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Dómr of dauðan hvern A chronological survey of Swedish picture stones

Of all the existing definitions of a *picture stone*, the most general one describes it as a detached stone or mountain side, onto which one or several figures are depicted. Using this general definition, picture stones can be found in the entire Scandinavian area, especially in Sweden, between the 4th and the 12th century.

Nevertheless, the name is often exclusively used for one specific kind, which became known as *the* picture stone: the classical picture stone from the isle of Gotland, dating from the period between 700 and 1100 AD (see figure 1).

First Period: From the origins to the rise of Christianity (4th-10th century)

I. Gotland

Apart from the easily recognizable shape, the ornamentation which runs along the entire rim of the stone and the division of the surface into several workspaces, the most unique characteristic is the technique used to create the different figures. In stead of cutting out the figures themselves, as is the practice in the rest of Scandinavia, the surrounding and thus superfluous stone surface which is removed and coloured in.

Of course, this type of impressive stone is based on a number of

earlier and more primitive types. The oldest type dates from the 4th century AD, and is no more than an unadorned piece of stone, of which the part above the surface measures less than half a meter. But even from the very beginning, the stones' primary function is the one which will dominate until their disappearance: combining indigenous Germanic tombstones with Roman public monuments, they were erected as private memorial stones for a social and cultural elite.

Why did these stones become necessary? In those days, every important family had their own burial site, where every relative had to be buried. If the corpse of the deceased wasn't available for any reason, a fictitious grave indicated by a memorial stone was made in honour of this dead relative. And just in this period, the corpse of the deceased often couldn't be buried. From the isle of Gotland, people began to undertake trade missions in the Baltic Sea area. These missions were not without danger, since it often happened that one or more crew members drowned in a storm at sea. And the absence of the corpse(s) made raising memorial stones necessary.

From approximately 400 AD the stones become higher and narrower, and in addition to strictly ornamental elements and geometric designs, the picture stones are also decorated with certain figures, e.g. ships, a heritage from the Bronze age.

From the 8th century onwards, the same figures and scenes are always depicted until the picture stones disappear at the end of the Viking era. This leads to a relatively early heyday: the classical picture stone, like e.g. the stone from Tjängvide (see figure 1).

In fact, this stone is quite unique due to the presence of runes, both at the top left and bottom right. Runes are unusual on Gotlandic stones, since the picture already tells the whole story. Furthermore the runes on the bottom right consist of the typical formula "X raised the stone for Y", a formula which was not used until the arrival of Christianity in Scandinavia. However, the runes were added several centuries later, and the picture thus contains the typical elements of the classical Gotlandic picture stone.

Above all, acceptance into the Walhalla is guaranteed by the depiction of figures and scenes from religious beliefs and the death cult.

Three of these figures can be found on almost every stone: the ship, the horseman and the Valkyrie who welcomes the deceased to Valhalla (upper left of figure 1) by offering him a drinking horn.



Figure 1: The Tjängvide Stone

The Scandinavians were convinced that the journey to the hereafter consisted of two stages: the ship transported the deceased to the shores of the land on the other side, where a horse was waiting to take him to Valhalla itself. The significance of the horseman is based on the very first person who used a horse for the journey between Asgard and Midgard: Odin. Therefore the horseman always has this double meaning Odin/brave warrior which is brought to Valhalla, as evidenced by the horse on later Gotlandic picture stones; it often has eight legs, and thus must be identified as Sleipnir, Odin's horse, bringing great

honour to the deceased it carries.

Very important is the fact that all these pictures are general representations that function as a general background against which the deceased's situation had to be interpreted. A picture stone shows the honour granted to *all* brave warriors, and thus also the person X for whom the stone has been erected.

The other figures on the Tjängvide stone can be interpreted in two ways: either as scenes which take place upon the deceased's arrival at Valhalla (warriors endlessly preparing themselves for the final Ragnarök battle and the dog which accompanies his master to the hereafter), or as a depiction of the situation leading to the acceptance of the horseman into the hereafter. The deceased thus has proven his skill in battle and has been claimed by Odin, disguised as a wolf. This is exactly the reason why pictures are used on these Scandinavian memorial stones: they supply us with visual proof of the deceased's honourable life. Thus the presence of figures and scenes from myths and sagas on picture stones is explained as well: it is a great honour to be associated with heroes like Sigurd, the dragon slayer. The essence of the existence of picture stones lies in the ever present and dominating focus on the honour and judgement of every deceased, *dómr of dauðan hvern*, which according to the Icelandic *Hávamál* is the only thing which will always exist.

II. Swedish mainland

In contrast to Gotland, runes had already been used for several centuries on the Swedish mainland, runes that retained their dominant position on memorial stones as well. Any possible picture is thus no more than a confirmation of the runes' message – on Gotland, it is the other way around; this means that we can hardly speak of a picture stone *tradition* in this area and explains the focus on Gotland. However, the reason for their existence is exactly the same: picture stones, or rune stones with a picture, are raised as a memorial stone, when the body of the deceased cannot be buried.

Of all the known picture stones in Sweden's central area, exceptions so to speak, one has intrigued researchers more than all the others: the

Möjbro stone (see figure 2), dated around 450 AD.

Interpreting the picture – the confirmation of the runes – depends on our knowledge of the runes' meaning. Unfortunately, all we know for sure about the message is that the stone is a monument raised for someone called *FrawaradaR*, whose name can be seen in the bottom line of the inscription. The meaning of the rest of the runes is not known, which of course has led to much speculation with regard to the interpretation of the horseman and the doglike figures. If the stone shows a hunting scene, why then the sword and shield? If it shows a battle scene, why then the dogs?



Figure 2: The Möjbro Stone

Throughout the years, researchers have emphasized the Roman influence on the horseman; but rather than a direct imitation, what we

see is an adaptation of both form and content of a horseman, based on a Roman example. Although this is highly unusual on Scandinavian memorial stones, it is very well known from contemporary amulets: bracteats.

Bracteats are golden disks which have several figures and designs depicted on one side. These bracteats came into existence as adaptations of coins from the 4th century Roman Empire, but were very soon given a Nordic content: horsemen showing the Nordic gods, above all Odin.

Based on this contemporary adaptation of Roman examples, a new interpretation of the Möjbro scene could be as follows: the horseman is Odin, a universal example for the deceased riding to Valhalla, including, of course, FrawaradaR. Odin would then be depicted with both wolves, Freki en Geri, accompanying on his trips on earth.

In conclusion, it can be said that Scandinavian artists in this first period – from the 4th to the 10th century – do *not* render persons (e.g. the deceased) or scenes from daily life on picture stones. The same symbols, figures and scenes from the religious world are completed with the same symbols, figures and scenes from the same myths and sagas.

Furthermore the greatly over-rated magical characteristics of runic and picture stones need to be put into perspective. Runic inscriptions and pictures are magical, but only in the sense that they, by their mere existence, ensure the presence of (or the transition to) a certain desired circumstance, i.e. peace and honour for the deceased and the family, acceptance into Valhalla, etc. Visualization means realization.

Second Period: The rise of Christianity (10th-11th century)

Then, around 980, king Harald Bluetooth of Denmark raises the Jelling stone. The figure of Christ on the south-western side of this stone marks an absolute milestone in Scandinavian history: the coming of Christianity, which eventually led to the assimilation of Scandinavia into and by (Western-) Europe.

First of all, the custom of raising memorial stones was itself generally spread by the coming of Christianity. After all, the converted believer now had to be buried in the sacred ground near the church, and was thus separated from his ancestors and relatives, who were all buried in the family's own burial ground. A solution for this problem was found by extending the custom which had led to the use of picture stones: raising memorial stones when the body couldn't be buried. The deceased received his simple grave in the cemetery, but a stone erected on their private burial ground described the family's deeds so as to bring peace and honour to the deceased.

The Christian influence on these stones could then be distinguished in three different ways:

1. by adding a Christian element on a heathen stone, as was the case with the runic inscriptions on the Tjängvide stone;
2. by using its own symbols. This led to the presence of a cross on a very large number of rune stones from the Viking era;
3. by taking over and adapting the old heathen symbols (snake, ship, ...), facilitated by the presence of identical symbols with identical content in both religions.

Thus in the beginning, the coming of Christianity does not involve a radical change in the use of pictures on picture stones. A few new motives are introduced, but these are still connected with the memorial function of the stones; the pictures are still a representation of the Scandinavian religion and death cult.

Third period: Heyday and decay (11th-12th century)

During the 11th century, Christianity spread all over Scandinavia, which of course doesn't mean that the Christianization happened as fast and easily everywhere. Denmark and Norway were no problem, but Sweden, and especially Uppland, offered resistance for quite some time.

Of key importance to this resistance was the Uppsala temple, situated in the middle of the Swedish kingdom of that time, and in fact the only place in Scandinavia where organized resistance was possible. After all, all the leaders regularly had to attend sacrificial ceremonies

there, which were also thus of great political importance. The king was able to keep an eye on rival *jarls* and strengthen his central power. By accepting Christianity, he risked not only the aid of the ancient gods, but possibly the unity of the country as well.

Thus longer resistance in Uppland resulted in a prolonged need of memorial stones and a heyday of the rune stone tradition in this area. However, quite remarkably this heyday is immediately followed by decay. Also remarkable is the fact there is only one motif: the *rundjur* or runic animal, very often depicted in a battle with a snake, e.g. on the stone of Ölstå (see figure 3).

The only symbolical meaning which has been attached to this motif is that of a battle between good and evil. Can this be true, and if so, is it a heathen or a christian symbol?

1. By no means is it a heathen symbol. The snake can be interpreted as the Midgaard snake or *Midgardsormen*, but what about the *rundjur*? Is it one of the four stags that dwell on the branches of the *Yggdrasil* tree? However this stag is not depicted on any of the old heathen monuments, and consequently is much too weak a symbol of goodness to be able to face the evil of such a worthy adversary as the world snake. Furthermore, Christianised Scandinavian artists have no problem whatsoever in using this motif, and quite often add a cross to it.

2. Then again, baring in mind the difficult in Christianising Uppland, perhaps a Christian meaning is more likely. Especially when it becomes clear that the coming of Christianity in fact is predicted and anticipated by the Nordic beliefs. The story goes that at Ragnarök all evil will be destroyed and a new world will arise, led by Baldr, the god who, due to his innate innocence, can be described as the saint of Nordic mythology, and perhaps even identified as Christ. What happens then in the eyes of the converted Scandinavians, is that the entire world is changing, and that Christ (as Baldr) will show the way to a new and better world. The battle between good and evil on picture stones thus becomes the battle between the snake and the lion (Christ), between the old and the victorious new religion. Unfortunately, this doesn't add up.

First of all the battle on the stones is still going on, and the outcome therefore still undecided. When wishing to render supremacy of Christianity, you would not place this supremacy somewhere in the future, but in the present. Furthermore raising this type of memorial stone still is a heathen custom; if the snake on picture stones represents heathendom, this means that you would first erect a monument in accordance with your religious beliefs, after which you would represent these beliefs as an evil which must and will be destroyed. In addition



Figure 3: The Ölstå Stone

the lion and the snake also appear on their own, or even in groups of for instance 6 snakes or 2 runic animals. Furthermore the so-called lion also functions as a dragon, namely as dragon's head at the end of the

run- or *ormslinga* (runic or snake/dragon band), and this lion sometimes finds it necessary to bite himself (right runic animal on figure 3 – the forked tail clearly suggests a fantasy animal). And finally Christianity has a much stronger symbol which can compete with any heathen one: the cross.

In conclusion, it is the *horror vacui* or the fear for the empty space of the Scandinavian artist, in combination with the dominant position of decorative elements in Nordic art, which leads to this final outburst of the Germanic animal ornamentation style. The pictures now above all serve to satisfy the Vikings' desire for pomp and circumstance, with elegance and dynamics eventually usurping any meaning the pictures might have had. The disappearance of the pictures' typical function inevitably leads to the disappearance of the function of picture stones as well. When other means of expressions are then found in Christian habits – e.g. the use of stone coffins with Latin texts – not only the pictures on picture stones, but the stones themselves cease to exist.

The only problem left is the fact that the step to meaningless picture is far too large to be taken all at once; you would expect an intermediary stage, where the range of the pictures' possible meanings is extended. The Böksta stone provides the proof that this stage exists. What we see is, without a doubt, a hunting scene, a scene from the daily life from the higher classes in Viking society – there is no such thing as the universal skier or hunter.

Thus, Scandinavian artists do not render persons or scenes from daily life on picture stones, *as long as the heathen religion continues to dominate*. When Christianity begins to take over, it is no longer necessary to render the typical symbols and figures connected with religion and death cult. The cross now fulfils this function, and other than figures and scenes from sagas – which per definition are extremely decorative – Scandinavian artists begin to portray scenes from the daily life of the class for which the stone memorials are erected. Now and again this leads to the depiction of elaborate scenes – as is the case with the Böksta stone, more often to the presence of the typical runic animal. So: no more general representations, but pure decoration and no reason to raise picture stones.