

# Hogbacks: Christian and pagan imagery on Viking Age monuments

*Alby Stone* investigates the origins, symbolism and possible meaning of these unusual Viking carved stones.

**H**OGBACKS ARE ARRESTING monuments. Their unique design makes them interesting as artefacts in their own right, but they also raise important questions with regard to the iconography of both paganism and Christianity in northern England during the Viking Age. These impressively solid-looking house-shaped sculptures, with their characteristic curved ridges, are found mostly in the north of England, with a handful of others scattered around Ireland, Scotland, Wales, southern England and Scandinavia in areas associated with settlers from Scandinavia and Viking-controlled Ireland. There are several distinct types of hogback, of varying size but most are around 1 to 1.5 metres in length, though their bulk makes them seem bigger. All conform to the same basic pattern: rounded or squared gable-ends and side-panels with slightly convex surfaces rising from a roughly rectangular base, often with a distinct upward-curving 'roof' like contemporary boat-shaped houses in Scandinavia. Decorative styles and motifs are derived from Scandinavia. Their origins and purpose are matters for debate, but one authority believes them to have evolved from the house-shaped stone shrines marking saints' graves in early medieval Ireland:

'The hogback was developed in the tenth century in northern England, apparently in Norwegian or Gaelic-Norse settlement areas. It represents an adaptation of the earlier stone shrine involving a change of shape and function. It takes on something of the appearance of contemporary buildings' (Bailey 1980: 96).

The same writer goes on to reject the possibility that hogbacks marked saints' graves, on the grounds that there are 'too many of them' (Bailey 1980: 97). Indeed, they do not seem to be funerary



Figure 1: Lowther hogback (after Collingwood)

monuments at all, as there is nothing to connect them with burials or the dead - though that has not prevented any number of authorities describing them as such. For instance, Collingwood refers to hogbacks as 'recumbent tombstones' (Collingwood 1927: 164); while Foote and Wilson call them 'tomb-covers' (Foote and Wilson 1980: 152). Bailey notes that the hogbacks at Lythe in Yorkshire occur alongside 'a series of small crosses whose shaft outlines exactly fit the undecorated gable-ends of the hogbacks'. Noting that 'similar crosses are known elsewhere', he goes on to suggest that 'it is difficult to escape the conclusion that some of the hogbacks were part of composite monuments with head and foot stones, similar in arrangement to the grave-slabs and end-stones which are known from York Minister cemetery. It is even possible that some of the large crosses were combined with hogbacks into composite monuments' (Bailey 1980: 99-100).

Something of the sort is perhaps hinted at on the so-called Saint's Tomb from Gosforth in Cumbria, which has a Crucifixion scene sculpted on one end. However, not many hogbacks fit in with this analysis. At Brompton in Yorkshire a group of hogbacks are gabled with powerful-looking animals, evidently muzzled bears, which would make fitted

crosses both superfluous and difficult to achieve. Similar animals occupy the gable-ends of hogbacks at Heysham in Lancashire, Lowther in Cumbria (the smaller hogback), Burnsall in Yorkshire, and elsewhere. Others, such as the Saint's Tomb at Gosforth, have end-beasts that are little more than disembodied heads. Bailey sees parallels with end-beasts on Irish metal shrines, and with animal heads on houses and churches in medieval Scandinavia and northern Europe (Bailey 1980: 97). But the end-beasts do not seem to be a specifically Christian motif - there are countless similar designs all over ancient Europe. The so-called Giant's Grave at Penrith in Cumbria comprises several hogbacks and two tall crosses, but the arrangement seems to be simply a mixture of hogbacks and crosses, rather than a deliberately composite arrangement. Despite this, both the hogbacks and crosses share motifs that hint at their being the work of the same sculptor(s).

One variety of hogback found in Cumbria and Lancashire, at the western limit of hogback distribution (though one example occurs at Sockburn in Durham), includes human figures among the decorative motifs. Interestingly, these tend to incorporate pagan iconography. One, a bear-gabled hogback at Heysham, appears to show a



Figure 2: Lowther hogback



Figure 3: Sockburn hogback

scene from the Sigurd legend so popular in medieval Scandinavia. A common motif which is also a popular pagan element is the World Serpent, found with sailing warriors and footsoldiers and separated by an indistinct but possibly female figure, such as that found at Lowther (fig. 1). On the other side of the same hogback the motif occurs again with a group of human figures. The figures are poorly preserved, but a nearly identical group is found on a smaller hogback at Lowther (fig. 2), including one figure that seems to be one-eyed, perhaps a rare representation of Óðinn. The larger Lowther hogback - like one at Gosforth (the Warrior's Tomb, so called because it has a warrior carved into the gable), which shows two armies meeting - may depict Ragnarok, the ultimate battle between the Norse gods and the monstrous forces of chaos. The resemblance of these images to those on 8th century pagan picture-stones on the Swedish island of Götland has been recognised [Bailey 1980: 137].

'One side of a hogback at Sockburn (fig. 3) shows a number of rather fierce-looking animals: the main one is bound, and a human is placing his hand in its mouth. This can only be Tyr and the

Fenrisúlfr - though it has been vaguely interpreted as Daniel in the lions' den, or Adam naming the animals in Eden (1).

Another hogback at Heysham has four human figures, two at each end of one side panel, who are apparently holding up the top edge. It is hard to see how these can be any other than the four dwarfs who support the four corners of the sky according to Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*. Their names - Austri, Vestri, Norðri and Suðri - indicate that they represent the four directions (Sturluson, trans. Faulkes 1987: 12). The two sets of human figures are separated by various animals. This is undoubtedly a cosmological scene. The other side shows a vaguely similar scene, but with one central figure supporting the sky. Taken together, the two sides have been associated with the poem *Voluspá*, though it is difficult to see how the four sky-supporting figures and the horizontal human and animals carved into the decoration above them could be interpreted as a scene from Ragnarok (Collingwood 1927: 170).

At York Minster (fig. 4) there is a hogback that purportedly shows a Crucifixion scene. There is no cross, and

the 'Christ' is rather flimsily bound with dangling loops or tassels; below his arms snake-heads point toward his torso. The absence of a cross does not contradict that interpretation, as several authentic scenes of the Crucifixion of the period omit the cross altogether, using the rigidly cruciform body of Christ to suggest the structure. Here however, the arms are not stretched out rigidly as they are on other Crucifixion scenes of the Viking Age, but bent. The supposed bonds, meanwhile, are barely deserving of the name: they consist of a loop at either side of the figure's head, with the loose strands dangling limply around the forearms. Snakes appear on contemporary Crucifixions in Yorkshire, including the church of St. Mary Castlegate in York.

Does the York Minster hogback show the Crucifixion? Well, there is no compelling reason to identify this figure, with its arms spread wide, ropes or bonds, snakes and circular object, with Christ alone. This could just as easily be a completely pagan scene. It has been identified as a scene from the Sigurd story, though not very convincingly. It could even be Loki, bound with the gods' insubstantial fetter, shown with the snakes set to drip venom onto him as punishment for his part in the death of Baldr (Sturluson, trans. Faulkes 1987: 52). This explanation has been suggested for other similar figures, such as the Bound Devil on a slab at Kirkby Stephen in Cumbria (fig. 5). This 'devil' is tightly bound and its arms are down by its sides (2). Many Viking Age sculptures depict the crucified 'Christ' tied, rather than nailed, to the cross. This tradition seems related to the myth of Baldr, who is tied to a tree when he is killed by the blind god Hoðr's mistletoe spear (Sturluson, trans. Faulkes 1987: 48-49). There is an obvious parallel with the blind centurion who spears Christ at the Crucifixion; but also with the myth of Óðinn, speared as he hangs as a sacrifice to himself on the World Tree (Davidson 1964: 51). Snakes do not figure in Baldr's death, but the World Tree's roots are said to be gnawed by the serpent Niðhoggr (Sturluson, trans. Faulkes 1987: 19).

It should also be pointed out that the 'outstretched Christ' image is generally found on or as part of crosses - as at Kirklevington in Cleveland (fig. 6); Gosforth and Penrith; and Thornton Steward in Yorkshire (fig. 7). Often, Christ's body is the cross. Sometimes, as

at Brigham in Cumbria, Christ's head merely surmounts the cross or forms the upward arm. One exception is the unfinished Crucifixion on the so-called 'Saint's Tomb' at Gosforth: but here it is impossible to guess what the artisan originally intended to do with the stone.

The York Minster hogback 'Crucifixion' scene quite clearly does not conform to usual practices in context or in form. It does, however, bear a striking resemblance to a figure between two serpents on a gold bracteate of the Migration period from Riseley in Kent. Both hark back to iconography found elsewhere in pre-Christian art: the so-called Cernunnos with two ram-horned snakes on a stone plaque from Cirencester in Gloucestershire; a deity holding two serpentine creatures on one of the outer plates of the Gundestrup cauldron; and a faïence statuette of a goddess from 16th century BC Crete - her arms are bent upward and she clutches a serpent in each hand. There are many other examples of such figures flanked by or holding two serpents. This is a motif of evident antiquity and pre-Christian origins.

There seems to be precious little Christian iconography on hogbacks. Even abstract decoration has pagan overtones. Other than the Crucifixion on the Gosforth Saint's Tomb, there are two hogback fragments at Bedale and Oswaldkirk in Yorkshire that have crude carvings that have been seen as the Madonna and Child (Collingwood 1927: 165). But the rudimentary style and fragmentary nature of these partial hogbacks makes analysis very difficult. What is more, the Saint's Tomb at Gosforth may not even be a genuine hogback at all. The roof-ridge does not seem intended to curve, and the roof and wall-panels are flat rather than tending toward the convex. Although it has fairly typical Scandinavian-style decoration, the object resembles the Anglian and Irish shrines more closely than do other hogbacks. Indeed, it may date from the late 11th century, which would make it significantly later than most other hogbacks (Collingwood 1927: 173).

Even abstract decoration has pagan overtones. For instance, a version of the *valknut* - a symbol associated with the cult and iconography of Oðinn (Davidson 1964: 147), occurs on one of the Brompton hogbacks. More curious is the absence of runic inscriptions. I have not been able to find more than one



Figure 4: Crucifixion scene on a hogback, York Minster



Figure 5: Kirkby Stephen, Cumbria



Figure 6: Kirklevington, Cleveland

possible example, a dubious object presently in the Pump Room Museum in Harrogate, though the runologist R.I. Page expresses doubt that it is a hogback and asserts that the supposed runes are not typically Scandinavian, if indeed they are runes at all (Page 1995: 184-185). While one might not necessarily expect to see runes used on a 10th century English monument, the hogbacks' Norse context should make the presence of runes - and especially Scandinavian runes - more likely than not. They certainly occur on contemporary monuments and other artefacts of Viking-settled England (Page 1995: 181-196), including crosses and *bona fide* grave slabs.

Hogbacks bear no unequivocally Christian imagery. While Bailey's opinion that they were modelled on Irish stone shrines, or perhaps also English ones such as the so-called 'Hedda's Tomb' (a pre-Viking stone shrine at Peterborough) is convincing, that does not automatically qualify them as Christian monuments. Indeed, the preponderance of pagan images and cult symbols suggests that they are anything but. There are precedents for Christian practices inspiring pagan imitations. The wearing of amulets in the shape of Þórr's hammer or Óðinn's spear has

long been thought to have arisen as a pagan response to the wearing of the cross in honour of Christ (Owen 1981: 25). Furthermore, when one sees Viking Age crosses with side panels depicting scenes from Scandinavian myth and legend, one wonders what kind of religious beliefs their makers actually held.

For instance, the story of Sigurd and Volundr - a mythical craftsman who creates, among other things, a flying-machine - is illustrated on a cross from Halton in Lancashire. Volundr is shown on two crosses from Leeds, where one strikingly resembles a picture on a stone from Ardre in Götland, and Sigurd occurs on a fragment of a cross at Ripon, cross-slabs from Malew and Jurby on the Isle of Man, and a cross-shaft at Kirby Hill in Yorkshire. A panel on a cross at Kirkbymoorside in Yorkshire depicts a man with a noose around his neck - possibly Óðinn, who is also shown being swallowed by Fenrisúlfr on a panel at Andreas, Isle of Man. A fragmentary cross-shaft at Ovingham in Northumberland shows a scene from Ragnarok: a human figure holds back Fenrisúlfr as it strains upward toward the sun, while another, probably Heimdallr with his horn, stands by.

All or any of these may be examples of what one scholar called 'the pagan iconography of Christian ideas' (Bailey 1980: 124). But are they really Christian ideas expressed in familiar images from Norse myth and legend? It might equally be suggested that pagan Scandinavians happily hijacked established Christian modes of representation for their own ends, and that any resemblance to Christianity on some of these monuments is entirely coincidental. For Armageddon read Ragnarok; for Christ crucified read Baldr tied to a tree and slain, or Óðinn hanging on the World Tree, pierced by his own spear - an image that has ancient Indo-European roots. For the serpent of Eden, substitute the Miðgarðsormr, the World Serpent, or the snake Niðhoggr that gnaws at the root of Yggdrasill, another image from ancient Indo-European cosmology. It should also be remembered that various types of crosses are found as decoration or symbol in many pre-Christian and non-Christian ritual and religious contexts throughout the world, as representations of the sun or the cosmos. The cross within a circle is a particularly common type.

It would not be fair to blindly interpret all such ambiguous images on Viking Age monuments as pagan, just as it would be facile to see them wholly as Christian. James C. Russell has shown how the Germanic worldview - mythic and cosmological ideas, social propriety and structure - had a profound influence on Christianity in early medieval Europe. One important factor, he suggests, was the 'coincidental similarity between certain Germanic myths, rituals, and symbols and certain Christian religious beliefs, rituals, and symbols' (Russell 1994: 213). This argues for a degree of general convergence between Christian and pagan ideas, rather than a deliberate, pragmatic take-over of pagan rites and sites of the kind urged upon Anglo-Saxon England by Pope Gregory the Great late in the sixth century (Mayr-Harting 1972: 64). Scandinavians, as relative latecomers to Christianity at the time of the hogbacks' construction, would have been especially susceptible to such a merging of images and symbolic structures. Whether the hogbacks represent such a state of affairs is another matter.

The remaining mystery is the hogbacks' purpose. They are not tombstones or markers of any conventional grave. They do not bear epigraphical or other

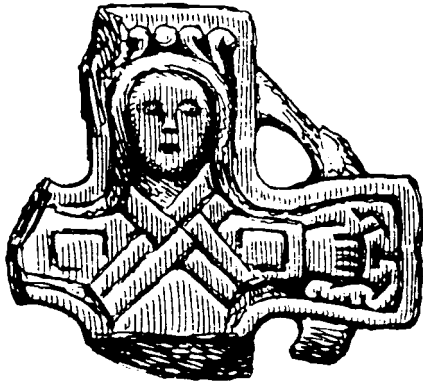


Figure 7: Thornton Steward (after Collingwood)

inscriptions. While many are found at or near churches, they are not quite Christian nor do they seem to be entirely heathen. But there is no avoiding the probability that their form was inspired by Irish stone shrines, as Bailey suggests. No real clues are offered by the distribution of hogbacks. They do tend to occur by rivers and near the coast, but enough of them are found far enough inland to confound an initial suspicion that they are memorials to those lost at sea and whose bodies were not recovered, which could otherwise explain the absence of the usual physical evidence associated with both cremation and inhumation among the Vikings. The best guess is that they were intended as religious monuments of some kind, as their imagery suggests. The nature of that religion is open to debate, but on balance the absence (or submergence?) of Christian content may be the decisive factor. If they were essentially pagan artefacts, a cosmological function is a distinct possibility.

Stones, rough or shaped, have served as representations of the cosmic centre, the *axis mundi*, in many cultures throughout history (Eliade 1958: 231-233). Houses have a similarly widespread cosmological aspect. They represent the entire cosmos, while their central or focal points are identified with the *axis mundi*:

'Every dwelling, by the paradox of the consecration of space and by the rite of its construction, is transformed into a 'centre'. Thus, all houses - like all temples, palaces, and cities - stand in the selfsame place, the centre of the universe' (Eliade 1958: 381).

This resonates with the cosmological scene on the Heysham hogback, and with depictions of the World Serpent on

so many hogbacks. In this context we should also note that the buildings of pagans in medieval Scandinavia had sacredness built into their fabric - the high-seat pillars of Scandinavian halls were sacred to Þórr, and the god seems also to have been associated with the main supporting posts of both temples and domestic dwellings. Images of the gods were carved on these objects (Davidson 1964: 78; Turville-Petre 1964: 248). One house, that of Ólafr the Peacock in 10th century Iceland, had scenes from Norse myth carved on its panels and rafters (Turville-Petre 1964: 248), paralleling the mythological scenes on hogbacks. This implies a certain clarity of purpose for hogbacks, rather than consigning them to religious ambiguity.

It is conceivable that they ultimately represent something alien to Christianity but close to the heart of Norse warriors. In Norse cosmology there is one particular building that stands out above all others - the hall of Oðinn at the heart of Asgarðr - where those chosen by the god fight and feast eternally until they are called to fight at Ragnarok. It may be significant that Oðinn was patron deity of the berserks, warriors believed to take the shape of bears in the frenzy of battle. This suggests a reason for the bears on the gable-ends of a number of hogbacks. It also suggests that the identification of Ragnarok on certain hogbacks is correct. Are hogbacks representations of Valholl, the 'hall of the slain'? Tentative confirmation may be found on a picture-stone from Alskog on Götland which shows a man riding an eight-legged horse, with other figures, including a woman greeting him with a drinking horn. This has been interpreted, reasonably enough, as Oðinn on his horse Sleipnir, being met by a valkyrie. But the horseman is riding towards a structure that has been identified as Valholl. Although it is damaged, the structure has the curving roof typical of hogbacks. Another Götland stone with a nearly identical carving confirms the resemblance.

The Norse adaptation of Irish shrines begins to make some kind of sense. If the Christians paid their highest respect to men and women of God - those chosen by God to do his greatest works - then it seems logical that the Vikings could have done the same. The difference being that for Oðinn the most worthy were the best warriors. In a way, hogbacks do (if this interpretation is correct) commemorate

the 'saints' of a warrior cult, those who do the god's work best. Whereas the Irish shrines mark the graves of saints, the hogbacks denote the cosmic dwelling of Oðinn's chosen. When Collingwood called hogbacks 'houses of the dead' (Collingwood 1927: 167) he was nearer the mark than he might have thought.

#### Notes

(1) The other side is badly defaced, but seems to be a repetition of the same scene.

(2) This type of figure has also been interpreted as Satan. In a Christian context, both Satan and Christ are associated with serpents.

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