parish (though by no means the other churches in the group) lies in direct vicinity to the famous Omberg, a common that may have been used as a royal hunting park (Zachrisson 2003, p. 128). Disregarding the iconography of the scene, could it be that it was

used as an argument for disputed claims of royal or aristocratic hunting privileges? In Östergötland and Småland there are some figural portal sculpture in stone, but figurative motifs are more often presented in the iron-mounted doors. Norway clearly represents a different tradition with its elaborate portals, while the Norwegian door mountings are restricted to the lock- and ringhandle plates, though often extremely well made. Despite these differences, the Rogslösa group and the Volsung portals have some interesting features in common.

Conclusion

First of all, the placing of the pictures by the church entrances should be of importance to the interpretation. The entrance of course marked a boundary of holiness. It was here that evil spirits were exorcised before an infant could be carried into the church to be baptised, and the ringhandle of the door represented the asylum of the church. The church door was also a weak point of the church that had to be protected by apotropaic measures (Karlsson 1988:I, pp. 252 ff.). But the entrance of the church could also function as a gathering place for the local community, a place for oath swearing and economic affairs, which is suggested by the presence of standardising ells on some church doors. The local centrality of the church and the importance of its entrance would probably have made it a suitable place for displaying ideological messages or propaganda.

As has been mentioned above, the "cultivated circles" were eager to retain their native traditions already in the early 12th century. Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* is only one example of this, others are the Danish history written by Saxo Grammaticus, the Skåne law that was partly codified with runes, and the old fashioned rune stone at Norra Åsum from around the year 1200, commemorating the building of a church by Esbern Mule and the Danish archbishop Absalon. But these tendencies were never manifested in church buildings as clearly as in the Volsung portals and the Rogslösa group, tied together by their archaisms traits. With some simplification, the former can be described as "pagan" in content, the latter "pagan" in form. This is of course not to be understood as any "real paganism", but rather as an interest in the past or domestic. An interest that stands out as something new in the ecclesiastical art of the 13th century, contrasting the pan-European aspirations of the previous century. I believe this change of focus or newborn interest in visual references to the past or domestic should be understood through the political and religious dynamics of the time. I have already suggested that it probably was not dangerous or controversial earlier, but rather that there had been no need for it then. So what new situation might have led to this need in the 13th century?

The motifs of the Rogslösa door and Rydaholm chest should be understood in connection with the transformation from private to public parish churches, where the former church-owners were reduced to church patrons. During the 13th century, the deacons as representatives of the parishioners gained economic influence, and the parochial organisation was fully accomplished. This might explain the "folk lore" of the Rogslösa group, either as manifestations or as arguments for a new order. As to the stave churches with motifs from the Volsung legend, not much is known except that they all seem to have been quite small. Perhaps they never went through a development similar to Rogslösa and Rydaholm. Nesland's three portals show interesting contrasts, with one Volsung portal, one portal decorated with motifs from the Old Testament and an ordinary portal of Atrå-type. Just like the two portals of Hylestad, not much can be said since we do not know where the different portals were placed, and thus it is only possible to speculate about who were addressing the pictures to whom.

Perhaps the archaisms doors and portals were expressions of an "aesthetics of power", striving to manifest ancient claims and courtly culture? Or did representatives of the church,

in need of popular support facing the competition of the new preaching mendicant orders, choose the motifs? Or was it perhaps manifestations of self-conscious parishioners, well aware of their strengthened position? Every single church calls for its own explanation. Today, the Volsung portals and the Rogslösa group stand out as solitaries, and I do not believe they were the result of any personal connections between southern Norway and southeastern Sweden. But taken as examples they might be showing how the church-building actors of the time were responding in similar ways to different problems. And the answers to these problems lay in the past.

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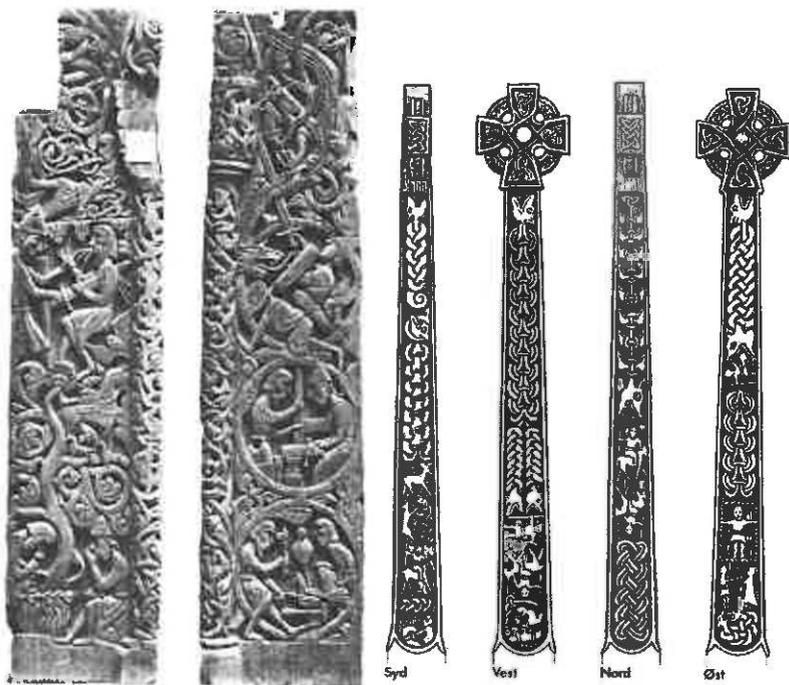


Fig. 1: Hylestad I, dated to the beginning of the 13th century. The figure scenes from the Volsung legend are here quite unambiguously depicted. From Hohler 1999.

Fig. 2: The Gosforth cross from Cumbria, England. The interpretation suggested by Danbolt includes both Christian and "pagan" iconography. From Danbolt 1989.

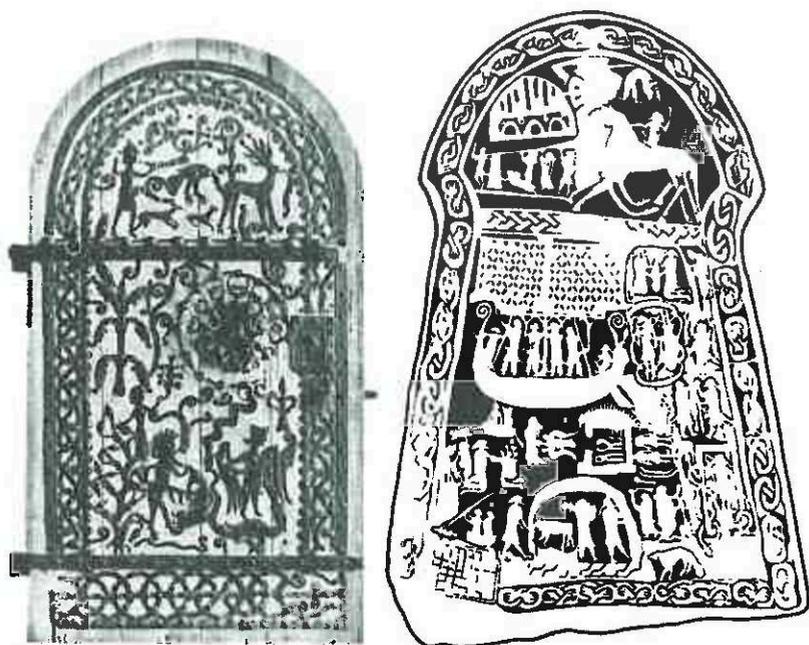


Fig. 3: The Rogslösa door and the picture-stone Ardre VIII. Rogslösa is mainly Romanesque in style, but there are some common features with the 400 year older picture-stone, such as the plaited frame, the silhouette figures and the division into panels. Despite these stylistic parallels, there have probably never been any mediating links between these two. Church doors older than the one from Rogslösa look quite different. From Karlsson 1988 and Andrén 1989.