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Understanding the Heysham Hogback

A tenth century sculpted stone monument and its context

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Heysham boasts two remarkable Anglo-Saxon churches, St. Peter's and the ruins of St. Patrick's, both placed dramatically overlooking Morecambe Bay and only about fifty yards from each other. St. Peter's may have been a monastic church, with St. Patrick's acting as a cemetery chapel (Potter and Andrews 1994). Local tradition claims that St. Patrick's was founded by the saint himself, after he was shipwrecked on St. Patrick's Skere in the bay nearby. However, the origins of St. Patrick's do not appear to be old enough to support such a legend. It remains possible that the church was dedicated to St. Patrick *because of* local legend that he had once come ashore here (even perhaps that he had founded St. Peter's), but St. Patrick's local popularity may also be attributed to settlement by Irish-Norse and to Heysham's position as the traditional crossing place for Ireland.

The hogback is displayed inside St. Peter's church, where it has been for the last forty years. It is made of red sandstone; it is a little over 2 metres (6'8") long, 28cm (11") wide and 54cm (15") high at the centre. The carvings suggest a tenth century date, and James Lang (1984) convincingly argued that most hogbacks are to be dated within the thirty years leading up to ca.AD950. It conforms to Lang's 'Illustrative Type' (Type VII) and both sides are decorated with panels of figural and animal carvings, which he describes as "arranged not according to symmetry, but to narrative constraint."¹ Its interest has been widely recognised, but it has always evaded easy interpretation. Edwards (1998 p94) sums up the situation, writing that "Despite a number of attempts to 'explain' the sculpture . . . it has to go down as a 'don't know'."

Hogbacks

The hogback is a distinctively Viking form, but as Richard Bailey points out "there is no hint in Scandinavia of this type of monument" (1980 p90), and it has been recognised since 1900 that hogbacks are probably a Viking development of the earlier Anglian shrine-tomb (Collingwood 1907 p276)², though adapted to the shape of a contemporary house. House-like stone sculptures such as the so-called Hedda Stone from Peterborough, are known from pre-Viking England and Scotland, and may have been the inspiration for the later hogbacks. Hogbacks are typically found in churchyards or churches (where they have often been reused as builders' rubble). The hogback is thus a wholly British phenomenon (there is one lone example in Ireland) with Christian Anglian roots, and although individual examples may show pagan iconography in their decoration (eg. Lowther 4 – 5 and Sockburn 21)³ there is nothing pagan about either their form or their context.

Bailey cautions against viewing hogbacks too firmly as grave-covers, as "no grave has been found in clear association with one of these stones," (1980 p99) although of course hogbacks are not always found in their original context (they have often been reused as builders rubble). Nonetheless their similarity to shrine-tombs and reliquaries strongly suggests that they were seen in some way as 'houses of the dead,' even if they may have functioned as cenotaphs rather than tombs. The Heysham Hogback is unusually large, and could readily have served as an actual grave cover if this was its intended function.

One curious feature found on many of the surviving hogbacks is the pair of carved animals known as end-beasts, which clasp each end of the monument in their stone paws. In some cases the animals are clearly bears, but in the case of Heysham it is difficult to relate their form to any natural members of the animal kingdom. Often only the forelegs are visible, but at Heysham all four limbs can be seen. Lang wrote (1984 p108): "Four-legged beasts tend to be associated with poor quality carving or developed forms . . . especially . . . the Illustrative Type [as at Heysham], and their stance and proportions are usually clumsy."

The Heysham Hogback is relatively well preserved, as it lay buried until about 1800. ⁴ The circumstances of its discovery are not completely clear, but except for one detail have little bearing on our understanding of the stone; some accounts suggest that a spearhead was found with it. This has been interpreted as evidence for a pagan burial with grave-goods, though there is no word of a body. If grave goods were discovered at Heysham, it would make this hogback unique. It would suggest this hogback at least was associated with pagan practices, and might influence attitudes to other such stones. But though often reiterated, the discovery of the spearhead is not reliably attested, and must be considered unproven at best.

Even if it could be proved that a spearhead had been found, it does not follow that it represents grave-goods without the presence of a body. It is possible that the spear was hidden once the hogback was already in place, using the stone as a marker for the spear's easy recovery at a later date. Even today graveyards are used to hide weapons.

The Figural Carvings

Edwards (1998 p94) notes that in the North West there is "a greater tendency to figural scenes than in most areas," and Heysham must rank among the most interesting examples. Each side of the stone is covered in figural carvings that invite interpretation. On one face (Face A) we see wolves, deer and men, on the other (Face B) a man beside a great tree surrounded by animals. It was in large part the interpretation of these scenes that had by 1894 already "formed the subject of much learned argument" (Fishwick 1894 p49), and it is their interpretation which chiefly concerns me here.

Dualistic interpretations have proved understandably popular, but have been largely subjective and consequently contradictory. One interpreter suggests that "the side which shows a single man surrounded by confident-looking animals represents man's bewilderment in the present world, and the side on which four men appear to be frightening two or three animals depicts how the position will be reversed when the dead rise again." ⁵ Another thinks that the first side depicts "the chaos under the old Gods" while the other side shows "the place of happiness from the 'tree of life' with man, or a God, upholding the heavens." ⁶ Another yet sees "the frowning almost violent figures on one side" as symbolising the dark side of life, with the other side representing "the joy and happiness of heaven." ⁷

No tradition of the kind of Christian iconography suggested by these interpretations can be traced elsewhere in Anglo-Norse carving, and a newly Christian community would have had difficulty in reading such allegorical meanings without awareness of an established iconographical tradition to draw upon. It is simply foolhardy to interpret such crude carvings as abstract concepts such as "chaos" or "happiness," and it is not surprising to find that there is not even agreement over which face represents the joys of heaven and which its opposite.

In 1891, Dr H Colley March proposed that the two sides of the hogback illustrated the Norse poem *Völuspá*, which he understood as an allegory for the victory of Christianity over paganism (March 1891). He saw Face A as a pagan version of the 'crack of doom,' with the wolves standing for the wolf Fenrir (though it is unclear why there should be five wolves in the place of one) and the human figures representing the Gods who fall at Ragnarök. On Face B he saw Christ beside Yggdrasil (which is taken as a pagan symbol for Christ's Passion) complete with mythological eagle and squirrel. His view has probably been the most influential of all, with followers to this day. ⁸

Professor Rosemary Cramp (Cramp 1994) also sees "a contrast between the traditional myths of the Germanic world and the Christian message." She reads Face A as Christian, and Face B as legendary, though she believes "it is equally possible that all of these strange motifs were capable of being interpreted in the light of both religions."

Other Christian interpretations make much of the trefoil and of a possible fish. But these are minor features (if we even allow that the fish exists at all) and in any case neither motif is exclusively Christian. Local traditions celebrating St Patrick have been invoked to see two trefoils in terms of "the well-known illustration of the doctrine of the trinity, adopted by St. Patrick," and the figure of the deer as a reference to the poem 'St Patrick's Breastplate.' ⁹

The four figures on the first side have been seen as the dwarfs, North South East and West, who hold up the sky in Norse cosmology (Davidson 1969 p116, 1988 p174; this view is widely followed in popular literature on mythology).

A purely secular interpretation has also been proposed for the first side, which is held to show a stag-hunt. ¹⁰ Hunt scenes may be found for comparison in Pictish carving and on the decorated *bautastein* from Alstad in Norway. But although there is a hart-and-hound motif at Heysham, without horses or weapons the human figures seem more hunted than hunter.

To begin to interpret the iconography, we must first identify some of the figures. If we cannot be sure exactly who is shown, then any interpretation will necessarily be subjective and suspect. For this reason, Bu'lock (1967) believed that "detailed interpretation" of the carvings on the Heysham Hogback was "quite unjustifiable, for this was a period where Christian iconography, folk-lore, convention, and mere decoration, were inextricably mixed together . . ." The curator of Lancaster Museum, Dr. Andrew White, is equally pessimistic: "The only people who are certain about the subject of the Hogback are those who do not know anything about the genre." ¹¹ But despite these warnings and the plethora of previous attempts, I believe it is possible to interpret these carvings convincingly.

The problem of interpretation is summed up more objectively by John McKinnell (2002 p28): "Sculpted images allude to motifs rather than relating complete stories, and they require prior knowledge if those motifs are to be understood." In their depictions of legendary stories, whether Christian or Germanic, sculptors attempted to incorporate specific details which would clearly define their subject. So, if we can identify pictorial elements which clearly illustrate a particular narrative episode from a story which the sculptor may be assumed to have known, then it is likely that the image alludes to that story.

When comparing the iconography of Viking Era carvings with stories preserved in medieval Icelandic manuscripts, we must be aware that the earliest written versions are separated from the Heysham hogback by three centuries and significant changes could have occurred. However, the medieval written accounts were based on earlier oral traditions, and key elements of later Icelandic legend have been clearly recognised in Viking Era sculpture. So, whilst we might not always have access to the stories in precisely the same form as the Heysham sculptor, and whilst our knowledge of the stories is probably considerably more limited than his, we can be confident that in specific essential details the stories are the same.



The Heysham Hogback, Face A
Photo: Fraser Smalley

Wolves and Men

Face A shows in its main panel four men, five wolves (or hounds) and one hart. Above these to the left is a smaller panel, showing one man and one wolf or hound; the man is lying prone and the animal approaches his feet. This smaller panel is I believe, the key to the whole, for it perfectly represents Sigmundr as he lies bound waiting for the wolf. His story is told in the Old Icelandic *Völsunga saga*, and forms part of the great cycle of legends surrounding the Völsungar. Sigmundr and his brothers are bound by their sister Signý's husband, and each night one is eaten by a large she-wolf. But when only Sigmundr is left, Signý smears him with honey. The wolf licks the honey; Sigmundr bites through its tongue and escapes. ¹²

The only manuscript of *Völsunga saga* dates from ca.1400, but the saga was compiled 150 years earlier from traditional materials. Where the sources of the saga have been preserved, their antiquity can sometimes be demonstrated. Among the sources referred to below, the poems known as *Fafnismál* and *Reginismál* contain elements which are probably tenth or eleventh century in origin, some of which may even have been composed in England. The stories themselves are probably the most widely illustrated in the Viking world and it is clear that there was a distinctive narrative-artistic tradition in which specific episodes from the legend were represented according to fixed conventions (Margeson 1980; McKinnell 2002). The Völsung stories are alluded to in the unambiguously tenth century *Eiríksmál*, and an Anglo-Saxon variant is outlined in *Beowulf* (874b – 897b), although neither source refers specifically to this episode. *Völsunga saga* also preserves an earlier fragmentary poetic reference to Sigmundr and Sinfjötli. ¹³

The legend of Sigmundr and the wolf also appears on the fragmentary stone frieze from the Old Minster at Winchester, where Sigmundr is lying down with the wolf on top of him, while an armoured figure (perhaps part of another scene) walks away. ¹⁴

The four figures in the lower panel may represent Sigmundr's nine ill-fated brothers, attacked by the wolves which were their death; they might also represent the three sons, sent by his sister Signý to Sigmundr in the woods. ¹⁵ The inconsistencies in numbers may be explained as alternative traditions, or on artistic grounds for reasons of space and symmetry. A small panel of ornament (above and to the right) perhaps supports the possibility that they are Signý's sons, as it appears to show a coiled snake ¹⁶ – Sigmundr tested the boys by making them knead a poisonous snake into a loaf. Alternatively, the four figures could represent Sigmundr and Sinfjötli his son, and the two kings' sons whom they steal wolfskins from. ¹⁷

Whilst today it may be difficult if not impossible for us to judge whether the panel shows Sigmundr's brothers or his sons or Sigmundr and Sinfjötli themselves, it is likely that a contemporary would have recognised distinctive elements to identify the scene as a traditional illustration, for which there was an accepted interpretation. This narrative-artistic tradition may have been preserved largely in perishable media such as tapestry and wood.

The Hart and Hound

In the centre of the main panel on Face A, is the image of a hart with a hound on its back. A great deal has been written on the significance of the recurrent motif of the hart-and-hound in Christian contexts, but I would like to draw attention to the possibility of other interpretations at Heysham.

The hart-and-hound motif is limited in the British Isles to Viking era carvings from Northern England and the Isle of Man. These are the same areas where themes from Norse legend occur, and the motif "does not appear on Northumbrian sculpture before the

Viking period” (Bailey 1980 p220, 72; Wilson 1970-73). The hart-and-hound motif does appear in pre-Christian Scandinavian carving; it is cut into a plank of the early ninth century Oseberg ship (Norway). It is also known from Migration era art, featuring on a wooden footstool or throne from Fallward (Niedersachsen, Germany),¹⁸ whilst a hart surrounded by hounds or wolves appears on the lost golden horn from Gallehus (Denmark), and a hart with a horned or long-eared quadruped on its back is shown on the Gundestrop bowl (Denmark).

It has been suggested that the motif represents the Christian beset by evil, the church pursuing the lost soul or the Jews in pursuit of Christ, but such allegorical interpretations hardly seem appropriate at Heysham. Generally its occurrence in pre-Christian contexts in Germany and Scandinavia, and its limitation in the British Isles to areas of strongest Scandinavian influence, suggest that Christian significance cannot automatically be inferred from the motif's appearance on Viking Age sculpture in Britain.

However, an interpretation of the theme as inherently Scandinavian is also problematical. The hart makes curiously little impact on the Scandinavian legends. It occurs, especially in *Grimnismál*, chewing on the branches of the mythological trees Yggdrasil and Laerad. But whilst this may explain the hart portrayed beside the door of Urnes stave church in Norway, the lack of so much as a branch on this side of the hogback makes this identification highly unlikely at Heysham. It is most likely that where the hart-and-hound occurred in Viking art, it represented no more than a hunting scene.

Völsunga saga opens with an account of a stag-hunt, which ends with Sigmundr's great-grandfather becoming “a wolf in holy places” (i.e. an outlaw), but it is unlikely that this is the scene shown at Heysham, as it is crucial to the story that there were only two hunters. It is the image of the wolf not the hart which recurs in the saga.

Some have seen the hart as a representation of Sigurðr, citing the Old Norse poem *Fafnismál*. Sigurðr names himself in this poem (v.2) as “*göfugt dýr*,” which means not “noble hart” but “noble beast.” In the late poem *Guðrúnarkviða II* (v.2), Sigurðr is described as “a long-legged hart over other beasts,” but he is also described as “a leek growing above the grasses,” and the intention is to compare Sigurðr favourably to other men, rather than to associate him specifically with the hart. However from *Guðrúnarkviða II* v.2 (and also from *Helgakviða II* v.37), it seems likely that the Sigurðr of *Fafnismál* may indeed mean ‘deer’ when he calls himself “noble beast.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, Sigurðr is not generally associated with deer, and there is no evidence for a tradition representing him in animal form.

Perhaps it is the hound we should be looking at, and not the hart. If this were not a hound but a wolf, like the other canines on the stone, then it may represent Sigmundr himself. After biting the she-wolf's tongue, Sigmundr also lives as “a wolf in holy places” and eventually he and his son Sinfjötli take the shape of wolves (see Note ¹⁷, above). *Völsunga saga* tells us little about this, but reveals that “under this enchantment they did many famous deeds.” If the image alludes to a lost tale of Sigmundr as a wolf, then we have little hope of ever coming closer to understanding it. But if the image does represent Sigmundr, either in a specific lost episode or showing in general terms his life as a wolf with Sinfjötli, it would tend to support the interpretation of the four human figures as Sigmundr Sinfjötli and the kings' sons who formerly owned the wolfskins. If this is the case then the brothers must be envisaged running with a larger wolf pack.

Somewhat unexpectedly, there is a close parallel for the whole panel on the top section of the fifth century runic horn from Gallehus in Denmark, as drawn by Paulli in 1734. Here as at Heysham, we see a hart attacked by hounds or wolves, and on either side stand a pair of men, their out-turned feet curiously reminiscent of the Heysham figures; even the amorphous animal above and left of the stag seems to find its echo on the horn. Unfortunately this does not help us identify the subject, since no-one knows what the figures on the Gallehus horn might represent (none of the four figures appear to be hunters). It is just possible that the entire scene was preserved in other media to reappear after five-hundred years across five-hundred miles of land and sea, but if so, the loss of the weapons at Heysham might suggest the image had been reinterpreted in the light of the Sigmundr legend; the hart-and-hound motif would then be a relic feature, without direct relevance to the story portrayed.

The Gundestrop bowl (second or first century BC) also shows a hart with an animal on its back, associated with a human figure and carnivorous-looking quadrupeds, some of which (as at Heysham) have excessively long tails.

If we knew more certainly what this image meant, we might know more about the four human figures in the panel, whether they do indeed represent Sigmundr's brothers or nephews or the stealing of the wolfskins, and whether they feature in the episode with the hart.



The Heysham Hogback, Face B
Photo: Fraser Smalley

Sigmundr's Son

On Face B, certain features are immediately obvious. There is a man standing by a tree, there are two animals to the right and others to the left. The two animals to the right (often taken for camels by the innocent!) turn out to be saddled horses, and most of the other creatures are birds; in the far left is what appears to be another wolf or hound. The combination of tree, birds and man has suggested to Lang (1984 p109) and Cramp (1994 p115) among others, that the scene depicts Sigmundr's son Sigurðr, who learnt the speech of the birds from drinking the blood of the dragon Fafnir. One of the horses would then be his famous steed Grani, and the other would presumably belong to his absent companion Regin (who we are told "was away off when Sigurðr killed Fafnir, and came back as Sigurðr cleaned the blood off his sword" – *Fafnismál* prose). The birds are those that Sigurðr heard chattering in a nearby tree, and who revealed Regin's treachery to him.

There are problems with the identification of Sigurðr here, and Richard Bailey (1980 p121) puts it "near the frontiers of credibility," finding it "not surprising that scholars have shrunk from making the identification." Normally we should expect a representation of Sigurðr to include certain other conventional attributes by which he can be identified (in the same way that a saint is also defined by his attributes): a fire with a spit; Sigurðr sucking his thumb; Regin the smith; and the dragon Fafnir. Not all these features are always present, but to identify Sigurðr without even one of them does indeed seem to stretch credibility.

In 2001, I was able to study the hogback with the help of two of the Heysham church guides Miss Mary Wright and Mr. John Disney, who have known the stone all their lives whereas I have only had the opportunity to visit it occasionally. There is a curious feature of this face of the hogback, which has often gone unnoticed, taking the form of a bulbous lump which interrupts the pattern of the *tegulae* or 'roof-tiles' just above the main panel of ornament. This was described to me by Miss Wright as "our sea-monster," and closer examination showed that it has the appearance of a serpent's head and forms part of a continuous ribbon which encircles the entire scene. The head appears (with the appearance of an ironic smile) just above the tree, and the neck and ribbon-like body continue to the right; a little to the left of the head is the tapering tip of the serpent's tail. Serpents are found on other hogbacks in the North West at Lowther (nos. 4 and 5; Bailey and Cramp 1988 p130-1) at Penrith (no. 7) and at Cross Canonby (no. 5), but in all these examples the serpent takes the shape of undulating coils at the base of the stone, not an encircling ribbon as is seen here. This serpent is also quite different from the small snake on Face A of the Heysham stone (discussed above), and his position surrounding the whole panel emphasises his importance to the meaning of the scene. Here then is the missing Fafnir, who encircles the entire scene, just as he does on the famous Sigurðr carving at Ramsund (Södermanland, Sweden). A serpent (or at any rate a serpent's tail) also appears on the half hogback from nearby Bolton-le-Sands; it is conceivable that this stone also represents Sigurðr's struggle with Fafnir. A grave slab from York Minster also probably depicts Sigurðr and Fafnir. ²⁰

Mr. Disney then pointed out the faint outline of what seems to be a sword (only visible in good light) held aloft in Sigurðr's right hand, which just touches the outline of the dragon Fafnir. This face of the stone has suffered severely from the effects of weathering (and perhaps from cleaning), but when the hogback was freshly cut and painted, these obscure elements would have been very much clearer than they are today. It is also likely that the detail on Fafnir's projecting head was gradually worn away during the hogback's long sojourn in the churchyard, where it gave piggyback rides to generations of Heysham children.

The wolf-like creature (on the far left) perhaps symbolises Regin's treachery. It reappears next to Regin on the Ramsund stone, and in a similar position on the Gök stone. ²¹ The wolf was symbolic of treachery, and Regin's untrustworthiness was possibly proverbial. In *Fafnismál* (v.35), one of the birds says, in a pointed allusion to Regin's planned treachery, "I expect the wolf once I see the ears." ²² Regin is described in the prose of *Reginismál* as "wise in magic" and his two brothers can change shape (one into an otter and the other into a dragon), so it would seem appropriate that Regin might take the form of a wolf. But if there ever was such a tradition (perhaps based simply on a literal-minded reading of *Fafnismál* v.35) it is now lost.

Not everyone agrees on the identification of a fish on this face, but if there is one (on the bottom right), then it is mirrored by the fish found on the Sigurðr stone from Ramsey (IOM), where a salmon is eaten by Regin's otter-shaped brother.

So on one side is Sigmundr, and on the other is his son Sigurðr. The fact that both sides of the hogback seem to refer to the same legendary cycle shows consistency, which lends credence to the identification of the scenes on each individual side. ²³

Pagan or Christian?

The question most asked about this monument is whether it is Christian or pagan. This straightforward question deserves our attention here, but ultimately I believe there is no straightforward answer. If we turn first to historical evidence for the religious environment in tenth century Heysham, the unhappy truth is that we know next to nothing about the structure of the Church in the north of England at this date, especially in the north west. Large scale ecclesiastical organisation seems to have collapsed, with the Bishopric of York the sole survivor among the northern dioceses, but the continued use of Christian cemeteries possibly suggests less disruption at a local level.

We saw earlier that hogback monuments have Christian origins and are found at Christian sites. This need not mean that the hogback was an exclusively Christian style of monument; it is after all a hallmark of Scandinavian settlement, and may be decorated according to distinctly Scandinavian tastes including mythological scenes. All we can say with certainty is that during this period, stone sculptures aimed at Scandinavian tastes (such as the hogbacks at Heysham and Lowther) were erected in churchyards.

Neither can we say that this must be a Christian monument on the grounds that it was found in a Christian context – a churchyard containing an earlier Anglian cross-shaft. Viking burials identifiable by grave-goods have been found in Christian graveyards at for instance, Ormside in Cumbria, at Kildale in Yorkshire, at Repton in Derbyshire, at Balladoole and in great numbers at Peel (St Patrick's Isle) on the Isle of Man. Churchyards may have been used as burial sites simply because they were the traditional sites already in use, or, where a mound (or hogback) makes the burial obvious, to show who was the new master. A burial or memorial at a Christian site need not imply a Christian rite. ²⁴ Likewise, elements of Christian ritual may have been adopted well in advance of true conversion.

Lang observed (1984 p92) that “The distribution of Norse-Irish placenames corresponds remarkably closely to the scatter of hogbacks.” Among these Norse-Irish settlers were the Gaill-Gaedhel, who are described by Smyth (1979 p265) as “half-pagan, half-Christian in religion; and ethnically . . . half-Norse, half-Celtic.” A contemporary description tells us, “They were a people who had renounced their Baptism, and they were usually called Northmen, for they had the customs of the Northmen, and had been fostered by them . . .” ²⁵ But on the other hand, the Norse-Irish who named Aspatria (‘Ash-Patrick’) are likely to have been Christian.

So, if these avenues do not lead to an answer, what can we learn from the legends we have identified in the figural carvings?

Sigmundr and his sons also appear in *Eiríksmál*, a poem which commemorates Eiríkr Blóðøx (‘Bloodaxe’) the last Viking king of York, whose rule probably extended over Heysham at about the time the hogback was made. Here the heroes greet the fallen Eiríkr at the doors of Valhöll; their memory is invoked to reflect glory on Eiríkr. Perhaps the hogback at Heysham makes a similar point, and is the memorial of another Viking who has gone to join the heroes in Óðinn’s hall. If so, then it would appear to imply that we might be dealing with a pagan monument after all, since it is only in the context of the pagan Valhöll that such a reference could be meaningful.

Eiríkr was supposedly Christian (as King of York he ruled a population that was at least partly Christian, and where Bishops and Church were still a significant power), and he and his wife are said to have founded churches, but it is hard to see how we can reconcile his memorial ode with Christianity as it is normally understood. *Eiríksmál* (which was probably composed for his widow in the Orkneys or Denmark, away from the Christian influence of York) is a thoroughly pagan poem and calls his professed Christianity into question as well as his wife’s. No such questions exist about the faith of his brother Hákon, who was brought up at the Christian court of Æthelstan in England, and a very similar poem was composed to mark his death. But here the poet Eyvindr grasps the complexity of the situation beautifully, as the king “goes to greet the heathen god.” Eyvindr was pagan. His king had been Christian, but Eyvindr honours him as a pagan, whilst recognising the incongruity it creates. There is no such recognition of incongruity in Eiríkr’s poem, and perhaps none was perceived.

After the absorption of Northern England by the kings of Wessex, there is a new interest in the definition and outlawry of pagan practices in their laws. The provisions against paganism do not appear to be based on earlier provisions from the time of the English conversion, and there is every reason to suppose that they reflect the presence of a significant pagan community in the newly absorbed North. These laws first appear in the legal codes of Bishop Wulfstan of York, who knew the situation in the Danelaw at first hand. Wulfstan’s lawcodes continue to legislate against specific pagan practices (including the worship of idols and heathen gods) in the early eleventh century, and make it clear that even at this date the pagans counted king’s thanes among their number; clearly the pagan community had a secure political base and was not eager to abandon its religion.

Fifty years after Eiríkr’s death, Bishop Wulfstan preached his *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* (‘The sermon of the Wolf to the English’). In it he suggests that among the English are many “pagans and apostates,” confirming the impression gained from the laws. If there were pagans and apostates in Wulfstan’s day, it is very likely that they were there in Eiríkr’s day too, and when the hogback was made. This raises the question: How would Wulfstan have regarded Eiríkr’s Christianity? Would Eiríkr have been numbered among the apostates?

In the Icelandic *Landnámabók* we hear of Helgi (‘the Lean’), who was brought up a Christian but who “called on Thórr for seafaring and tough decisions, and for the things he thought were of most importance.” Helgi would probably have said he was Christian. He accepted the Christian God, and he had been baptised. But Wulfstan would have called him an apostate. We are reminded of an earlier example in King Raedwald of East Anglia, who Bede tells us “had in the same temple an altar for the holy Sacrifice of Christ side by side with an altar on which victims were offered to devils.” ²⁶

The Icelandic poem *Sólarljóð* is piously Christian, but contains elements from pagan tradition which take their place within a Christian allegory; angels singing psalms rub shoulders with Njörðr and the Nornir, and if Óðinn’s wife is despised she is not denied. ²⁷ On the other hand the poem *Völuspá* is overtly pagan, yet shows the influence of Christianity. *Sólarljóð* and *Völuspá* are very different poems by very different poets holding very different beliefs; one is pagan and one is Christian, but they both combine images drawn both from paganism and from Christianity. Study of eddic poetry such as *Völuspá* reveals “a deep absorption of Christian doctrine in a Norse-speaking community, which maintained its own Norse religious traditions in the wider political context of Christian society” (Dronke 1996 p124), and among the likely locations for the birth of this new paganism is the Viking north of England.

At the heart of the problem is the question of what is meant by Christianity: To a pagan, Christianity means the adoption of the Christian God; to a Christian it means the renunciation of the pagan gods. A pagan approach to Christianity might result in a mix of religions that looks Christian to a pagan, looks pagan to a Christian, and looks plain confusing to an archaeologist ten centuries later.

But if the Völsungar-legends might be used for a pagan memorial, they were used for Christian memorials too. At nearby Halton (Lancs.), a contemporary churchyard cross combines Sigurðr-scenes with Christian imagery (Taylor 1971 p287). The most famous Sigurðr carving of all is that from Ramsund (Södermanland, Sweden), which is clearly Christian from its runic inscription

in which Sigrid dedicates it to “the soul of her husband.” The Gök stone marks its religious affiliations with a cross. Even the devout King Ólafr inn Helgi (‘the Holy’) had a tapestry depicting Sigurðr and Fafnir in his hall, and asked the poet Þórfinnr to make a verse about it (*Flateyjarbók III*, 9, p244).

It has even been shown that the story of Sigurðr can be read in a Christian context (Bugge 1953 p36, cited in Bailey 1980 p124). His defeat of the dragon Fafnir can be equated with St. Michael’s conquest of Satan, and his drinking of Fafnir’s blood with the Eucharist. Such allegorical readings of pagan texts are possible, though to accept both readings involves Fafnir’s allegorical transubstantiation from Satan into Christ. At Heysham however, where there is no overtly Christian imagery to lead us, it is unlikely that a specifically Christian allegory is intended.

The legends of Sigurðr and Sigmundr are not in themselves either pagan or Christian, but simply heroic. Although the roots of these stories may lie in a world where Christianity was unknown, we owe their preservation to generations of Christian oral storytellers and poets, as well as to the medieval Christian scribes who recorded them for posterity.

There are also examples from Anglo-Saxon tradition, where heroic legend has been reworked in a Christian context. In the great Old English epic *Beowulf*, the monster Grendel is a descendant of Cain, driven into exile by God, whom the pagan Beowulf defeats through Providence; “The Lord ruled over all mankind, as He still does now” (*Beowulf*, 1057b – 1058b). Anglo-Saxon regnal lists name Germanic heroes alongside Biblical ones. The lyric ‘Deor’ draws a Christian message from traditional heroic exemplars. ²⁸

Consequently, it is not possible to say with certainty whether the Heysham hogback was intended to commemorate a Christian or a pagan or someone of ‘mixed religion,’ if indeed it was intended as a memorial at all. The hogback has Christian English antecedents and possibly marked a burial in a Christian burial-ground, yet the choice of decoration shows greater interest in heroic legend than in Christian theology or Redemption. As such it represents a secular comment on the heroic qualities of the person commemorated rather than either a Christian or heathen religious statement.



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Notes

- [1] Lang 1984 p109; the entry for Heysham is on p138 with facing illustrations on p139. In writing this article, I am indebted to their useful comments to Professor Rosemary Cramp and to John S. McKinnell.
- [2] Collingwood writes, "In a paper on the Early Christian monuments of the Glasgow district (read November 9, 1900), Mr. Romilly Allen traces the evolution of the hogback from Christian sarcophagi of the third century in Italy, made in imitation of roofed buildings." He adds, "hogbacks . . . evolved from English shrine-tombs."
- [3] Bailey and Cramp 1988 p130-1 for Lowther, and *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture vol.1: County Durham and Northumberland* p143-4 for Sockburn; see also Lang 1984 p146 (Lowther 1 & 2) and p164 (Sockburn 5).
- [4] Sadly it has recently suffered from re-exposure to a moist atmosphere, but is still in good condition. Casts of the stone were made shortly before its recent deterioration.
- [5] Bagley, J. J. 1972 *Lancashire*, B. T. Batsford Ltd, London p30
- [6] Howard, A. ca.1978 *A Brief Guide to St. Peter's Church Heysham together with the Antiquities to be seen in the Environment*, The Rector and PCC, Heysham p6
- [7] Dent, E. 1997 *Heysham – A History*, Heysham Heritage Association, Heysham p8; my thanks are due to Lisa Earnshaw for a summary of interpretations in local guide-books.
- [8] Cramp 1994 p115; Davidson 1985 p61; Hogarth, F. W. 1967 *St. Patrick, Heysham, and Christianity in Britain*, publisher and place of publication unknown – presumed to be local
- [9] Tomlinson (Miss) ca.1900 *A Guide to Heysham: With a Description of its Antiquities*, Wigleys Bookshop, Lancaster p7
- [10] Margeson 1980 p191 believed each face showed "a simple hunt-scene." Lang 1984 p110 referred to the figures on Face A as "the four hunters"
- [11] email correspondence
- [12] *Völsunga saga* Chapter 5 (Guðni Jónsson 1954 p116-9)
Whilst this scene could be interpreted as Óðinn and Fenrir at Ragnarök (as at Kirk Andreas IOM or less certainly at Ledberg Östergötland), it is difficult to see the possible significance of Óðinn's fall in the context of the Heysham carvings as a whole.
- [13] *Völsunga saga* Chapter 8 (Guðni Jónsson 1954 p127)
- [14] Winchester Old Minster 88, dated to ca.980-1094 (probably either 993-4 or 1016-42). Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1995 p314-22.
- [15] *Völsunga saga* Chapters 6 and 7 (Guðni Jónsson 1954 p119-23)
- [16] Lang (1984 p138) describes this feature as "a disorganised twist in medially inscribed strand." The legendary association of the Völsungar with poison features in a verse by the ninth century poet Bragi the Old, who uses the kenning *Völsunga drekka* ('the drink of the Völsungar') to mean 'poison' (*Skáldskaparmál* v.153 cf. Faulkes, A (ed.) Snorri Sturluson *Edda: Skáldskaparmál* 1998 p50; Faulkes, A (trans.) Snorri Sturluson *Edda* 1987 p106).
- [17] *Völsunga saga* Chapter 8 (Guðni Jónsson 1954 p123-4)
Return to the second reference to this note here: [17]
- [18] The stool was found in 1994 and is preserved in the Museum Burg Bederkesa. On the other side from the hart-and-hound carving are the runes **kamella lguskapi** which have been read by Düwel as *skamella alguskapi* = "footstool (showing / in honour of) elk-killing."

[19] cf. Sijmons-Gering's note on *Fafnismál* v.2, *Die Lieder der Edda* Bd. III Part 2 p186

[20] Minster 34, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture vol.3: York and Eastern Yorkshire* p71; see also McKinnell 2002

[21] Ellis (1942) believes it represents an otter but the form of both animals, in particular of the well-drawn example from Ramsund, is clearly canine.

[22] This proverb appears to have been widely known and is used by Saxo (Book V iii 3) in a different context (J. Olrik and H. Raeder (edd.) *Gesta Danorum I* Copenhagen 1931 p113; P. Fisher (trans.) and H. Ellis Davidson (ed.) *The History of the Danes I* Haverhill 1979 p127). A lost passage from the poem *Reginismál* is quoted as a proverb by King Sverri (*Sverris saga* Chapter 164 p314, Guðni Jónsson (ed.) *Konunga Sögur II* Reykjavik 1957); the verse which Sverri quotes was originally paralleled by another on Regin's untrustworthiness, as it is in the prose version of *Völsunga saga* Chapter 15 (Guðni Jónsson 1954 p146).

[23] The Anglo-Saxon tradition represented in *Beowulf* has Sigemund (=Sigmundr) slay the dragon, doing away with any need of Sigurðr, but it is not possible that this is the version represented here. The context of the Heysham Hogback, which is Norse not Anglo-Saxon, and the appearance on the stone of distinctive elements from the Norse story (especially the horses, which are replaced in *Beowulf* by a boat) preclude the possibility that both sides represent the Anglo-Saxon hero Sigemund.

[24] see for instance Wilson 1967, p42-5

[25] from J. O'Donovan (ed.) *Annals of Ireland. Three Fragments by Dubhaltach macFirbisigh* Dublin 1860 p138-9, cited in Smyth (1979, p132)

[26] Bede *A History of the English Church and People* Book2 Chapter15 translation Leo Shirley-Price, (revised by R. E. Latham, Harmondsworth, 1955, 1965, 1968 and subsequent reprints).

[27] In this respect *Sólarljóð* seems to be a literary equivalent to those stones which appear to use pagan imagery within a Christian context.

[28] For a perspective on the production of (literary) art on pagan-heroic subjects in a Christian context, see Wormald, P. 'Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy,' in R. T. Farrell, ed. *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England: Papers in Honour of the 1300th Anniversary of the Birth of Bede* (British Archaeological Reports 46) London 1978