

Interpreting the Gotland Memorial Stones
by Timothy J. Stephany
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Abstract:

The Gotland memorial stones tend to provide a means for people to look for graphical representations of what they know from what they have read. Since what people know is the starting point to how they then interpret the stones, they have done so without properly evaluating what the stones actually depict and what it might mean, largely divorced from our other knowledge. If the stones are showing us things that have not been recorded in writings, then they offer something that is unique, and the proper interpretation of them must not become stalled through a faulty approach. An important part of interpretation lies in the ability to see how the same thing is represented on different stones, giving a sense of the context in which it appears helps to define its purpose. The Storra Hammar stone is said to depict a sacrifice, yet there is no indication that a sacrifice is shown, nor that the *valknut* itself is in any way connected to the Norse god Odin, on this or the other stones. The Tangelgaerda stone, Ardre stone and Klinte stone also appear to be mostly concerned with the person being memorialized. Memorial stone depictions include recurring images of the Norse ship and the man on horseback being greeted by a figure holding a drinking horn to him. There are three instances of all the funerary equipment being led along by a winged spirit (that might be a *fylgia*). The stones are primarily focused around the end of the man's life on this world and their transfer into the next, while other depictions still remain difficult to decipher.

Timothy J. Stephany
Rochester Institute of Technology
One Lomb Memorial Drive
Rochester, NY 14623-5603

Introduction

This endeavor has largely arisen not out of any regard to what might be gained from properly interpreting these stones, covering the era that's span includes the so-called Viking Age, but to provide alternate interpretations to those that others have given them, that in adding to the diversity of these it might be more clear how poorly we are able to do so. Much hasty interpretation can be inspired by wishful thinking; the central problem is, apart from the enigmatic contents of the stones themselves, that we are using what we already believe we know in order to interpret what the stones mean; so after we have interpreted what they mean, we will learn very little from them, despite all our efforts.

The only purpose they appear to currently serve is to validate the conceptions we have already formed; we look for visual representation of our notions of what the Medieval Norse believed or did, but they don't ever seem to be able to add to our overall understanding, which would only happen if we could be sure of what the stones were depicting and why. For this reason we shouldn't perhaps get too wrapped up in attempting to explain what they are showing, because we might only find they were showing what we know to look for.

How one approaches the issue of interpreting might be based upon a poor attempt to see evidence of something that isn't really there, that something that is close to is deemed good enough to offer some verification. It is often the case that we will take what we know from texts, sagas or myths, and then look for evidence of them in these pictures, which are often based upon an attempt to believe we are somewhat knowledgeable at least, such as presuming that the eight-legged horse on the Ardre and Tangvide stones are Odin's horse Sleipnir. So assuming that because it is an eight-legged horse and because Sleipnir is said to have had eight legs, then that is

an easy interpretation, but even if it might be so, it is also clear that the rider is not Odin at all, although this assertion is often enough made. It must also be clear that how something is shown, especially in regards to scale, might just as well be based upon spatial limitations as upon any attempt to provide accurate scale, just as one will scrunch letters together when reaching the end of a page so that they will all fit. So scale is by no means indicative of true proportion.

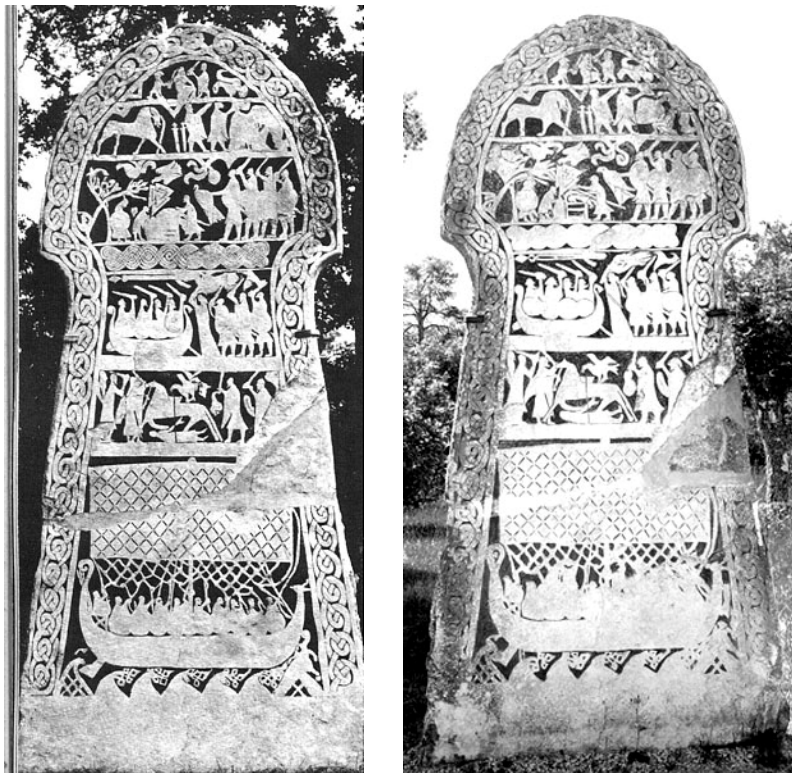
The important thing is to try to one's best to attempt to understand what would be the value of communicating, and the purpose of such communication, rather than to attempt to see in the stone graphics what we would wish to see represented from what we know. For this reason it is far better to attempt to be open-minded and leave a certain amount of latitude around what we think the stones might be showing and why, and not to get drawn into accepting either common or widespread interpretations that otherwise arise from mere published guesswork. So here the attempt will be to approach them simply by what they show, then to try to give a meaning that is easily arrived at and does not rely itself upon too many assumptions and attempts to assign a great deal of up-front symbolism when none might have been intended. There might also be something to be gained in being able to look at the real stones up close rather than using rather low-resolution images of them, but low-resolution images are all I possess.

Stora Hammar stone

Beginning the process of correctly interpreting this stone must begin with a clarification of what is being depicted. Shown in *Figure 1* are two different images that I have of this stone, each showing a slightly different view on contents.

Figure 1.

Two different views of the Stora Hammar stone



How this stone will be interpreted greatly depends upon which one you use, and it is not at all clear which one is more authentic than the other, or if anything has been prone to interpretation in rendering the painted regions. This of course only amounts to the beginning of the frustration, the rest in figuring out what is being depicted with little or nothing to go by, there are prior attempts at having explained them by making comparisons to textual works that are questionable at best, and then there is the real danger of putting forward interpretations that are not only entirely wrong, arising only from guesswork, but are deemed in the future to be absolutely ridiculous.

Here the first step is going to be based upon defining what each object shown is, which is based upon which of the two depictions is accepted as more accurate. Here the second is going

to be taken because this one is more commonly shown. However, before proceeding it should be clear where major discrepancies exist, particularly in the second panel down, which appears to show three figures gathered around a pool, whereas the first shows only an indefinite collection of blobs. Likewise below in the third panel, to the left is shown a warrior under the tree with a rope going up to the tree, the second does not show such a connection. These present major problems for a full and accurate interpretation, and all that follows is conditional upon the assumption that the second depiction is the more accurate one, which is by no means being assumed unconditionally.

By taking this second depiction and coloring objects so they can be defined, which is shown below, and looking only at the upper half, since the lower half clearly depicts a Norse longship, this is what we have.

Figure 2.

Color-coded Stora Hammar stone (upper half)



The red figures are all warriors, the flesh ones are unarmed men, the blue shapes appear to be ornamentation, there are two horses, the light blue figure is a woman, the light green are birds, and there are two trees in the third panel. Much of these are clear, some are open to question, so let's take a closer look at each panel here.

Panel 1, the top panel, shows two warriors around another figure shown in violet, who appears to be unarmed. There is also a design to fill the blank space. The figures are smaller in size than the others, which might not represent the true scale. If it does it would appear to show

two children fighting against a effigy of some sort, for practice fighting. Such mock fighting is attested in Norse literature and if the stone shows a progression in time from top to bottom, then this appears to be logical. However, it is by no means certain and it isn't clear who the figure in the center would be. Let us take this as our working interpretation of the first panel.

Panel 2, second from the top, clearly shows a horse to the left, two swords set against the wall, and two figures, presumably the swords' owners are walking to the right, each carrying something. On the right-hand side are what appear to be three figures gathered around a pool. The two figures arriving appear to be carrying something like pieces of wood, and as their weapons are set aside, it is clearly something other than swords. If these have been properly identified, and given the initial panel, are perhaps the same two figures when grown. If they are carrying wood to a pool, the three men might well be diviners of some sort, and thus the purpose of their visit is for some form of prophetic knowledge. But I am unaware of anyone ever floating wood in a pool or natural spring as a means of divination, and the panel remains open to quite a bit of conjecture.

Panel 3, the third from the top, is the most noticed and regarded as showing some form of human sacrifice as a hanging to the god Odin. This is underscored by the *valknut* shown nearby. However, there is nothing that has ever illustrated or proven that the *valknut* had anything to do with Odin, in fact the only sort of possible interpretation it could have is from its typical use around men of prominence mounted on horses, which might well be a symbol of divine power but nothing to do with Odin, as far as anyone has shown. In addition to this there is the figure on a frame, which has been suggested to be a sacrificed dwarf or child.

There is more potential evidence in scenes depicted on the Hammars picture-stone from Larbro on Gotland, dated to 700-800. A man carrying a shield seems to be tied by his neck to the branch of a tree which has

been tethered down. When the tree is released he will be jerked from his feet. The main focus of the scene, however, is the small figure, perhaps a dwarf or child in the centre of the panel, who lies face downward upon a platform of some kind. Above the figure hangs a *valknut*, three triangles that mark the victim as dedicated to Odin, bound in the same impossible perspectival framework that so fascinated the Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher. (Ferguson 2009: 30)

Despite all of this interpretation, used to prove the existence of human sacrifice in Norse culture, not just forced sacrifice but voluntary sacrifice, nothing in the picture actually illustrates human sacrifice or a sacrifice of any kind. Likewise no one has satisfactorily explained the presence of the two birds in the scene, one being brought by a band of warriors, the other floating in the sky.

The pictures rather suggest an altogether different story, once it is seen that the warrior to the left does not appear to be connected to the tree, and that there is no weapon of sacrifice shown near the “dwarf or child”. The tree is clearly being bent down, and the rope tied to it is being held by the figure near the center. Then there is another figure lying upon a frame, and another behind what appears to be an upright stone. There is also the warrior who is standing behind the one who is behind the stone. There is nothing to indicate the figure on the frame is a sacrificial victim, and considering that the man is pulling back the young tree, the man on the frame might merely be holding it down with his weight. If the rope were then tied to the frame, the stone would force the frame to fly skyward, which would carry the object upon it high up, and the object there is shown to be a bird. This could mean that what is being shown here is not a sacrifice at all, but another means of divination. The means by which the tree is pulled back by an assistant, attached to the frame, held down by another assistant, with bird is placed on the frame, which is then released. The bird flies into the air and the man behind the stone (who is shown to have divine power) interprets the trajectory of the bird in order to foretell the future.

The warrior standing behind him might well be the one who brought the bird for this unusual test. What we are seeing is them pulling down the tree for the next arrivals, the band of men bringing their own bird for the same test. This at least explains the presence of the birds, and lack of tools of execution.

It is true that the flight of birds has been used in divination by many, but never this sort of unnatural flight, really flinging the bird into the air, although it is not even clear if the bird is a live one, a dead one, or a carved one. The physical rather than metaphorical presence of the birds is confirmed by the fact that the men are carrying it there to that spot, otherwise the bird could well be viewed as representing a spiritual form. It is also possible that this practice rather conferred some form of divine protection to the person, rather than being a redundancy of the divination scene in panel 2. There is also no reason to believe the assistant lying upon the frame is a dwarf or child, it rather appears the figure has been simplified and scaled to fit it into the picture. While it should certainly be said that the scene might well be showing a sacrifice or a funeral, nothing in the panel secures either of these interpretations.

Panel 4 shows one band of warriors arriving by sea in a ship on the left, about to engage with another band of warriors arriving by land and being led by a woman holding a flaming torch. This is about all that can be said, except that it seems to be the consequence of the prior panel, that the divination was in some way preparatory for the coming battle, but it is not clear which side was seeking it. What appears above the boat, apparently a tongs holding a diamond might indicate the identity of those within the ship. Of course it might mean something altogether different. There's no way for us to easily guess about anything, lacking an informant about it.

Panel 5 reveals what might be the fate of the warrior in question, for whom the memorial stone was raised. A headless body underneath a horse, which carries a bird upon its back is the

central feature of this plate, with warriors shown on either side. The bird in this case might well be symbolic of a freed spirit, but there is no way to distinguish it from the birds above, which are presumably real. But if this was the case, and the warrior was killed, it would then clearly be followed by what is in fact the final panel showing the warriors on their way to the Otherworld upon a stately craft.

Tangelgaerda stone

The stone in *Figure 3* shows a couple of the same features as the Stora Hammar stone: the *valknut* around the man on horseback leading a row of men with rings perhaps indicates the function of the *valknut*, in the second panel is a horse with a body underneath it, and apparently a bird on its back. This stone is even more difficult to interpret because the figures are even less clearly definable, but will be the subject of our next interpretation.

Figure 3.

The Tangelgaerda stone



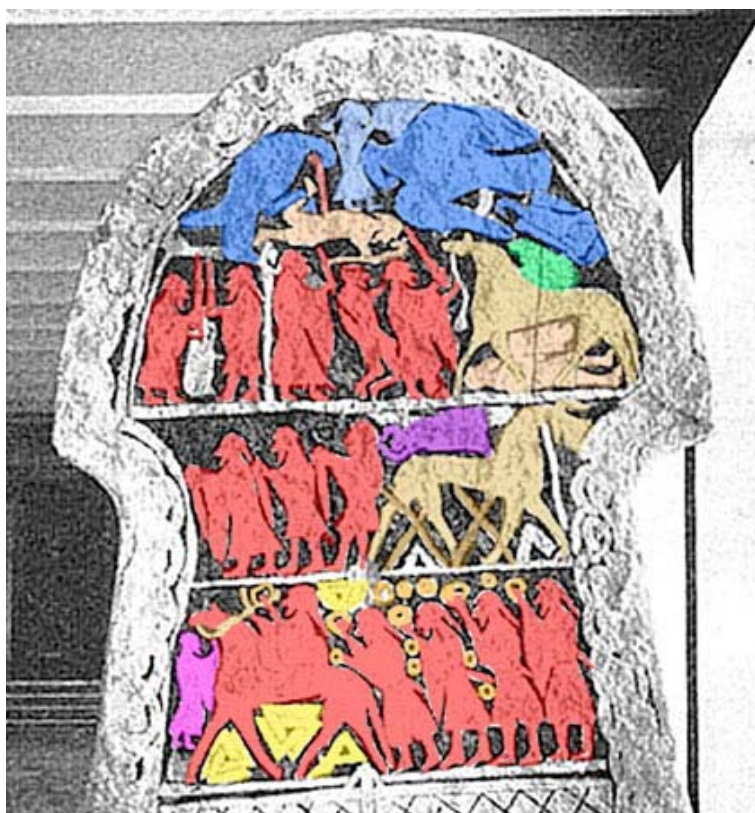
Again it is not necessary but to consider the top half of the stone, as the bottom half showing a ship is a common feature on many memorial stones and appears to reveal a man of great significance and the ship as symbolic of passage to the Otherworld, which is also attested in numerous ship burials, and could have become a commonly accepted funerary motif even after its spiritual significance was lost.

Panel 1, the top panel, shows what appears to be a corpse being pulled upon by a bird-like creature, with two other birds shown and in the center the figure of a woman. Panel 2 shows two scenes: the first with two figures holding up swords on the left, and three men with swords with a horse with a bird on its back that is standing over a body on the ground. Panel 3 shows three warriors walking to the left with their swords turned down towards the earth, the horse to the

right. Panel 4 shows a figure upon horseback holding a ring and *valknuts* surrounding him, followed by a procession of warriors holding up rings. Another figure, standing out in front (to the left), holds something forth that might be a drinking horn.

Figure 4.

Color-coded Tangelgaerda stone (upper half)



So what does it all mean? It is impossible to tell for sure, but assuming that the individual panels are related, the top panel seems to show an unworldly place, perhaps the Underworld. The only obvious place it shows is a depiction of Hel, with a creature consuming a corpse, the woman figure in the center could very well be Hel herself, but this is just conjecture. It is unclear if this were the underworld why it would be birds and not rather snakes that are featured

prominently. Winged creatures might well be sort of demonic creatures, and both Nidhogg and Hraesvelg (corpse eater) are winged, but as to what they are is entirely uncertain.

The following panel may shed some light on it, if the two figures at the left are engaged in a duel it could be the first and second panel reveal the fate of the two participants, the upper went to a wretched existence by having his corpse torn apart by winged demons. Here it also might reveal the function of the horse and bird, that if it is not just a metaphor, that it actually represents some form of procession around the corpse with a shield on his chest, to assure that the man would pass fortunately into paradise, rather than into the abyss.

The three men with swords do not appear to be fighting the horse, but one appears to be leading it, not over the prone figure but it appears to show that the horse is going around the figure. The next panel might show these same three men having left the horse and perhaps the man, after having performing the burial or cremation ceremony. Although it is not clear whether the horse shown has been tied up and left with his master, it now appears to be propped upon sticks (making it look quite like an eight-legged horse) with what might be a spiritual form hovering above it, indicating the horse has been sacrificed. Indeed, it looks as though a bag might have been tied over the horse's head. The next panel appears to be a variant of the warrior's arrival in the Otherworld, greeted with a figure holding a full horn and followed by his true companions, coming into paradise as a great man. The figure greeting them with the horn, usually shown as a maiden might represent someone of significance, such as his own father, who might also have been a king of sorts.

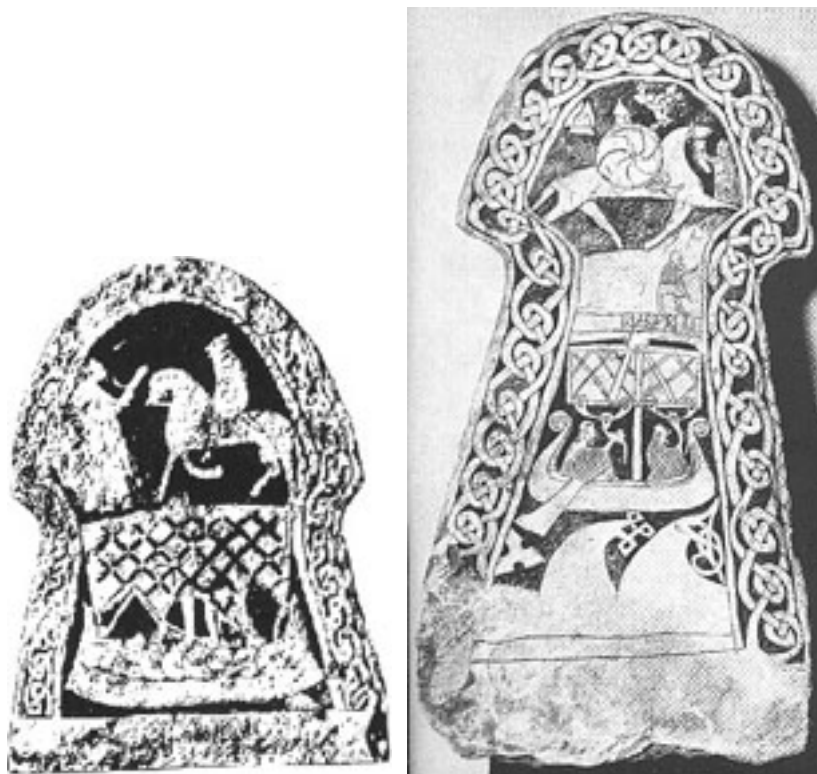
In other words the stone represents the fate of two men who engaged in a duel, both died but one went off to a terrible existence in Hel while the other was welcomed as a great man into

paradise (Valhall?). This appears to be a plausible interpretation, although it is all conjectural, even if it is based upon some underlying knowledge of Norse culture and their spiritual beliefs.

In *Figure 5* are examples of two other stones that depict the warrior arriving to the figure holding a drinking horn upon their arrival, while both also include a Norse ship underneath.

Figure 5.

Halla Bora stone and Stenkyrka stone



The Ardre stone

Figure 6.

The Ardre stone



This is one of the two stones that receives its share of attention for depicting what most identify as Odin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir, one of the few presumed artistic representations of a mythological figure. While the paper "The Nordic Otherworld: Interpreting the Tängvide and Ardre Stones" provides a complete analysis of the straightforward action going on at the top of this stone, this study will continue with an attempt to sort out the possible meaning of the bottom part of the stone, which itself shows no separate panels of action like other memorial stones.

representation shown on the top of the stone and also on the well-known Tangvide stone; the only difference being that it is showing the funerary collection of a woman rather than a man.

The next sequence that draws attention begin in the middle of the left, showing two men in a row boat, below which a bearded man (likely one of the men from the boat) is seated with what appears to be a four-headed figure. Below the two men are again in their boat, this time spear fishing. The bearded man appears again, this time facing what appears to be a wild boar across a river. This then leads to two men (likely the two men from the boat) leading to a river where across the way is a woman (Valkyrie?) holding either a torch or some sort of steaming cup. That they are coming into the Otherworld at this point might be bolstered by the dog shown below, since also on the Tangvide stone it appears to show the man's faithful dog recognizing his master's arrival. This might have been a typical concept, since dogs are going to precede their masters into the next world and would be thought to be waiting for his arrival upon his own death, which might show how far the connection between a man and his dog were among the Norse. The other woman (Valkyrie?) facing the other way might be holding a drinking horn and holder, but it is difficult to tell. She would apparently be offering it to the woman and her company who are shown above her, who is very likely the bearded man's wife. Some have attempted to link some of these scenes as a depiction of Thor's duel with the Iormungand but there is nothing here that lends any evidence that this is so, nor that the figure is Thor.

There is no way to know how well things have been interpreted to this stage, but it is based upon recognizing the figures and comparing them to the sure conclusions drawn from the upper half of this stone and the Tangvide stone. There is however no way to know if one of the men in the boat is also the one shown on the eight-legged horse. It might be odd that they would show the same man arriving on the horse of death at the top, by ship in the middle, and over a river on foot

in the third, but this might arise from an accumulation of different ideas that became commonly represented rather than being regarded as alternative ways to the Otherworld. In other words, symbolic cultural representations would win out over any sort of clearly expressed or logical sequence of events.

The rest of the figures can be fairly well identified, although this section of the stone shows far greater signs of wear, so it is difficult to get a sense of their meaning. At the top are two figures who are sitting with an object between them, which looks like a stone. Whether they are holding the stone, are tied to the stone, taking an oath upon the stone, or whether it is a stone at all are open to conjecture. There is a woman nearby who has her hands on a frame, but whether the frame is just decorative is unclear, although it is tempting to think it is rather like the frame mentioned by Ibn Fadlan. However, the object between the two kneeling men is not a woman, and it might be going too far to draw any connection between Ibn's descriptions and this unrelated memorial stone. The next panel shows what is likely the same woman near what are perhaps the same two men, this time sprawled out and appearing to be entangled in ropes or vines. Whether this is meant to be a physical entanglement or metaphorical is unclear, the woman however appears to be holding a drinking horn, but it is impossible to know if her intention is to feed them or anesthetize them. If they are the two sacrifices represented below, this might be showing that they were captives and how they were put to death, but this is by no means clear. The woman would thus be, according to Ibn Fadlan, the "Angel of Death".

Below this are shown two warriors standing with their sheathed swords, and they appear to be pounding a stake into the ground, where the one on the right is holding up a rock to pound it. As to what reason this has been included here is difficult to imagine, unless it relates somehow to the figure below them, appearing to be a figure inside a coffin with vines growing around it. It is

not clear what this figure is and it is so worn is it is not even clearly evident if it is showing a man or a woman, but the point down from the head matches well either a beard or the short hair of a man, but it is still open to doubt. If this is a figure placed in a coffin the two figures above might be placing a marker stake into the ground above it.

However, there might be given an altogether different meaning to the sequence. If the top portion reveals not the stages of a sacrifice but of an oath taking and pledge of some kind, the final stage of which is to put a stake into a burial mound to sanctify the pledge. These two figures might then be the same two who appear in the boat in the other sequence. So for every explanation might exist an equally plausible contradictory explanation, where insufficient evidence exists to determine which is correct.

Klinte stone

Figure 8.

Color-coded Klinte stone



This final stone that will be part of this interpretive work contains two distinct panels: the top one is separated from the rest and shows clearly the warrior arriving on his horse to a woman

who is greeting him with a drinking horn. Also there is what must be his dog, the two warriors fighting are most likely Einheriar and the figure floating behind him a sacrifice that was made at the time of his funeral. This contains all of the same elements that are contained in both the Ardre and Tangvide stones, but might be of a later date, as it appears to contain the mythological Einheriar as part of its conception of the Otherworld. Another that might show Einheriar is shown in *Figure 9*.

Figure 9.

Stone showing what could be Einheriar fighting



The ship in the center of the Klinte stone requires no substantial interpretation, so the main focus of the rest of this endeavor is upon the drawings located at the bottom of the stone. Here the top panel shows a man in a room full of snakes. There too is a woman who is either reaching through a wall into the room or down into it. Her objective appears to be to obtain one of the snakes, as she is shown holding it in the next panel. The final panel shows an interesting group

that is far from simple to explain. It begins with a hawk, a man holding a coiled snake, with the top half of a man with what appears to be a sword or club in his hand. Within the building are two men with bows and arrows, behind them an ox, with another man standing outside the back. What is unusual here is attempting to explain what is being shown, but it appears to be a sequence of events: the woman procures the snake, and delivers it to a man who then attempts to go to a building where the occupants resist with bows and arrows. This strangely resembles the story of the Mead of Poetry, where a snake makes its way into a cave to obtain the mead. There is nothing to indicate that such a thing is intended, but there is an eagle nearby, which plays a role in the theft story also. This might be a coincidence and other details from the story don't match, so it might rather be a story from one of the sagas, but what the purpose the snake serves then is uncertain. However, this by no means proves it is not, since myths can be told in different versions.

If it were retelling a myth it might show the woman (Gunnlod?) going to a man who is in a snake pit (and such a fate might have been a common one for some forms of crime, or it could be a figure out of myth or legend), and stealing one of the snakes from this room to hand it off to Odin, who uses it to steal the mead, to be carried off by the eagle. On arriving he defeats the guard, who is lying in half on the ground, whereby after the snake escapes the occupants shoot arrows out of the hole he has made. However, just like other attempts to indicate a representation of a myth on a memorial stone, there is no clear depiction of the mead or Odin, so it might be depicting an entirely myth altogether or no myth at all.

The sequence seems clear enough, but as to whether it is representing something mythical, legendary or historical cannot be proven unless there were found some account that agreed to it in terms of its details and not just according to some isolated similarities it contains.

Alskog stone

Figure 10.

Alskog stone



This particular stone is difficult to interpret for a couple reasons, one is the quality of the image, and the other is the damage done to it over the centuries. Nonetheless, most of the figures are identifiable. Those that are difficult to identify as to whether they are figures within the picture are shown in aqua in *Figure 11*.

Figure 11.

Color-coded Alskog stone



The rest can be fairly well identified, starting in the lower left there is the horse procession, where it appears the man's body is on the ground, although there is some damage to the stone at this point. Nonetheless this motif has been used on two of the others stones discussed above, all but for the addition here of a wagon being pulled by the horse. Before the horse, in the damaged section appears to be two men leading them forward, although it is difficult to know what role they play within the picture. The next section to the right shows what appears to be a woman with the body within a hall, although some of this image had to be reconstructed due to a hole added to the stone when it was placed within Alskog church. This is perhaps some form of preparation of the body; but if the aqua shape on the roof is representing a person, it is difficult to imagine what their role is in the ceremony. (It might be dumping a bag of dirt through the roof of the hall; so then perhaps this is illustrating the mound being filled, but it is very difficult to be

sure.) Then to the right are three figures heading away. It is impossible to know who these three might be, but they appear to be the same three figures that appear on a different stone in *Figure 12*.

Figure 12.

Stone showing three companion figures



This particular stone shows three figures walking together, holding implements above them that are similar to the three figures in the Alskog stone. What their role is in either stone is not easy to determine. Above these three figures here is a brief scene showing two seated figures, with a bird peeking over the head of one, while the other appears to be handing off a spear to the figure between them. Other than the insertion of a *triquetra*, there is nothing much more than can be identified in it. The three figures might be three gods, and if this is the case, where the first one here holding a spear would most resemble the god Odin, perhaps with his two companions Loki and Hænir, but is impossible to know. It is not clear if the two objects behind them on this stone (which could be representative of the Sun and Moon) correspond to the circle and square behind the figures in the other depiction. The importance of the three figures in the Alskog stone is not

obvious and seem unrelated to the other figures shown, and here there is no further clue as to what function they might serve.

Above these three figures is a difficult collection, including two figures who are under a frame or within a hut that looks surprisingly similar to the two figures shown on the Ardre stone, shown in comparison in *Figure 13*.

Figure 13.

Comparison of detail on Ardre stone (left) with detail on Alskog stone (right)



Since, however, it is unknown what they are doing on the Ardre stone, it gives little help in figuring out what they are doing on the Alskog stone. They are perhaps representing sacrifices, and what might suggest this is the figure in aqua that appears to be a headless body, and thus the man kneeling at the stone in front is perhaps the executioner holding an axe. The two men within the hut might perhaps be either awaiting sacrifice or undergoing a sort of preparation or “last rites”. Coming back to the left are two women shown in light blue with four ducks between them. The ducks are also around a figure that holds a position of prominence but cannot be identified; it looks rather like an empty dress laid out on the ground. There is also a very noticeable shape shown in blue above them, which looks like a fortress with walls giving the

shape of a pentagon, but could just be a decoration. There is nothing like this section on any other memorial stone, but could be some ritualistic practice that is otherwise unrecorded.

Next to the left is a figure holding up a hammer or axe, which could simply be identified with the god Thor, although his appearance here would make little sense. It would be better viewed to be the man himself, breaking free from his burial mound to enter paradise, and indeed to the left are two warriors with shields, which is a motif generally believed to represent the *Einheriar* fighting in Valhall. Below these appears to be the man's body within his burial mound. The figure in aqua might be someone standing in attendance.

Most of these interpretations are based upon some knowledge of what is the subject of other memorial stones. That rather than depicting myths, that we might hope to find represented in pictorial form here, is really the more relevant portrayal of, essentially, the man's funeral. Even identifying many of the figures does not help to understand the presence of the three companions, the four ducks with the women, and interpretation is made more difficult by the damage done to the stone and shapes that might not even represent figures but if they are must also have some meaning within the presentation.

Jelling stone

Figure 14.

Jelling stone showing Christ's crucifixion



The Jelling stone is a well-known rune stone from Jelling, Denmark known to show Christ's crucifixion on one side. What is more interesting than the issue of what is being shown is *how* it is being shown, which might give some clues as to what depictions on other memorial stones might mean.

Figure 15.

Colorized version of Jelling stone



What is interesting is that Christ is shown to be entwined, which could perhaps mean one of two things, that this entanglement is meant to represent inevitable fate or that it is meant to mean the onset of death (the binding of the spirit). Since we know this is representing Christ's end it might well be either, but both essentially imply the same thing, since they both mean that he is bound by fate to death.

This entwining reminds one of the depictions on the Ardre stone that are shown in *Figure 16*.

Figure 16.

Detail of the Ardre stone



That clearly in the case of the lower figure, that is entwined with vines and so indicates that it is not a living body. Likewise, this also may indicate that the two figures above, shown intertwined with vines are also being shown as being dead, and thus the entanglement is symbolic: to illustrate to the person looking at the stone that it is meant to represent a corpse. (Although there are corpses shown on other stones that are not depicted in the same way, which would indicate it wasn't a universal symbolism.) This is suggested in the Ardre stone, but the continuing tradition of heathen representations after the adoption of Christianity led to a representation of the crucifixion in a way that would be understood by the Danes who saw it, without there being any doubt as to what it meant.

Conclusion

The interpretation of these memorial stones sacrifices any surety but satisfies a certain amount of curiosity while helping us to build up a few conceptions that might at some point be confirmed or refuted by other evidence. If it serves any purpose at all it should be to make sure that these interpretations are all conjectural and can hardly ever be used as real evidence to prove something else. Looking at the stones with a certain conception will influence how we then interpret what we are seeing, so it is important to show that the possibility of offering diverse and contrary interpretations should indicate that we should not become too readily fond of any one of them, or to pretend that the stones in any way depict mythical or saga figures and events.

Even after spending a good deal of time attempting to explain what is being shown on the stones and what they might mean, it appears to tell us nothing more than we had already known before we started. There are no great revelations that arise because our preexisting ideas are the basis of how we interpret them, and thus we cannot then use these interpretations to validate our preexisting ideas, so they can still only be understood in the vaguest of terms.

This does not mean that no attempt should be made to understand them, but it does encourage caution that common or well-accepted interpretations mean virtually nothing to support those who are contented to see artistic depictions of the Norse stories, myths and sagas that we are most familiar with today.

One thing that they can certainly be used for is to get an idea of the development and origin of Norse artistic styles as well as providing information on the appearance and dress of men and women of those times in a way that would otherwise be lacking. In addition, its

representation of ships can tell us a great deal as to how they were outfitted at that time, both in terms of appearance and for materials that do not survive in the archaeological record.

Sources

Ferguson, Robert. The Vikings. Penguin:London, 2009