

**THE FRANKS CASKET:  
AN ANGLO-SAXON SYNTHESIS OF  
RELIGION, LITERATURE AND ART**

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The Franks Casket, named for Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, who donated the casket to the British Museum in 1867, is one of the most distinctive pieces of Anglo-Saxon craftsmanship. A product of 8th century Northumbria, it draws upon many sources - artistic, literary and religious - from both the Germanic and the early Medieval European Christian traditions. By analysing these sources it is possible to learn more about the society, as well as the artisan, who produced it.

The casket itself is quite small, about 20cm long and 10cm high, and has five carved panels made of whalebone. Each consists of a central picture and a surrounding border of runic inscriptions, except for the lid, which may once have had an inscription, but this is now lost.

The top panel depicts a man with a bow defending a fortified building from a number of armed men. The man is identified by runes spelling the name *ægili*. It has been suggested that this *ægili* could be Eigil, brother of Weyland the Smith and master Bowman, but there is no event in the Weyland saga which corresponds to this scene.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the inscription would have provided more information, but as it is, any interpretation is mostly conjectural.

There is another notable figure seated behind the Bowman under an arch, holding a spear and accompanied by two animals, possibly wolves. Without any identifying text, it is hard to determine who this is, but the figure suggests Woden, or Odin, the chief god of the Germanic pantheon, with his two wolves and his magical spear, Gungnir.

The front panel is probably the best-known, containing two separate scenes of widely varying content. The left hand scene is from the saga of Weyland the Smith. In the story, Weyland was crippled and imprisoned on a small island by King Níphad, and forced to forge all manner of treasures for the greedy king. Weyland exacts his revenge when the King's two sons, Glam and Skul, visit the island to interrogate Weyland over the location of his hoard. Weyland kills both of them and makes finely ornamented cups from their skulls, and sends these back to King Níphad.

The figure of Weyland himself is unmistakable, lame in one leg and forging cups while a headless body lies at his feet. The other figures are less recognisable, but are probably King Niphad and his daughter, the princess Beadohild. The figure in the background is possibly Weyland's brother Eigil, collecting feathers to make a cloak with which they can fly from the island, but they may instead be the three swan-maidens, or *valkyries*, that are the wives of Weyland and his two brothers.

The right hand scene is the Christian 'Adoration of the Magi', and the word *magi* is written in runes immediately above the scene. The runic text does not relate to the scenes, but instead presents a riddle. Beginning in the upper left-hand corner, it reads: *Fisc flodu ahof on fergenberig; warþ gasric grorn, þær he on greut giswom. Hronæs ban.*

This translates as: 'The flood lifted up the fish on to the cliff-bank; the great beast became sad, where he swam on the shingle. Whale's bone.' This riddle, composed in traditional Germanic alliterative verse, likely makes reference to the whalebone from which the casket is made, and how it was acquired, (ie. from a stranded whale).

The right panel remains the most enigmatic, and many interpretations have been proposed. The scene appears to be composed of three parts: on the left there is an armed warrior facing a monstrous figure who is seated and holding a branch in each hand; in the middle is a figure holding a staff and a cup and a horse standing over a mound which appears to contain a body; and on the right are three cloaked figures facing each other. Around the horse are the words *risci* 'rushes, twigs', *wudu* 'wood', and *bita* 'bite'. Unfortunately, their meanings in relation to the scene are unclear.

One interpretation, outlined by Soderberg and Wadstein, relates the scene to the story of Sigurd; the monster being the dragon Fafnir and the armed warrior confronting him, Sigurd. The middle part would then be Sigurd's wife, Gudrun, and his horse, Grani, mourning Sigurd in his grave. The three figures could be Brunhild, Gunnar and Hogni, the conspirators who brought about Sigurd's death.<sup>2</sup>

D'Ardenne argues that the scene involves the legendary hero Horsa, who, with his brother Hengist, led the Saxons in their original invasion of Britain. The figure on the left would then be Horsa, facing his slayer. The middle scene is Hengist mourning his brother, and the four figures on the right are Vortigern and his three sons.<sup>3</sup>

Yet another interpretation is that of Ellis Davidson, in which the half-animal, half-human figure is a *valkyrie* welcoming a fallen warrior to Valhalla. The middle shows the horse, body and mourner left behind, and

the right side shows the three Norns, or Fates, who spun the web of destiny and cut the thread when one's time was due.<sup>4</sup>

The runic text of this panel presents many problems as well. For some reason, most of the vowel-runes have been replaced with new, and seemingly arbitrary, runes, and many of the spellings are unusual, making the translation somewhat difficult. It may be read as: *Her hos sitaþ on harmberga; ægl(æ) drigip; swa hiri ertæ egi sgræf, sarden sorga ænd sefa torna.*

A possible translation is: 'Here a host sits on the mound of grief; misery endures; so to (her or them) Erta prescribed dread, a sad grave of sorrow and troubled heart.' The text does not seem to relate directly to the scene, but there are a number of connections; mourning over a grave being the most obvious theme in common. The most curious item is the name 'Erta', who may possibly be related to Urð, the Norn responsible for cutting the threads of fate, which would argue in favour of the three figures on the right being the Norns.

I believe the theme represents the passage of the warrior at death to Valhalla, but that the bird, most likely a raven, below the horse is the *valkyrie* who presents the fallen warrior to the figure on the left, who may well be Woden. These figures have clear parallels elsewhere in the Germanic world, notably on the Gotland picture-stones. The monstrous figure appears to have the wings of a bird and the head of a wolf, ravens and wolves being directly symbolic of Woden. Furthermore, the hallmark of the most formidable warriors in the Germanic world was their identification with certain animals, notably the Norse *berserker*, or 'bear shirts', and *ulfhednar*, or 'wolf heads'.

Clunies Ross has suggested that the left-hand figure is a judge-figure and very likely a pagan god, but that its monstrous appearance is a product of Christian iconography, casting the pagan god in the guise of a devil.<sup>5</sup>

The back panel is a depiction of the capture of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 CE. The central area depicts the Temple holding the Ark of the Covenant; the upper left section showing Titus leading a group of spearmen into battle. The upper right section shows people fleeing the city. The lower left shows a trial scene, and the accompanying runes spell *dom* or 'judgement'; and the lower right shows a group of people, next to whom is the word *gisl* or 'hostage'. On the left side, the runes read: *Her fegtaþ Titus end Giupeasu*, or 'Here fight Titus and the Jews'. On the right side, the carver is writing in Latin, for the first part using Roman letters: *Hic fugiant Hierusalim*, and for

the second part, runes again: *afitatores*; which translates as 'Here the inhabitants flee from Jerusalem.'

The left panel also is fairly straightforward, depicting Romulus and Remus suckling from the she-wolf, and being found by Faustulus and three other shepherds. The runes read: *Romwalus and Reumwalus twægen gibroþær: afæddæ hiæ wylif in romæ cæstri, oþlæ unneg*. This translates as: 'Romulus and Remus, two brothers: a she-wolf fed them in the city of Rome far from their native land.'

Altogether, the scenes of the Franks Casket present a curious mix of Germanic, Classical, and Christian themes. The varied nature of the content of the panels seem to be a sort of encapsulation of known history in the form of significant events, all given more or less equal status. That is, that Weyland is no less a significant historical figure as Jesus.

The artisan who made this casket knew Latin, and was a man of great learning and a Christian. It is very likely that he had had some level of monastic education, in addition to his training in the native tradition. He shows great creativity, not just with the pictures but also with the texts, substituting his own invented runes for the vowel runes on the right panel, or writing in Latin with both Roman letters and runes. He almost seems to be playing with the text, in much the same spirit as the riddle from the front panel, providing puzzles and clues to draw the audience into participation with his work.

His use of Latin is curious as well. Some scholars suggest that he may have been translating the events on the back panel from a Latin text, and that he may have inadvertently lapsed back into Latin half-way through the inscription,<sup>6</sup> but carving a panel is not like writing with a pen, so it seems unlikely that this was any less than deliberate. Thus it shows that he expected his audience to know Latin, so it is quite possible he was commissioned by a learned noble, or more likely by the Church.

It is significant also that when he does start using Latin, he writes in Roman letters, a convention well established at that time. Numerous other texts with similarly mixed conventions are known from both inside and outside the Germanic world, one of the most notable being Ogham stones from 5th and 6th century Wales with parallel inscriptions, Latin written in Roman letters alongside Old Irish written in Ogham script. This is a natural phenomenon, especially in the case of the Anglo-Saxon language, which contains sounds not represented in the Roman alphabet, such as *æsc*, *þorn* and *eð* which were retained after the adoption of Roman letters for writing Old English.

It seems, at least in the early period of literacy, that it was expected that a different language should have a different script as well, and it may even have been an expression of cultural identity to write in runic script. Therefore the most curious part of this text is the Latin word *habitatores* written in runes down the right side of the panel, particularly for its disregard of convention. Again, I would put this down to the carver's creativity, providing something which would look exceedingly strange to the audience, perhaps for shock value to put the audience outside of the limitations of convention, to communicate rather than just write.

The range of the subject matter also indicates a milieu of great learning. The artisan draws from Roman and Christian history in addition to the native Germanic themes. It is especially significant that there is no apparent animosity towards the pagan Anglo-Saxon themes; each is presented in its own right with equanimity. Significantly, his audience, who would have been Christian and probably churchmen, were expected to recognise the pagan scenes as readily as the Christian and Roman ones.

Like other great contemporary works, such as Bede's *History of the English Church and People* and the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Franks Casket holds a mirror to the society that produced it. It demonstrates that although they were proud of their pagan past and maintained the cultivation of their ancient traditions and lore, they were becoming part of a larger religious, academic and cultural milieu, which they embraced with equal vigour. There was no conflict between learning the story of Jesus and the stories of Woden and the ancient gods, and each could be appreciated for its own merits. This period of the co-existence or synthesis of old and new ideas marks the high point in the history of Northumbrian religious, literary and artistic life.

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## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> R. W. V. Elliott, *Runes: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 125.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133ff.

<sup>5</sup> M. Clunies Ross, 'A Suggested Interpretation of the Scene Depicted on the Right-Hand Side of the Franks Casket', in *Medieval Archaeology*, vol. 14 (London: Society for Medieval Archaeology, 1971), 151ff.

<sup>6</sup> Elliott, p. 129.