

THE CIPHERMENT OF THE FRANKS CASKET

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primo mense primus MMX

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INTRODUCTION

The word 'casket' brings the dead to mind, yet here applies to a whale-bone chest that would cramp a corpse rather too tightly; the Franks Casket is roughly the size of a lunchbox. The name 'Franks' comes from the scholar-philanthropist who in 1859 recovered it from Auzon, France, and afterward donated it to the British Museum; but it does not hold his bones, nor anyone else's.

It is wholly a unique piece; there is nothing quite like it in the history of art, although its unknown creator may have modeled it after a casket like those which have survived from Late Antiquity. The one casket surface that is completely plain, lacking any sort of decoration, is the bottom, on which the casket was meant to rest. The artist has carved the other five sides both with pictures and with writing in runes and Roman characters.

As excepting the one Latin sentence the language of the inscriptions is very early English, the casket is assumed to hail from England in the earlier Anglo-Saxon period. Beyond these wide parameters, its date and origin are by no means settled. Some number of authors have located it in early eighth-century Northumbria.

How it ended up in France is likewise a matter of speculation, although it is worth remarking that the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had close connections with various continental kingdoms throughout the entire period to the Conquest. Then again, it may have been taken to Normandy after 1066; we don't really know.

The content carved on the Franks Casket has remained as obscure as its origin. No-one has managed to properly interpret the artwork and the runic inscriptions, though the piece has often passed under the scope over the 150 years since its discovery; with a range of lenses, which at times have passed the flaw to the thing seen. The casket enjoys a given reverence, but wants the respect of close reading.

I have given it the reading of my spare hours for about twelve months; I am not a trained scholar, but have seven years' experience of reading Anglo-Saxon with close pleasure. I present this essay informally, as a collection of insights which range from my solutions to the linguistic problems to the impressions with which the art has left me. As I have written it drinking a great deal of tea, you are welcome to think of it as a *tea essay*, and read accordingly.



Figure 1: The Right Side.



Figure 2: The Nativity.

SECTION 1 - Right Side, Center Scene: The Nativity

The right side (fig. 1) is divided into three scenes; the central scene depicts the Nativity (fig. 2). The runic inscription *wudu* locates us in the 'wilderness' or 'wood', into which Christ is born as the Water of Life:

I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys: I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. (Isaiah 41:17)

But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life. (John 4:14)

In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. (John 7:37)

Christ is the Water in the *wudu* or wilderness of this world. The casket artist has inscribed the word *risci*, which means 'rushes', which are here depicted growing in this wilderness. We as mankind are rushes, for

Can the rush grow up without mire? can the flag grow without water? (Job 8:11)

The infant Jesus lies atop the hay in his manger (1), and a shepherd kneels over him with a staff in his left hand (2). This shepherd figure feeds a tuft of hay to the ox (3), as explained by the third inscription, *bita* ('bite' or 'morsel'). The small circle of the moon hangs over the head of the ox; and we observe a further small cross-shaped mark over the shepherd's shoulder, which may or may not be member to this scene (as the mark first belongs to the scene adjacent -- see Section 4); but it would here represent the Star of Bethlehem. Below the ox spread the wings of a dove (4), the Holy Spirit, which sowed the seed in the bride-bower of Mary's womb.

SECTION 2 - Front Side, Right Scene: The Magi

Push the casket round to its front, and look on the grand scene rightward, the panel *mægi* (fig. 3).



Figure 3: The Adoration of the Magi.

The Nativity dove is now at nest (1), plume-tailed, poised by the throne of Madonna and Child (2). The gem-studs (3) trebly mingle sun and moon over throne with the Star multifoliate (4); and unto this mother-child constancy, seizing our gaze with much directer gaze, approach the Wise Men, bearing fit tribute.

The first man kneels forward to give the cup runover with gold coin (5), and you may see the piece shed loose of the abundance (at the tip of his beard). The second bears frankincense burning in its mounted censer (6), and the dense smoke rising thereof (q.v.) curls throughout the scene (q.v.) and imparts the youth with its noble sense (q.v.); the artist has actually carved the curls of smoke. The last man brings a knotty bough (7): there shall its oil bide, all unto life's end, when there is need of myrrh.

SECTION 3 - Left Side: Romulus & Remus

The left side of the casket (fig. 4, up-ended) portrays the suckling of Romulus and Remus (1) by the she-wolf (2 & 3), as found by several crouched and spear-wielding men (4 & 5).



Figure 4 (turn): Romulus and Remus.

We must not conclude that the artist was careless or ignorant of his subject, without enquiring whether his departures from tradition bear an aesthetic effect on the piece, and so whether he perhaps broke from tradition upon a conscious purpose. If without such humility we approach the left side of the Franks Casket, which doubles the she-wolf, and makes four of the herdsman Faustulus; and with view to the tradition, we wish away this excess, leaving a single supine wolf and one shepherd a-crouching in the bush, our vision surely has grown impoverished. The inscription runs:

romwalus and reumwalus twøegen gibropær
aføeddæ hiæ wylif in romæcæstri
oplæ unneg

It translates, "Romulus and Remus, the two brothers: the she-wolf nourished them in the city of Rome, far from home." Not 'wolves', but 'wolf'. In the original myth, of course, there is only one wolf.

You could point out the two wolves in the picture, and make fun of the artist; but I assume he knew what he was doing. I first observe that symmetry which pleases this eye with concentric frames. Starting from this outer world and this self, I enter the casket at its workless bone on the rim of the panel; I pass to the runic inscription around it (not pictured); then to the picture -- forest, the shepherds, forest, shepherds; to the she-wolf, and finally, the twins at the centre.

The artist could not have achieved this wonderful symmetry if he left out the 'second' wolf; yet there is more to recommend it. For I have found he is a great story-teller; and in telling a story with

pictures, it has come often useful to depict the same personage more than once within a panel.

This appears to be true of the she-wolf, which above (2) is shown walking through the forest, perhaps as first coming upon the infants Romulus and Remus (1) lying helpless on the ground. They have been orphaned, so the she-wolf takes them in -- and when we look below, we now see it suckling the twins from her own teats (3). The artist has told a story in miniature.

I would also lay a specific purpose to the number of *Faustuli* (4 & 5) who are not one, but four. I have pointed out that they carry spears, rather than the crooks one would expect of shepherds. I also said that they were crouching; as it were hiding in the shrub, about to spring on the twins and wolf in the centre. It is perfectly acceptable to see them in this way, as *hiding* and *crouching*. But if I choose my word differently, and say that they are *kneeling*, -- that rather changes the way we read this panel.

If they are kneeling to Romulus -- here an infant, but one who will someday found Rome as its first king -- how do we proceed from this insight? Recall the panels we already looked at. On the casket's right side we met a shepherd kneeling before Christ, and giving hay to the ox (Section 1). On the front side, we saw the three wise men kneeling before the throne with their gold, frankincense and myrrh (Section 2).

There is a contrasted correspondence between these two scenes and that on the casket's left. I should first say that this left panel and that of the Nativity are each set in the wilderness of this

world. On the left panel, the figures kneel to infant Romulus, destined to earthly kingship. On the Nativity and Magi panels, the figures kneel to infant Christ, with whom lies universal sovereignty.

The four figures who kneel to Romulus represent all the world with its four ends which was made to kneel to the Roman Empire. They bear spears, which signify the war which was necessary for Rome to extend its lawful authority over the earth; war which ended with the closing of the gates of Janus and the birth of Christ.

On the front, the Magi bear no spears, but unwarlike gifts which acknowledge Christ's universal kingship. In contrast to the four figures on the left side, which stand for temporal authority, there are on the front three wise men, who together stand for that divine and perfect rule which is vested in the Trinity.

The Nativity, spatially and thematically opposed to the scene with the she-wolf, bears this connection to it: that Romulus, earthly king, feeds of the beasts of this earth; but Christ, king of heaven, is the bread of angels, on the grain of whose flesh feed those beasts made holy. The Nativity shepherd may well stand for the Church, which administers spiritual food to the people.

We may reasonably guess that the artist has read Orosius, *History Against the Pagans*, a very popular text in the Middle Ages. Orosius sees the origin and rise of Rome as guided by God toward a universal Christian destiny. God protected Romulus so that he could found Rome, and it was through God's will that the city grew to world empire; God invested Rome with temporal authority, in preparation for Christ's universal rule.

Orosius memorably points out that Octavian Caesar ordered the gates of war shut on January 6, and on that day assumed the title of Augustus. It was the first time in history that anyone had presumed the right to world rule, and from that point on the world would remain under monarchy; for even in the lifetime of the first Roman emperor the one was born whose right to rule was without limits. Indeed it was on January 6 that Christ received both the gifts of the Magi and sacrament of baptism; and before the Magi here on the front of the casket, Christ has assumed the throne of universal empire.

Orosius has many other splendid arguments, for which we direct the reader to his work. Orosius is immensely relevant for the Franks Casket, as it gives Roman history a significance for the Anglo-Saxons, by virtue of their being Christians. God has sanctioned the authority continuous from the birth of Romulus to the birth of Christ, and has prepared Rome into a universal Christian kingdom.

A last word on the inscription, where we have *romwalus* written for Romulus, and *reumwalus* for Remus. The second form *reumwalus* was modelled by analogy after the first, which occurs also in Durham Gloss as a u-stem; but elsewhere the Latin form *romulus* suffers no change. We can reasonably posit that early Anglo-Saxons had trouble fitting the shape of the name to their phonology; but I would suggest also that the word *romwaran* “the Romans” helped shape it from *romul-* to *romwal-*.

SECTION 4 - Right Side, Right Scene: The Passion

The right scene on the right side recounts Christ's arrest and torture (fig. 5).

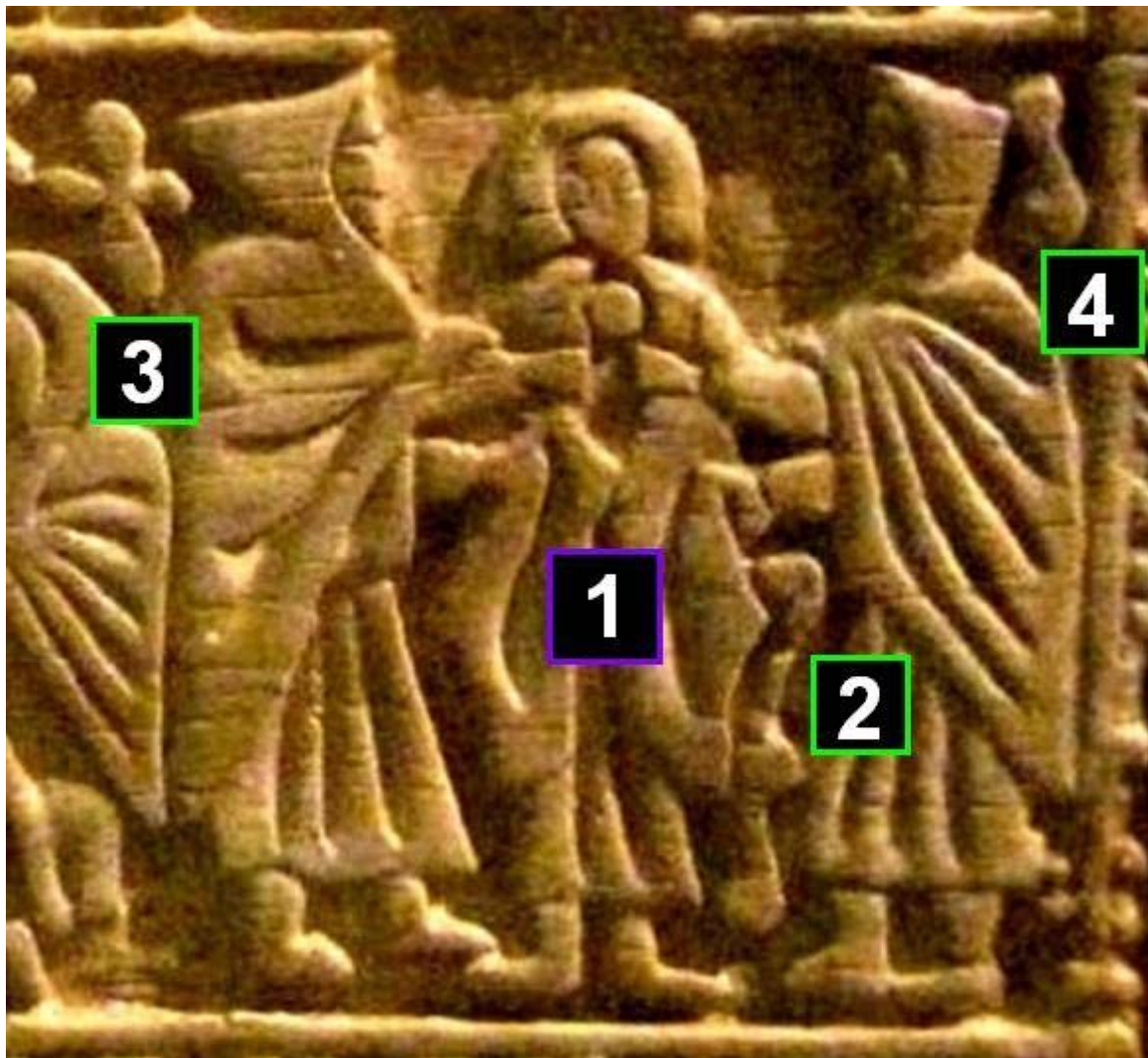


Figure 5: The Passion

Christ is the central figure (1), his captors on either side, who are strong-arming his cloak. Several signs identify this figure as the Christ -- for one, it is nimbed; but observe also the lion's tail coming round the left (2). Yet its surest indicator is the Christogram carved at the upper fringes of the scene, where the cross-looking chi X denotes Christus (3), and iota I denotes Iesus (4). Christ is shown in a similar manner on the lid of the 4th century Brescia casket.

SECTION 5 - Right Side, Left Scene: Satan and Hell

The runic inscription that rings the right side of the Franks Casket relates primarily to the right side's leftmost scene (fig. 6). I shall explain the picture first, and proceed to explain the inscription.



Figure 6: Satan and Hell

The setting of this scene is Hell, but Hell personified is the figure on the right (1), armed with a crested helmet, shield, and long spear. The other, mound-sitting figure is Satan in the form of an ass (2), and wearing a rather motley suit; his mouth bound fast

with the coils of a snake (3), which mutes him of all but those truths native to a triple tongue. In his right hand Satan holds a sword which has been beaten to a ploughshare (4), and in his left the pruning-hook which was once a spear (5). A bolt over his knees holds him down (5, below).

When after Christ had first triumphed on the cross he began his descent to the infernal regions, Hell perceived his advent and was afraid; but admonishing Satan for having incited the Jews to kill Christ, he sent Satan without the gates as his champion; and then he bolted the gates. That was an ill match; nor was it long ere the speed of one hand had thrown down gate and champion, and from the depths borne all souls rejoicing to the other kingdom.

So it was that Hell walked among his prisons, and found them empty; but upon finding Satan he rebuked him as the origin of his misfortune, which was the loss of souls; and so Hell bound Satan and tortured him with many tortures, even as Satan had tortured the souls in Hell, and tortured Christ through the Jews.

The right side inscription runs:

herh ossitæþ on hærmbergæ
agl drigip swæ hiri er taegisgraf
særden sorgæ and sefatornæ

Which translates, 'The idol sits far off on the dire hill, suffers abasement in sorrow and heart-rage as the den of pain had ordained for it.'

In the first line, *herh* is the subject to the intransitive verb *ossitæþ*; it is also the subject of the verb *drigip* in the following line, which has *agl* as its direct object. The same word *herh* is the referent of the dative feminine singular personal pronoun *hiri* in the subordinate clause which begins with *swæ* and contains the remainder of the poem. The verb *taegisgraf* governs *hiri* and picks up a subject *særden* in the third line (which compounds *sær* 'pain' with *den* 'den, lair'). The word *sorgæ* and the compound *sefatornæ* are in the dative case.

The instance *ossitæþ* represents an otherwise-unrepresented verb **ossitan*, a compound of the prefix *op-* 'away, off, far' + *sittan* 'to sit', and most likely denotes simply, 'sits far away'. (We have here an instance of the sporadic OE sound change *þ > s / ___ s*.) The word *agl* likewise occurs nowhere else in the OE corpus, but is to be found in 1 Cor 11:6 of the Gothic Bible (also a hapax legomenon); there it translates a Greek adjectival noun meaning 'shame, abasement', and we do well to extend this sense to the word on the casket.

The b-verse of the second line has many counterparts in *Beowulf* and elsewhere, where *swa* heads the half-line, directly precedes a personal pronoun, alliterating *er* or *ær* 'previously, before' follows, and half-line ends with a verb:

ealdgestreonum swa ic ær dyde (*Beowulf* 1381)
 engla and monna swa ðu ær myntest (*Christ and Satan* 688)

The word *tæe-gi-sgraf* is a three-member verbal compound (not unknown in OE) of which the final member is the verb *scrifan*, and the penultimate member is the prefix *gi-/ge-*. The first member *tæe-* (*tæ-*, *te-*) is the ancient pretonic form of the particle-prefix *to-/tor-* 'apart', and occurs twice in the Erfurt Gloss (*te-cinid*, 343; *te-drithid*, 344). As the OE particle *to* nearly always takes a dative, this prefix *tæe-* here demands the dative pronoun *hiri*; alternatively, *tæe-* could govern the two datives *sorgæ* and *sefatornæ* in the following line, but I tend to read them as being syntactically independent (i.e., locative-instrumental).

In any case, the verb has the same general meaning as *gescrifan* 'ordain, set as fate'; and the three nominal compounds in the poem are clear enough: *hærm-bergæ* 'mound of harm', *særden* 'den of pain', *sefa-tornæ* 'outrage of the heart'.

Let us now match phrase with picture, as the artist intended. 'The idol [Satan] sits far off in Hell upon a hostile hill (q.v.), suffering abasement in sorrow and outrage of the heart, as the den of pain [Hell] had ordained for him.' -- So the artist has given us a personified Hell, who now torments Satan in Hell-kingdom for Satan's having lost him the souls that were held captive; souls which Satan himself used to torment. To this irony the artist has added a further, that Satan be tortured on a hill, even as Christ was tortured on the Hill of Calvary.

The ploughshare and pruning hook of course refer to Christ's fulfillment of Isaiah 2:4:

And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

The picture also reminds me of a description in Book I of the *Aeneid*:

*saeva sedens super arma et centum vinctus aenis
post tergum nodis fremet horridus ore cruento.*

This is Furor which "sitting above the savage arms and bound with a hundred bronze chains roars ragged with a bloody mouth." I remember also the Anglo-Saxon poem *Christ* (cf. ll. 558-563), and direct the reader to the apocryphon *Decensus ad Inferos* 'Descent to the Infernal Regions', which tells the story of the Harrowing of Hell. This we know to have circulated in medieval England, as the text survives in Anglo-Saxon translation.

When we observe the casket's right side, we should recognise the Passion scene of suffering Christ (Section 4) as the intended counterpart to the left scene of Satan suffering in Hell; the one justifies the other. It is likewise counter to the theme of Christ as water in the wilderness, for it was written

As for thee also, by the blood of thy covenant I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water. (Zechariah 9:11)

SECTION 6 - Front Side: Inscription

The inscription which frames the front side relates to the casket as a whole:

fisc · flodu · ahof on fergenberig
warþ ga:srcic grorn þær he on greut giswom
hronæs ban

The front inscription literally translates, "The whale lifted the waters onto the mountain; the king of souls came to regret when he swam onto the sand: bone of whale."

Readers have found these verses elliptical, but they become somewhat clearer if we unify their subject (italics): "The whale lifted the waters onto the mountain; *the whale*, king of souls came to regret when he swam onto the sand: *the whale*, bone of whale."

On the one hand these verses take in that stranded whale whose bones furnished the material for the casket; but they also catch that whale whose mouth was entered at the skull and left empty on the third day. *Balenam, i. diabolum, hran; ballenam, i. diabolum, hwæl.*

That whale which swallowed Jonah, on the third day spat him whole; Hell swallowed Christ; on the third day, Hell could not but release him whole. The early Christians connected these events with allegory, and the notion of Hell being very like a whale became commonplace in the medieval West; as in no wise cryptic did the glosser of Aldhelm gloss 'devil' for 'whale'. It had a peculiar force among the Anglo-Saxons, who took the idea up with vigor, and thrust it into the heart of culture.

I should first of all mention the Hellmouth, which often appears in illustrations. It is the depiction of Hell as a whale or whale-like monster, which swallows the damned souls that fall into it. Then there is the Exeter poem *The Whale*, a poetic translation of the corresponding story in the *Physiologus*. Here the author openly draws the allegory that the whale deceives sailors in ways similar to those by which Satan deceives godly men. There is support for the connection in instances besides Hellmouth and *The Whale*, but I wish to move forward with discussing the inscription on the casket front.

Fisc, the subject of the first line, maintains as the understood subject throughout the poem; while the verb *ahof* has as its direct object the neuter plural *flodu*, with analogic *-u* from the short stems.

In the a-verse of the second line we meet with the odd word *grorn*, which is altogether uncommon in the corpus, although there are a handful of derived forms, such as *grornian*. The handbooks have left *grorn* and its derivatives rather ill-defined. A fragmentary corpus search for ‘grorn’ brings up 14 matches which include the following contexts:

- 1) ‘all middle-earth shall grorn’ on the Day of Judgement
- 2) the *grornhof* or ‘hall of grorn’ denoting Hell
- 3) the ‘grorning souls of men’ in a vision of Hell
- 4) translating Latin *murmurare* as well as *quaerella*

Accordingly we might associate *grorn* with a range of meanings: 'full of complaint' ; 'full of regret', &c. We should also observe that it is a word prone to be used in the specific contexts of damnation and Hell.

It is by now an old theory that the word *ga:sric* consists of the noun *gast* and the suffix *-ric*. The Old English word *gast* has what we moderns would call a great polysemy, -- 'breath', 'spirit', 'soul', 'heart', 'ghost', 'demon', -- but these things were one to the ancient mind. In fact, the whale itself is referred to as *garsecges gæst* or 'gast of the sea' in the aforementioned Exeter poem (line 29).

The second element *-ric* means 'king, ruler'. In the Old English of texts which presumably date later than the Franks Casket, *-ric* is only a suffix found in compounds; more specifically, in proper names. On the other hand, the noun *cyning*, also meaning 'king, ruler', is a very productive OE suffix in forming epithets. There is even an instance of a compound *gast-cyning* in Genesis A (lines 2881-2884). Here it euphemistically refers to God:

rincas mine, restað incit
her on þissum wicum. wit eft cumað,
siððan wit ærende uncer twega
gastcyninge agifen habbað.

Which translates, 'My warriors, rest yourselves here at this stop. We'll be back, the two of us -- we'll come back once we've given tidings to the "lord of spirits."' These are Abraham's words to his servants, right before he takes Isaac to the hill for sacrifice.

But more than once in the corpus occur the genitive plural phrases *gasta cyning* 'king of spirits' and *sawla cyning* 'king of souls'; either of these usually, if not always, refers to God. But Satan himself is likewise called *cyning*, lording it over the more unfortunate souls, especially in the phrase *hellwarena cyning* 'king of the inhabitants of Hell'.

I have brought in all this evidence to demonstrate that Satan is plentifully called both *gast* and *cyning* : and with view to God being at times called 'king of souls', that this epithet could apply to Satan with equal justice. If therefore on the casket *ga:sric* represents *gast* 'soul' + *-ric* 'king'; and if *ga:sric* refers to the subject of the first line, viz. *fisc* 'whale'; and if the whale defines with such felicity to Hell or Satan, which are here not distinguished from one another (i.e., Hell = Satan), -- I venture that both *fisc* and *ga:sric* define to Hell, i.e. Satan.

Now I come forward with another instance yet of Satan being called *gast* when, as the Gospels relate, Satan tempts Christ in the wilderness by bringing him to the top of a mountain and offering him all the kingdoms of this world, if only Christ will fall down and worship him (*Christ and Satan* 679-682):

þa he mid hondum genom
atol þurh edwit, and on esle **ahof**,
herm bealowes **gast**, and on **beorh** astah,
asette on dune drihten hælend.

Which translates, "Then the terrible one (Satan) with his hands took the Saviour Lord with reproach and lifted (*ahof*) him onto his shoulder, that dire spirit (*gast*) of evil, and clomb onto the mountain (*beorh*), setting him on the hill."

Now look back at the inscription for this side.

fisc · flodu · **ahof** on fergen**berig**
warþ **ga:src**ic grorn þær he on greut giswom
hronæs ban

I have put in boldface three key words common to the passage in *Christ and Satan* and to the inscription on the casket front: *ahof* 'lifted', *beorh* 'mountain', *gast* 'spirit'. What happens if with the shared words we attribute a shared theme?

Again, the front inscription literally translates, "The whale lifted the waters onto the mountain; the king of souls came to regret when he swam onto the sand: bone of whale." We previously interpolated (italics): "The whale lifted the waters onto the mountain; *the whale*, king of souls came to regret when he swam onto the sand: *the whale*, bone of whale."

We have just suggested that the whale or soul-king is Satan. Our discussion of the Nativity panel (Section 1) established that the casket artist identifies Christ with the Water of Life. Here again on the front we have water or *flodu*, which is the flood; might it not also be Christ?

Replacing the names, we read the first line of the front inscription: "Satan lifted Christ onto the mountain. " If these are just substitutions, the first line of the casket's front inscription is allegory of Christ's temptation in the wilderness. In the second line, replacement yields: "*Satan*, king of spirits came to regret when he swam onto the sand (*groot*)." If Christ is the flood, we have here the implication that he defeated Satan.

In fact the artist has wakened us to the great reversal, which makes for a singular irony: Satan, who had set Christ on the hill (*fergen-berig*) both in the wilderness and again at Calvary, is now himself set on top of the hill (*haerm-berge*) on the casket's right side (Section 5). That is to say, the *groot* intends the *haerm-berge* or hill upon which Satan receives punishment in Hell, as depicted on the right side of the casket.

We are meant to see both the literal and the allegorical meaning in these verses. A literal whale which in the might of life could raise seawater to the mountains, but has since swum onto the beach and died, with the third line finds itself reduced to the bone (*hrones ban*) which has yielded this casket. I suppose you could see Satan as 'bone' insofar as he is dry without Water, and is trapped where he sits, and does not move.

The verses on the front side give the entire casket no less than a cosmological significance, as it has become a physical allegory for the Harrowing of Hell. It stands for the victory of Christ and Christianity, which has established the universal authority of Christian empire.

SECTION 7 - Back Side, Center: The Temple of Herod

The back side of the casket recounts the Siege of Jerusalem (fig. 7).



Figure 7 (up-ended): The Back Side

The Jews have waged open rebellion against the Romans since AD 66, and have recently witnessed Vespasian, an eminent general of the war, emerge as *princeps* in 69. Events at Rome forced Vespasian's return to secure *imperium*, so he has laid it upon his son Titus to carry out the war in Judea, which would climax in the Siege of 70. Titus became Emperor on Vespasian's death in 79.

Several accounts of the Jewish War have come down from antiquity, but none so famous or influential as that of the Jewish historian Josephus, who was present at the battle, and survived to write both the *History of the Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*. The medieval West received these works in full, and held *The Jewish War* in particular esteem.

That text would spawn its own family of apocrypha, including the *Vindicta Salvatoris* (“Vengeance of the Saviour”) which has survived in Old English translation from the Latin. This Anglo-Saxon version of the apocryphon is preserved in the same manuscript as *Descensus ad Inferos*, the Harrowing of Hell alluded to on the right side (Section 5). Now here on the back side we have the story related in the apocryphon *Vindicta Salvatoris*.

Yet it is difficult to imagine that, whatever the popular apocrypha afforded, the casket artist had not closely read the actual works of Josephus. He does not imitate slavishly, but borrows from the ancient author where he judges this or that detail may serve to enrich his art.

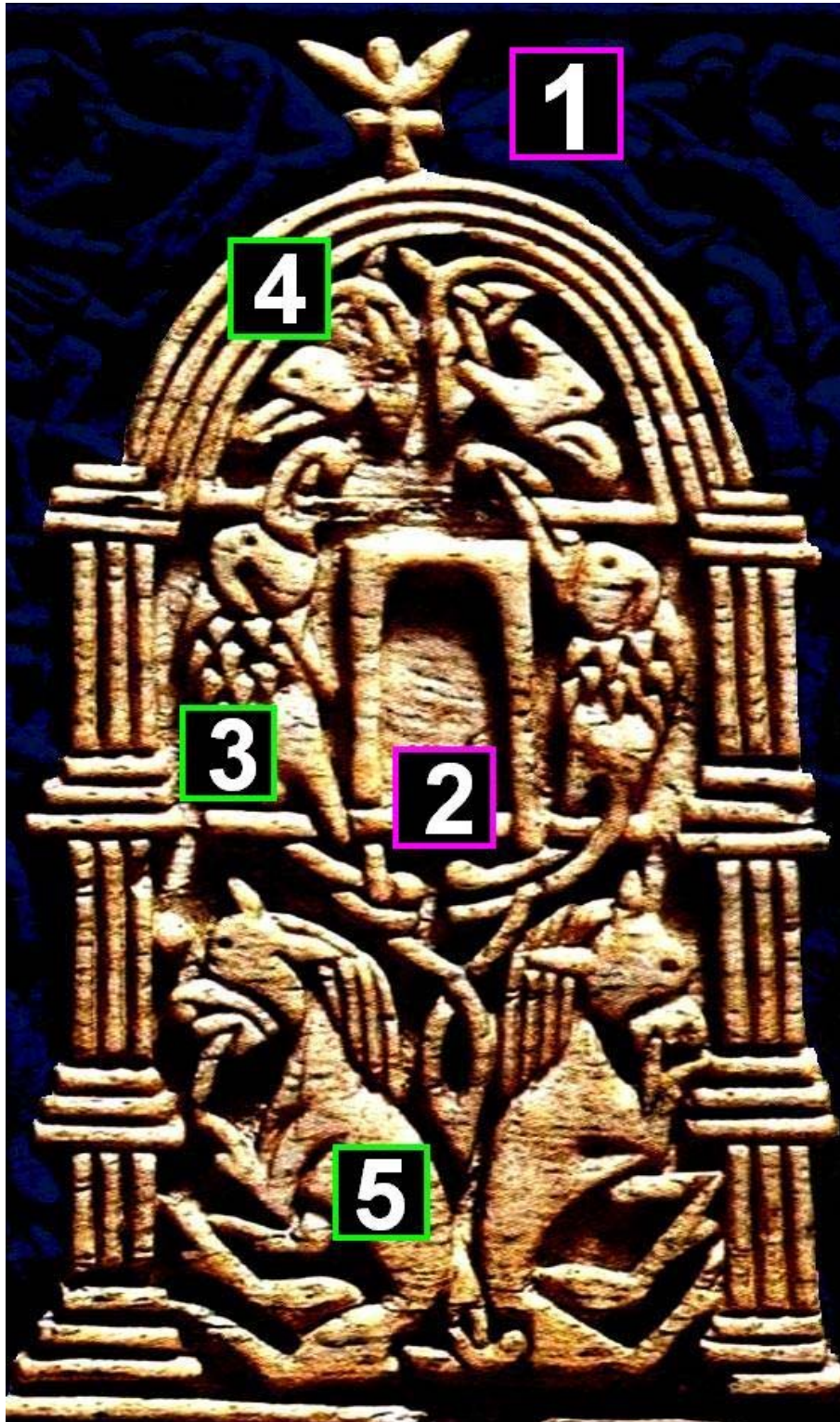


Figure 8: The Temple

Several touches in the carving indicate a Josephus consulted, or at least half-remembered, as with the temple of Herod (fig. 8): "On its top it had spikes with sharp points, to prevent any pollution of it by birds sitting upon it." And so we see the temple on the Franks Casket crowned with such sharp spikes (1); yet the temple is no carbon copy of the passage in Josephus, but has been transformed with the artist's imagination.

All surrounding the Torah niche (2) there are animals carved which can only be *korbanot*, the offerings of Jewish sacrifice. The author would have read of them in Leviticus and the other scriptures, as well as in Josephus. We think on Acts 15:29, which instructs Christians "that ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled," and recall that medieval Christians generally thought of Jews as idol-worshippers. On the casket, the turtle-doves meant for sacrifice (3) are shown strangled with rope. Leviticus further explains of turtle-doves or pigeons:

And the priest shall bring it unto the altar, and wring off his head, and burn it on the altar;

Thus the artist has wrung the heads of the doves into the tangles near the roof (4). Two cloven-footed beasts kick with their tongues out at the temple base (5). We compare their feet to those of the uncloven animals depicted on the casket's right side (Sections 1 and 5), and determine them to be goats, an offering which Leviticus sanctions in the same chapter.

SECTION 8 - Back Side, Upper Left: Battle of Jerusalem

The Jewish War had great significance for medieval Christians, as it was the Jews who had betrayed and murdered their Lord and Saviour. It was further believed that Satan had worked through the Jews to bring about Calvary, and this connects the back side with the panels we have reviewed (Section 5 &c.); for as Satan had received punishment, so must the Jews who had obeyed him as *herh* or idol. When the Romans destroyed the Temple of Herod, it seemed to fulfill the words of Christ --

I am able to destroy the temple of God,
and to build it in three days. (Matthew 26:61)

As Orosius and other authors had established it was God who willed and directed the Roman Empire, it came to be seen that the Romans who sacked Jerusalem in 70 had acted on God's mandate, exacting revenge on the Jews for the murder of Christ. The *Vindicta Salvatoris* converts the historically pagan Vespasian and Titus with miracles, and sends Titus to Jerusalem as a Christian conqueror. The battle of Jerusalem begins in the upper left corner of the back side (fig. 9).



Figure 9: Battle of Jerusalem

The inscription runs:

her fegtaþ titus end giuþeasu

Which translates, 'Here fight Titus and a Jew'. Titus appears as an Anglo-Saxon *dryhten* or lord (1), wearing a boar-helm and carrying a sword which distinguish him from the loyal ash-bearing *thegns* or retainers he leads (2). Lord Titus fights and cuts down a Jew (3), down upon the Jew's shoulder where it meets the neck, and sinews loosen hold; the hand opens, and the hilt falls harshly from him.

SECTION 9 - Back Side, Upper Center: Temple Roof

That the casket artist was a medieval Christian, who did not hesitate to overladle the Jews with hellfire, is a very wet fact. Yet on the casket they appear not gross or monstrous. They are Jews, but they are human, brave and tragic, who will not yield without a fight, and they fight with the valour of Maldon. Thus we observe them grappling with the Romans on the temple roof (fig.10).

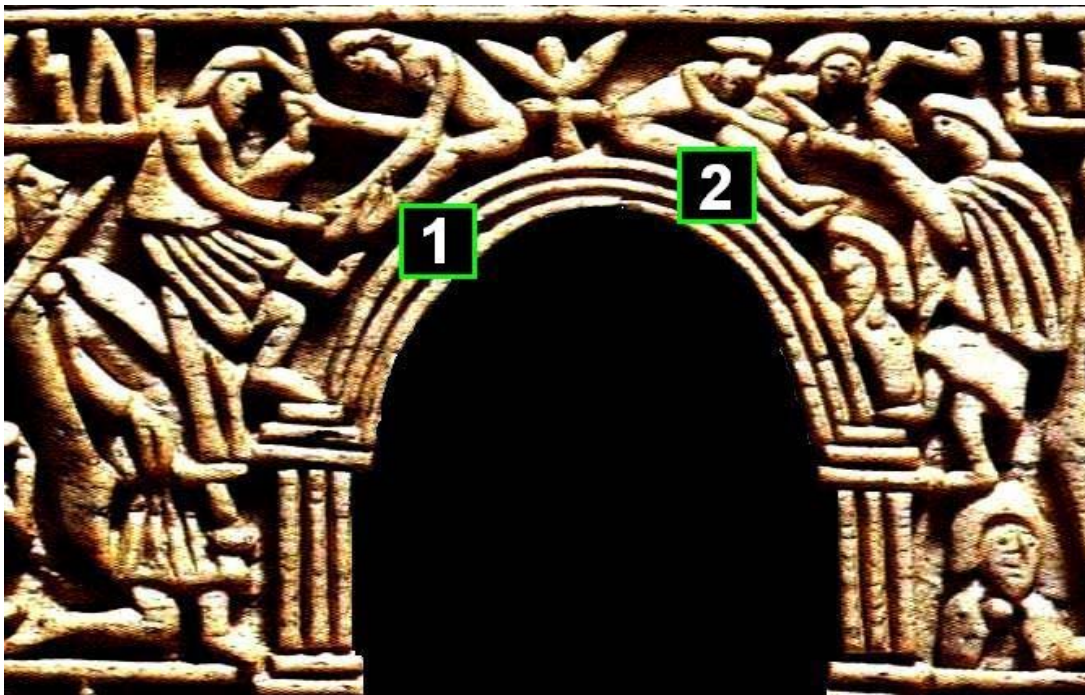


Figure 10: Temple Roof

It is their last stand. They possess the high ground, yet the Romans are too many, and famine too deep set. Romans scale the dome one after the other, and it is all the Jews can manage to grab their holds and throw them off. This Jew sits ready: a Roman scrambles up to him: his weapon gone, he hafts about -- a plough -- brunts it into the Roman's chest (1). Round on the other side, another verges the top: his wrist caught, flail mid its swing (2).

SECTION 10 - Back Side, Upper Right: Fall of Jerusalem

Our eyes follow toward the right (fig. 11), unto the sad crowd of Jews who have lived to see their city lost.

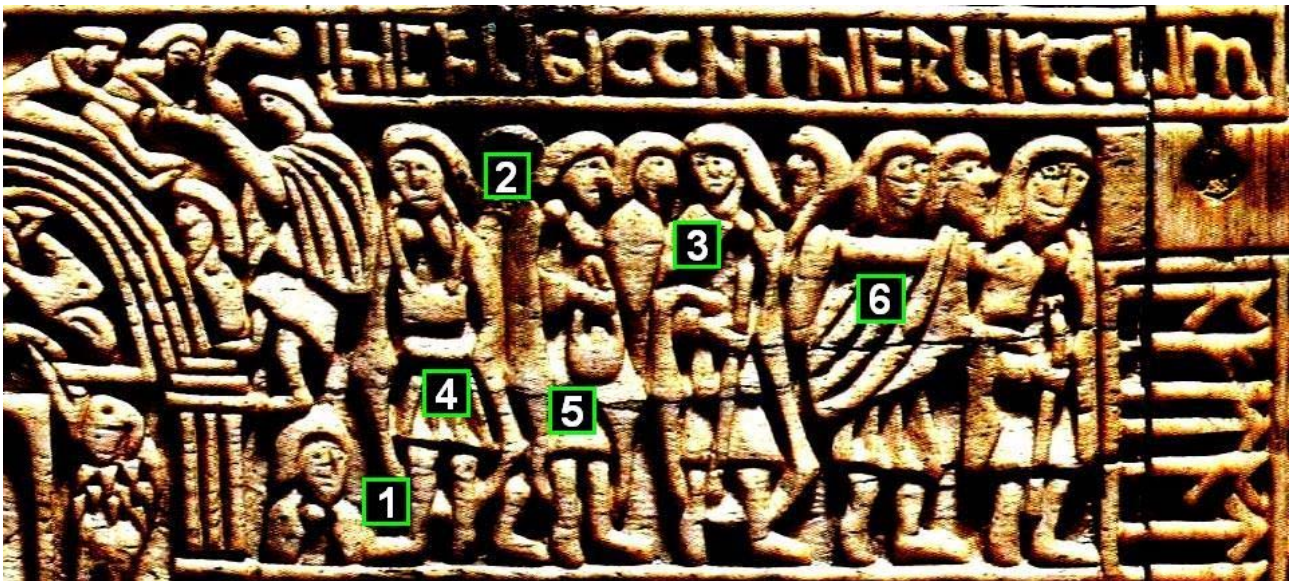


Figure 11: Flight from Jerusalem

The inscription runs: *hic fugiant hierusalim afitatores*

Which intended, "Here the inhabitants flee Jerusalem." This is the only Latin phrase on the casket. The artist renders bulk to their number, and completes the space (as with 1), by matching foregrounded figures with figures partially seen. One of these faces has broken away (2).

In those which remain we perceive a great melancholy as they look back on the temple (3 & 4), and again we consider a half-remembered Josephus: "Now every one of these died with their eyes fixed upon the temple, and left the seditious alive behind them." Thus may an image burn itself in, and the chaff of context fall clean from memory. But we mar him to point to so-called sources and say, "there and thence his art," numbering every stroke to the order of a found catalog, when it rather comes to the tally of a mind in nature.

Now the praise here which garners to the artist is entirely aesthetic; for he has heightened his art by the pathos rendered enemies. Yet even in exile the old Jewish greed shows itself. The sack of the town prevents no-one capable from sacking up gold (4 & 5) which, the ancients say, the city possessed in great quantity. With all their heritage loaded they attempt a flight out, and someone points the way (6).

SECTION 11 - Back Side, Lower Left: Judgement Under Vespasian

There is no escaping Roman authority. We pass now to the scene on the back lower left (fig. 12), the imperial court where father and son sit and lay the *dom* or 'judgement' upon the Jewish race.



Figure 12: Fiscus Iudaicus

Emperor Vespasian sits in the *domsetl* or seat of judgement (1), wears the consular robes and holds the *globus* or orb which represents world domination. His son Titus, still in helm (2), sits beneath and holds both orb and *mappa* scroll. These representations derive from Roman coinage.

Josephus says that Vespasian "laid a tribute upon the Jews wheresoever they were, and enjoined every one of them to bring two drachmae every year into the Capitol, as they used to pay the same to the temple at Jerusalem." He has sent out soldiers to round up the Jews and extort this *Fiscus Iudaicus* (Jewish Tax). One soldier (3) pulls a Jew (4) by the hair (5), who drops his money bag (6). Another stands with spear (7) while the Jew (8) shells out his bag (9), and two drachma coins fall out on the ground (10).

SECTION 12 - Back Side, Lower Right: The Jews Captive

This final scene, located in the lower right-hand corner of the casket back (fig. 13), with the single word *gisl* 'hostage' remembers the worse fate to which the fall of Jerusalem destined so many Jews.

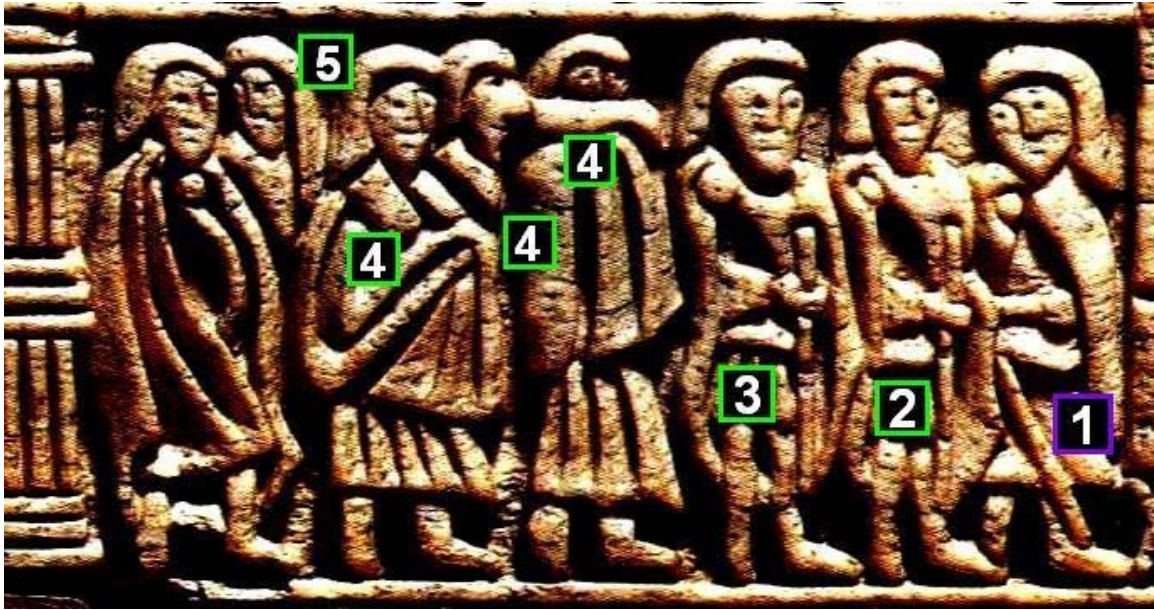


Figure 13: Exile and Bondage

Says Josephus: “and as for the rest of the multitude that were above seventeen years old, he put them into bonds, and sent them to the Egyptian mines. Titus also sent a great number into the provinces, as a present to them, that they might be destroyed upon their theatres, by the sword and by the wild beasts; but those that were under seventeen years of age were sold for slaves... now the number of those that were carried captive during this whole war was collected to be ninety-seven thousand.”

We see a slave-master (1) dragging along the Jew behind him who holds the staff of exile (2), followed by another (3) and the rest of the train. Some on their shoulders bear the beam of a yoke together (4). But once more the artist remembers their humanity, and touches one face with a last look back (5).

SECTION 13 - Front Side, Left Scene: Welund and Beadohilde

The legend of Welund the Smith as related at length in the Eddic poem *Völundarkviða*, and alluded to in the poem *Deor* of the Exeter Book, has many analogues throughout the old Germanic world. These are better stories than I have space to give, and I here narrate only as far as it helps to identify what is carved on the front of the casket (fig. 14).



Figure 14: Welund and Beadohilde

King Nīdhād has captured Welund and set him to work at his forge as smithing-slave. Welund is the left figure (1), and in giving him hobbled legs, the artist shows that Welund has been hamstrung. He half-stands at the forge with tools laid about: at the top of the scene, a bow saw on its peg; below that, what may be a file; a few hammers; and under the tongs, an anvil with in-driven handy (a chisel). Over Welund's head, the moon.

Nīdhād has taken many treasures from Welund, including the coat of rings which Welund made for his wife; this Nidhad gifted his maiden daughter, Beadohilde. However, Beadohilde has already broken one of the rings, and fearing her father's anger, comes secretly to the forge that Welund can repair it. Welund has previously deceived and killed Nīdhād's son, and having laid his headless corpse along the lower edge of the scene (2), has since cast the skull into a silver cup.

Beadohilde (3) arrives, and Welund agrees to fix the ring or *beag*, which we see balanced in the tongs of his left hand. With his right, he offers beer in the skull-cup to Beadohilde, now reaching to take it. Do we see Beadohilde as wary in her expression, or is it beer already that glosses her wide lovely eyes? Welund serves round after round in the silver skull, and stories soft-eyed Beadohilde with slayings and hoards, even as she starts to drift off. Let us leave the two young folks to each other's company.

When we return to the forge, Beadohilde is alone -- sprawled on the ground, stirring from heavy sleep; but the dull pain beneath as she rises (4), the unfamiliar blood; and here the loose robe, and open air where was her girdle-purse -- and there her girdle-purse, which she seizes with trembling wrist (5); and the ring of that girdle thrown cruelly at her left foot (6), loud to the world name her a maid no longer. It is a beauty and a shocked vastation of this lady that the artist intends, when he rounds her face with expressive garlands (as it were: q.v.).

Smug with vengeance, Welund limps about outside (7), plucking the geese whose feathers he will use to fashion wings which, like Daedalus, Welund will use to escape Nīdhād's forge. With regard to whether this 'fowler' figure is Welund, or Ægil instead (as in the *Thidrikssaga*), I have my own view, but it may fairly be deemed a moot point.

On the one hand, this figure is characterised differently from the one which we identify with certainty as Welund (1); mark that he has no hobbled legs. The beard also seems missing. But neither does the fowler very closely resemble that figure which we know to be Ægil (on the top of the casket), who is Welund's brother.

We should remember that Welund is a completely self-reliant character, unlikely to need help at this point -- and why, moving left to right on the casket, should the story end with Ægil, a peripheral character? Welund and Beadohilde are the characters in concern.

With view to *Vǫlundarkviða* not mentioning Egill here; having in fact rather said that Egill has journeyed east to look for his wife; and finding Egill (Ægil) in his own story on the top of the casket, it does economy to Welund's story, and justice to Welund's character, to see him on the casket both with forge and with fowl. The human figures then in the left scene on the front side, from left to right, are Welund (1) - Beadohilde (3) - Beadohilde (4) - Welund (7).

SECTION 14 - The Pforzen Buckle

The lid or top of the Franks Casket (fig. 15) at one time was connected to it by hinges, which were subsequently lost. Alone among the five decorated sides, the top bears no framing inscription; a disparity between the dimensions of this side (smaller) and those of the undecorated bottom (somewhat larger) has left open the possibility that frame and inscription have broken away. What it comes to is that we have only one word of text on top, *ægili*, set into the picture beside the head of some bowman figure (1).

Already the first generation of philologists who approached the Franks Casket had linked this word and this figure with the name and character of *Egill*, identified as Welund's brother both in *Vǫlundarkviða* and *Thidrikssaga*. Some also posited a connexion between the woman in the bower (2) and *Ǫlrún*, who figures in the *Vǫlundarkviða* as Egill's Valkyrie wife. It was further pointed out that a handful of English place names dating from before the Conquest bore a first element *Ægel-* (or the like), which was taken as possibly being the English cognate of *Egill*.

The discovery of the sixth-century Pforzen buckle in the late 20th century would provide a further clue toward reconstructing the lost myth surrounding **Ægel* and **Alrūn*. The silver buckle is inscribed only with a runic alliterative line in archaic Old High German:

aigil.andi.ailrun l.tahu:gasokun

The a-verse records two names, 'Aigil' and 'Ailrun'. In the b-verse, we have a verb *gasōkun*, meaning 'they strove', 'they fought'. It demands a dative or instrumental object, which we find in the compound *l-tahu:*, and I find very sensible the suggestion that the first element abbreviates *al-* 'all'. The second element *-tahu:* is more ambiguous, but I connect it to OE *teoh* 'troop of men, company, war-band', which can be any gender, with the Pforzen instance representing an ablaut variant.

The whole word, then, can read either as *al-tahu* (instrumental singular) or *al-tahum* (dative plural), with roughly the same meaning. The line could then translate two ways --

1) *aigil andi ailrun al-tahu gasokun*
'Aigil and Ailrūn fought the entire war-band'.

2) *aigil andi ailrun al-tahum gasokun*
'Aigil and Ailrūn fought all companies'.

It would certainly be a remarkable coincidence if the names *Aigil* and *Ailrun* were in no way related to *Egill* and *Qlrún*. A rather superficial difference between the sets of names has cautioned some from asserting their identity, but it is merely a matter of vowel quality in the initial syllables, a diphthong /ai/ in the Old High German words against the Norse monophthongs, that separates them.

Thumbing through the letter E of an Old High German dictionary, I note the words *egileihhi* and *egilleihhī*, which are clearly derived from the word *egileih*. It appears that the first syllable varies between *e* and *ei* in a word environment similar to that occurring in the word /aigil/, which perhaps shows the change:

**a* > *ai* / ___ *gi(l)*-

This change would appear to be optional in early Old High German grammar.

The word *egi*, the first element of the compound *egi-leih*, stemmed from older **agi*- as its pre-umlauted form. The person who made the Pforzen buckle, if he knew an early equivalent of the word *egileih*, may likewise have pronounced it with an initial diphthong /ai/ -- something like [aigi-laih]. This variation might explain the Pforzen buckle spelling 'aigil', as being conditioned from an underlying **agil*-.

We find another parallel to the *a* > *ai* sound change in the name *Aigulf*, also known as Saint Agilulf, seventh-century Bishop of Metz. The full version of his name, i.e. *Agilulf*, means 'wolf of Agil'. This name was something of a mouthful, but the *i* of the medial syllable evidently contaminated the initial *a* before the medial syllable was lost.

The pronunciation of **Alrūn* reflected in the spelling 'aïlrūn' has been conditioned by its context in oral poetry. The husband-wife alliterating pair **Agil*~*Egill* and **Alrūn*~*Qlrún* must have occurred very often together in poetic phrases, as on the Pforzen

buckle and in the *Vǫlundarkviða* (stanza 4):

austr screiþ Egill at Ǫlrúno
'Egill fared east to find Ǫlrún'

Once the speakers of this Alemannic dialect had begun to say [*aigil-] instead of [*agil], or when these remained in free variation, the 'characteristic companion' of this name in verse and folklore would be susceptible to analogy, so that the speakers were liable to have pronounced it [*ailru:n] instead of [*alru:n]. I would remind the reader of the oral pair *Romwalus and Reumwalus*, whom we met on the casket's left side (Section 3).

As I have shown that the so-called phonetic problems were only superficial, we may now link the Pforzen names to the Norse with greater confidence, and build on the affinities *Egill~A(i)gil* and *Ǫlrún~A(i)lrūn*.

To recap, the *Vǫlundarkviða* names Egill as the brother of *Vǫlundr*, i.e. Welund, and that Egill's wife was a Valkyrie named *Ǫlrún*; that grew restless and went off to fight battles, and he journeyed east to try and find her. *Thidrikssaga* adds to this the detail that Egill was a great archer, and had no peer as Bowman.

The Pforzen Buckle says that Aigil and Ailrun 'fought an entire force', with the implication being that they did so successfully. It hardly inspires to imagine that they lost; that were the common odds of two against many, and I hardly think anyone should like to invite a similar outcome on his belt.

Each of these sources gives a hint that complements the other. They connect with facility: Egill/Aigil the archer journeys east to find his Valkryie wife Qlrún /Ailrun -- (he finds her in trouble) – husband and wife have to fight off a lot of enemies -- (wife and husband win). I have alternated the word order “husband and wife” with “wife and husband,” because the Pforzen buckle seems to imply that they had an equal share in the fighting, as does the lid of the Franks Casket.

SECTION 15 - The Top: Ægel and Alrūn

The Anglo-Saxon word *wael-cyrge* and the Norse *val-kyrja* are cognate and literally mean, ‘woman who chooses slaughter’. The Anglo-Saxon word is rather rare among surviving texts, but the figure of the *valkyrie* or ‘chooser of the slain’ has a special prominence in Norse literature. The prologue to *Vǫlundarkviða* says that when Egill first met Qlrún and her companions they

*spunno lín; þar váro hia þeim alptarhamir þeirra;
þat váro valkyrior*

“they were spinning linen; near them were their swan-cloaks; they were valkyries.” Valkyries in Norse literature are said to wear swan-cloaks, and often appear with names like *Svanhvit* ‘swan-white’. At times they are even said turn into swans, as in Chapter 6 of the Saga of Hromund Gripsson. Valkyries are often described as wearing helmets, as when they are called ‘helm-wights’ in the Eddic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (stanza 54):

como þar or himni hialmvittr ofan

‘Came there from the sky the helm-wights from above’. And like the maidens in *Vǫlundarkviða*, valkyries are often said to spin or weave. This was the typical office of medieval women, and art from all over the medieval West will typically show women with spindle or distaff in hand. But among valkyries, weaving had a terrible significance:

Hann gekk til dyngjunnar. Hann sá inn í glugg einn er á var og sá að þar voru konur inni og höfðu færðan upp vef. Mannahöfuð voru fyrir kljána en þarmar úr mönnum fyrir viftu og garn, sverð var fyrir skeið en ör fyrir hræl.

This comes from the 157th chapter of *Njal's saga* and translates:

[A man] went to the bower, and looking in the window saw women inside who had set up a loom. Its weights were the heads of men, its weft and warp the guts out of men; a sword was the beater, and arrows were the reel.

The women are valkyries, and the passage has described a warp-weighted loom, which they have made out of weapons and battle-carnage, literally or metaphorically. There follows a lengthy poem which the valkyries chant as they weave the fates that will bind to men in the coming battle of Clontarf, for such is their power. Whatever his sources, the 18th-century poet Thomas Gray clove to the theme in 'The Fatal Sisters' (stanzas 2, 9):

Glitt'ring lances are the loom,
Where the dusky warp we strain,
Weaving many a soldier's doom,
Orkney's woe, and Randver's bane.

We the reins to slaughter give,
Ours to kill, and ours to spare:
Spite of danger he shall live.
Weave the crimson web of war.

At the end of the poem in *Njal's saga*, the valkyries throw down the loom and ride forth to battle:

*ríðum hestum hart út berum
brugðnum sverðum á braut heðan*

‘Let us ride our horses, and sharply out with swords drawn let us bear hence away.’ When they reach the battle-plain, they will protect their chosen heroes and choose others for death; they are therefore called *wael-cyrgan*, *val-kyrjur*, valkyries: ‘ladies who choose the slaughter’. Now that all these sources have taught us how to recognise a valkyrie, we have enough knowledge to examine the top of the casket (fig. 15).

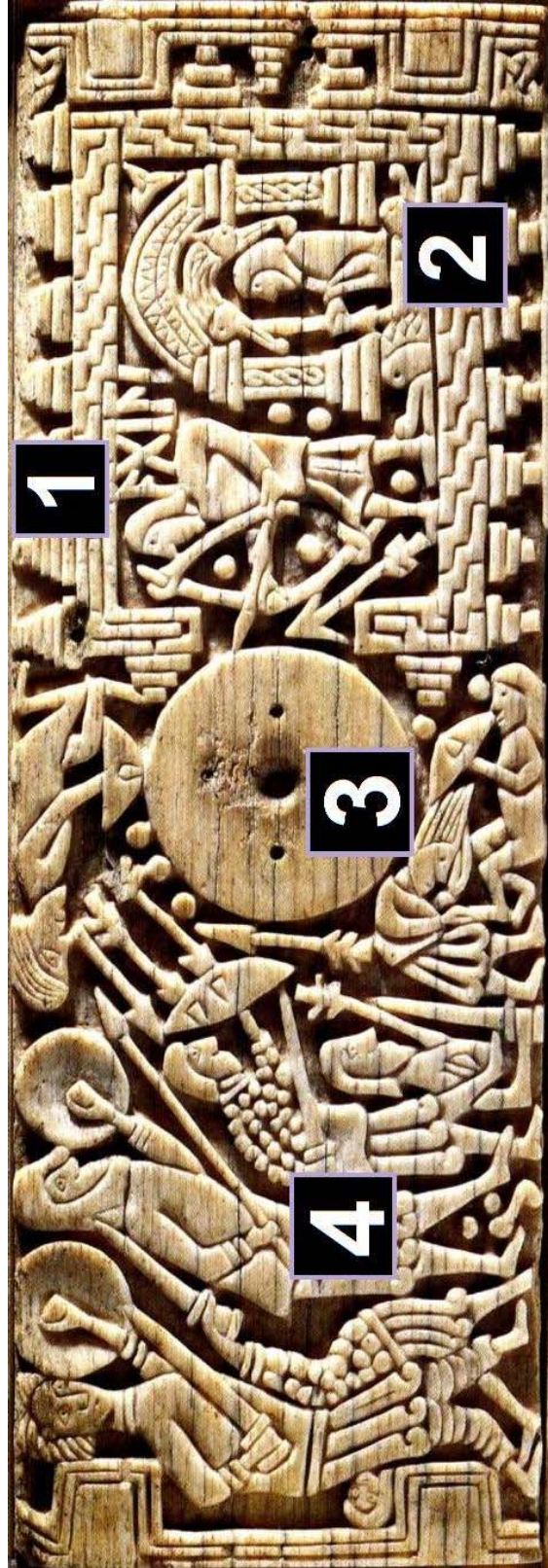


Figure 15 (up-ended): The Top

We have come to expect from the artist that he carves every element to a purpose, and this is no less true of the top. All details cohere in a great battle between some enormous number of soldiers (4) charging a fortress which holds two people (1 & 2), who have special marks of character. The soldiers charging them are unmarked and interchangeable, wherefore we take them as ‘the army’ or ‘the enemies’ (4). These enemies press on to the fortress with swords and spears, but their bucklers are poor cover against the arrows that pelt from out the walls. The figures under the dial (3) are to be considered separately, but the one above the dial is simply another enemy.

A man with a bow (1) keeps shooting the army, and next his head is written the only inscription on the casket top. It appears to read: *ægili*. There are linguistic issues that surround this word, which I will discuss in Section 16. In the meantime, I proceed to identify the name and the figure beside it with the names and characters of the Norse *Egill* and the Pforzen buckle inscription *Aigil*. From here on, I refer to the casket figure (1) as **Ægel**, which is how the name would have been written in later Anglo-Saxon.

Ægel here defends a fortress with the volleys of his bow, which confirms the Norse tradition where Egill is held to be a master archer. Just as the Norse legends name Egill as the brother of Volundr, so we presume that the Anglo-Saxons held Ægel to be the brother of Welund, with each brother appearing in his own panel on the Franks Casket.

The other figure in the citadel sits within a bower (2), and appears to be a woman. Now if the one figure is the Anglo-Saxon counterpart of Egill and Aigil, we tentatively identify this second figure as ***Alrūn**, the Anglo-Saxon counterpart of Qlrún and Ailrun, a name which apparently means ‘ale-rune’. This name is never found in any Anglo-Saxon text, and ‘Alrūn’ is one of several ways to reconstruct its Old English form, if it ever existed; it may be that she had no name in Anglo-Saxon, but was known as ‘Ægel’s valkyrie wife’.

In any case, I seek to show that the artist makes clear that the woman on the top of the casket is a valkyrie. We have found the woman sitting in a bower. What do women and women valkyries do in bowers? They weave, as per the poem in *Njal’s saga* (and plenty of other stories). We need to take a thoughtful look at what’s happening inside the bower (fig. 16).



Figure 16: bower = loom

The woman holds something in her hand which looks like a sword (1). This turns out to be a weaving tool called a *slege* or sley, with which one beats the threads of the woof to knock them upward, after having passed the tool through the warp. The word is related to the verb *slean* ‘to kill’, our word ‘slay’, which originally meant ‘to strike’. It is also called a *skeid*, a Norse loanword we met in the passage quoted from *Njal’s saga* above, in the phrase *sverð var fyrir skeið* ‘a sword was the beater’. And indeed in English the tool is sometimes called a ‘swordbeater’.

Above her head (2) there is something which looks like a rainbow ended with weird animal heads (trippy!) This is actually a

gearnwinde or yarn-winder, yarn meaning ‘spun wool’. The weaver wraps yarn around the ends of the tool to make a skein, the ideal form to dye yarn in. The artist intends the lines that span between the heads as the threads of stretched yarn. This is the ‘reel’ referred to in the *Njal’s saga* passage above: *en ör fyrir hræl* ‘arrows were the reel’, although here the ends of the yarn-winder are shaped like animal heads, apparently birds. (I’ll explain later how ‘arrows were the reel’ holds true as metaphor.)

What sort of bird-heads are these? If the woman is a valkyrie, they may be raven-heads, as ravens are closely associated with valkyrie women. They could otherwise be the heads of eagles or vultures; all three kinds of bird occur as a type in Germanic poetry, the beasts of battle who fly above and feast on the plain of slaughter. Stylized birds are no rarity in Anglo-Saxon and Germanic art; on the Sutton Hoo shield, the bird has a hooked, curling beak like the bird-heads in the bower.

The woman has used the yarn-winder (grabbed by the beaks) and twisted wool into skeins; now she has hung the skeins on the posts of the bower (partially covered by labels **1 & 2**). It turns out that these posts are actually the uprights of a loom. Above the yarn-winder there seems to be another ‘rainbow’, thrown over the two posts. This is the beam (**3**) from which the warp hangs down. The zig-zag verticals intend the warp; long horizontal grooves follow the woof.

The entire bower is therefore a loom. Underneath are two beasts with woolly striations cut into them, the sheep (**4**) which the woman shears for wool that she spins into yarn. Possibly they are dead.

Now remove from the loom and take in the whole panel once more (fig. 15). We have discussed the enemy army and the persons in the the fortress, but what of the two figures under the dial (fig. 17)?



Figure 17: Choosing the slain

The right figure lies on his back (1), trying to cover himself with a shield, or falling dead under it. The left figure stands over him (2) and has grasped his foot. This left figure looks different from any other. Its lower garment drapes, and gives a grace to it. Its left hand has long fingers which seem like feathers.

Now look at the head, which appears to have a helm on it. The helm looks strange: there are long lines carved from the crown outward, almost looking like feathers. I trust my eyes, and believe that they are feathers; this is a valkyrie in her swan-gown, and she is choosing the other figure for slaughter on laying hold of his foot.

We have a valkyrie carved in the battle, and a valkyrie carved in the bower. On the front of the casket, Beadohilde and Welund are each twice depicted as the artist tells a story. Here on the top (fig. 15), the artist tells a story by depicting the same valkyrie in the bower (2) and on the field of battle (3). Alrūn is twice depicted, whether we choose to call her by that name or simply as ‘the valkyrie in league with Ægel’. Putting her in the bower of a fortress with Ægel and setting both against the army makes for great romance, and strongly intimates that they are at least lovers, if not husband and wife.

These are the two spheres of valkyries; they go to weaving, and they go to war. Their weaving is war, as we remember from the poem in *Njal’s saga*: “The weft and warp were the guts of men; a sword was the beater, and arrows were the reel.” On the bower-loom, the woof passing through the warp guides the arrows of Ægel into their enemies. The arrows are metaphorically the ‘reel’ with which the valkyrie stretches bare and snaps their life-force. The Anglo-Saxon word *wyrd* ‘fate’ comes from a root which means ‘to turn’, and we observe that the valkyrie has woven the future of the battle through the turning of a woof.

In *Beowulf* ll. 696-697, a belief in woven victory underlies *ac him dryhten forgeaf / wigspeda gewiofu* ‘but the Lord would grant them the of *ge-wiofu* of war-victories’, with *ge-wiofu* meaning ‘fate’ from the original sense ‘weaving’ or ‘web’. If it is the Lord who grants webs of victory, he is likely to tie the ends with the eternal threeness of a triquetra knot, and one of these appears above-right the bower; two others (somewhat deformed) are carved into the right-hand corners of the lid.

We find another triquetra in the Magi panel (fig. 3) carved over the last wise man's bowed back. Over his head (q.v.), and behind him (cropped out), there is the same pattern which we saw on the posts of the bower, which in that context I called the twists of skeins. I do not withdraw that thought, but wind others into it.

On the one hand the pattern is pure ornament, characteristic medieval-Insular. But the tropes of weaving clearly pervade the culture, and surely the artist who wove victory on the lid could weave victory into his own casket by carving on its front the God-spun threads of fortune. And on the Pforzen buckle (of all things), the same twist-thread pattern is etched at the end of each half-line of the poem. It is doodling maybe, and on the casket mere margin, but there all argument ceases.

We often hear of spells that 'bind', as with the two Merseburg Incantations in Old High German; the first spell clearly reads as a description of women who use the power of weaving to control war (like the valkyrie Alrūn). The weaving 'decoration' etched into the Pforzen buckle, together with its verses on Aigil and Ailrun, together make the buckle a kind of protective amulet so invested with the magic these women are held to wield. Thoughts of this power were not far from a mind that imagined a war-weaving valkyrie on the casket top, and bound a casket with victory in triquetras and in its front seams; but God himself is the ultimate weaver of destiny.

I now call attention to the small round dots which are carved into the lid and scattered all over (fig. 15). Some of these dots are carved around Ægil (1); there are more carved below the dial, and others above (3); and a few more carved into the space around the army (4). Again, the artist carves to a purpose. The dots represent hail, coldest of grains.

A storm is an obvious metaphor for battle, and kennings like *stræla storm* ‘storm of arrows’ unite them in one image. But storms also herald the coming of valkyries, as in both *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* poems; likewise the air with a valkyrie presence resonant cracks into stones of hail on the casket lid: Alrūn’s natural force flung out from her, out over the plain with Ægil’s woof-spined arrows.

The fortress on the lid deeply recalls the stone-wrought hill forts of the Iron Age. It may otherwise represent a Roman ruin, which many an Anglo-Saxon poet has looked on as ‘the works of giants’, with an awe at least equal to his despair.

The enemies beyond the walls do not lend themselves to sure identification. King Nīdhād is the only antagonist with a name in the Welund-Ægel cycle, but the casket artist has not marked out any one figure as the enemy leader, and Nīdhād cannot be in two places at once, if he is busy torturing Welund. Remembering the quote from *Vǫlundarkviða* ‘Egill fared east to find Qlrún’, after which Nīdhād captured Welund, we maintain that the events of the two legends occurred at roughly the same time, but in different places.

It will have been noticed that the enemy figures on the lid are carved in larger form than the protagonists Ægel and Alrūn. It has been suggested that the enemies are giants; in Norse tradition, the giants were said to live in the east, precisely the direction that Egill journeyed in. Yet I point out that the dying man under the dial (fig. 17, 1) is no larger than the valkyrie Alrūn as she hauls him off.

I rather think that the artist carved the enemies larger to save himself some unnecessary trouble. Carving them to scale would have meant carving more of them, to fill up all the space; each figure requiring its own fine details. What were the use of carving them to scale? the use of carving seventy, where seven will do?

He has just enough carved to give the impression of an army, and chosen to execute his art with freedom and exuberance; a story told lively and well. I think on the essence of the Ægel-Alrūn myth, and conclude that the enemies are human-sized people. It is not the size of their bodies, but the size of their number which makes the legend compelling. It is a legend of 'two against all comers'.

SECTION 16 - The form "Ægili"

I begin this chapter by noting the popularity of names formed after **Agil-* (or its equivalent) throughout 6th and 7th-century Germania, especially among the Franks. I have already mentioned St Agilus, also called Aile, who of Frankish descent worked in Bavaria as missionary; and Bishop Agilulf, i.e. Aigulf, whose seat was at Metz. His name means "wolf of Agil," appropriately enough for a bishop. We remember also King Agilulf the Thuringian who was king of the Lombards and Duke of Turin.

There was further a Bishop Agilbert, again of Frankish descent, who over his long career presided at Wessex and Northumbria in England, and later at Paris. Anglo-Saxon texts refer to him as *Ægelberht*, and the name literally parses to *Ægel-bright*, where "bright" means "famous"; we interpret it to mean "famous one who is of the kin of *Ægel*."

I also recall that entire dynasty which named itself after an ancestor Agilulf, -- the Agilolfings, who held the Bavarian duchy from the sixth through the eighth centuries, and for a time held Lombard Italy. These were Franks or Bavarians, and were affiliated with the Merovingians.

The English version of the name occurs as *Ægel-* in several place-names dating from the Anglo-Saxon era. It is important to distinguish the names with **Ægel-* against those with a reduced form of the word *aethel* "noble", as this reduced form likewise appears as "*Ægel-*." Many places in England have survived to the present day, whose names truly contain the element *Ægles-*, which

is the possessive genitive of the name *Ægel*: Aylesbeare (*Ægel*'s grove), Aylesbury (*Ægel*'s fort), Aylesford (*Ægel*'s ford), Aylesthorp (*Ægel*'s village), Aylesham, Aylsham (*Ægel*'s home), Aylestone (*Ægel*'s town).

On the one hand it is possible that individual men who were each named '*Ægel*' gave the name to each of these places; that one man named '*Ægel*' named Aylesbury after himself, that another named Aylesford after himself, and so forth. It hardly stands that one '*Ægel*' named them all after himself, as the places are far-flung over England. This might imply that '*Ægel*' was not only extant, but common as an Anglo-Saxon personal name.

Yet when we look through the Old English corpus, we find no one named '*Ægel*': there is not one instance of '*Ægel*' as a personal name. There is no evidence for the name *'*Ægel*' among the Anglo-Saxons, outside of the place-names which are certainly formed with *Ægles-* as the first element. Whence the names of these places, if indeed there was no personal name *'*Ægel*'?

We have our answer upon comparing these toponyms to others in Anglo-Saxon England that have their basis in myth and folklore. I will only cite a few, because they are numerous. Places named after the god Woden include Wednesbury (Woden's fort) and Wednesfield (Woden's field). Named after the god Tiw are Tuesley (Tew's meadow) and Tysoe (Tiw's hill). After the character Grendel from *Beowulf*, we have *grendles mere* (Grendel's pool).

One can consult a list of English toponyms to find many more examples. But I should finally point out that there were at least two

places in England named after Welund, as in *welandes stocc* (Welund's tree stump) and *welandes smiddan* (Weland's smithy). As the second name makes clear, these each refer to the one and only Welund who has famously appeared on the Franks Casket.

If the Anglo-Saxons could name places after the legendary hero Welund, they were certainly capable of naming others after Welund's brother, Ægel, who was a hero and legend equally worthy of commemoration on buckles and caskets. It was this one and only Ægel, peerless among archers, after whom Anglo-Saxons named their towns Aylesbury and Aylesford; the same **Agil*, after whom so many Franks named their sons *Agilulf*; the same *Egill*, who fared east to find Qlrún; the same *Aigil*, who with *Ailrun* fought and defeated an entire force; the same 'Ægili' whose name is written on the Franks Casket, whom we have referred to as Ægel.

We connect the form *Ægili* carved on the Franks Casket with all the other names, yet we must now address the outstanding problem which saddens many who attempt it. We would expect the name to appear as *'Ægel' or *'Ægil', but are confounded to read the form *Ægili*, which has an *-i* appended to the end of the word.

Why the artist has included this final *-i* is anyone's guess. While several solutions present themselves, I would call some better than others, and yet none are final. I prefer to read *Ægili* as a nominative singular, but if we persist in relating this name to the others, we should consider whether it might be in the oblique. Thus **Ægil-* were the stem, and *-i* a case ending. I shall discuss the more plausible possibilities in turn.

The form *Ægili* would be the expected form of an OE dative singular *Ægil*, though uncontracted; it would yield the meaning 'to/for *Ægil*'. There are other senses of the dative, but this seems to me the only one plausible. If this is the correct reading, we might infer that the casket was dedicated to someone who happened to share the name 'Ægil' with the folk hero. If the casket was a reliquary, perhaps it was the name of the saint whose bones it held; perhaps it was 'to or for' St. Agilus.

Yet it is also possible that the name was Latinized, and so given a Latinate o-stem genitive singular. A possessive genitive could make sense here, 'of *Ægil*'. It could be labelling the fortress, as in '*Ægil*'s fort', '*Ægil*'s town'. As noted, there are many *Ægil*/*Ægel*-place names in England, and this reading could locate the casket to one of them; most likely a place with a minster, e.g. Aylesbury.

There are other oblique possibilities, yet none seems as plausible as these. Yet of the two neither seems preferable to reading the name as a simple nominative. The single words *wudu*, *risci*, *bita* which have been set into the picture on the casket's right side are all nominative labels of their referents, as are *dom* and *gisl* on the back side, and *mægi* on the front. An oblique *Ægili* fits this pattern poorly, and the motives I devised for it strike me as somewhat far-fetched against reading the word as yet another nominative.

Now if *Ægili* is another referent-labelling nominative it should surely be in the singular, for it seems to label the archer figure to which it is juxtaposed (1). Given the many English and Germanic instances of the name, we deem it English and not Latinate. Yet somehow we must account for the nominative singular ending in *-i*.

It plausibly reflects a Germanic ja-stem, a type which had this ending exactly in the earlier OE period, and which in the later period commonly yielded *-e*. Rather less plausibly, it could reflect a Germanic i-stem, which at some point in the (supposedly) pre-OE period likewise had *-i* as in the nominative singular; but the sound change which eliminated this *-i* from light two-syllable stems is supposed to have taken place much earlier than even the early Old English period.

There is no compelling reason to take as i-stems either the English place-name element *Ægles-* or its Germanic cognates *Egill*, *Aigil*, *Agil-*. Nor do the names admit to being ja-stems, else we had *Ægele*. The casket form would seem to be exceptional, if we call *Ægili* an i-stem or a ja-stem while identifying it with these names. However, we recall the several threads of myth which connect the nominal triad *Egill-Aigil-Ægili*; threads we deem reasonably fine and strong. They remain uncut, even if we class *Ægili* with the i-stems or ja-stems.

I should say that all the forms except *Ægili* may qualify easily as Germanic a-stems, which are the most numerous type of noun. Yet it is just possible that even the name on the casket goes to the a-stems, though I grin already at the foul cried upon the guile I am pleased to take toward this end. We look at that vertical which is at word's end and which we have persisted in reading as the rune representing *-i*. Suppose it is a mere mark, and no letter; as such resembling a *danda* to end the four-letter word: thus: *Ægil |* .

I myself shall be first to attack this thought, even while defending it. For the letter seems too much like a rune; in the same word there is a mark exactly like it, which we do not doubt in reading as the letter *-i*. The mark which is final rests on the same row and is cut to the same measure as the four letters prior. Again, we come forward with the angry reproach that no marks may be seen to follow the single words set into the right side of the casket, i.e. *wudu, risci, bita*. And now with critical thumb we crush the thought at its origin by questioning why in the first place the artist should wish to include such a mark.

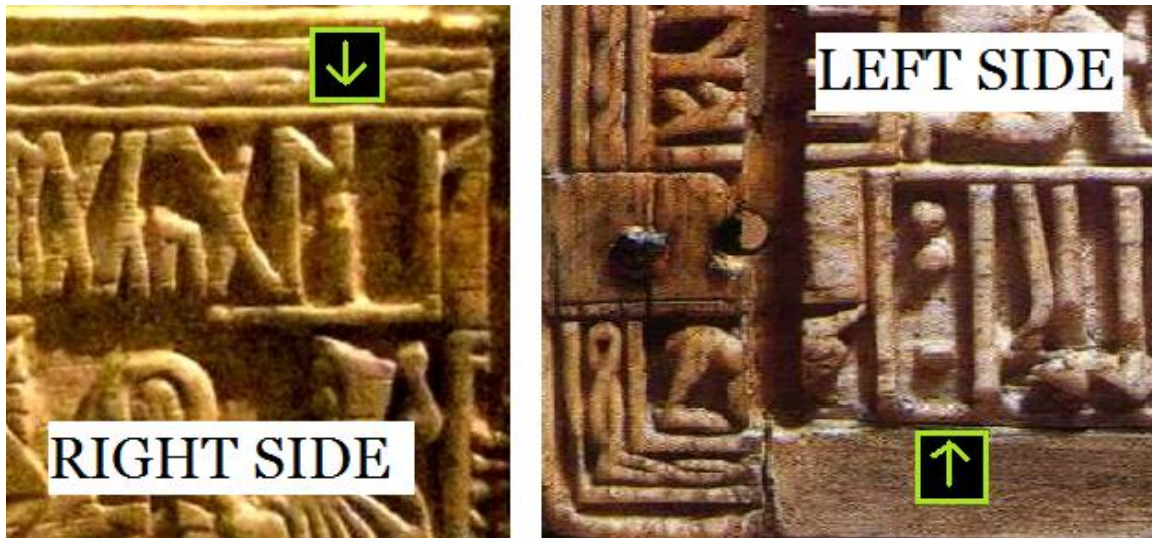


Figure 18. Staves and dots

To the last point, I should remark that the casket artist has done this sort of thing elsewhere: on the right side, after the word *agl* (fig. 18), there was not enough space on the line to complete the next word *drigith*. However, in the space between the final rune *-l* and the more extreme margin the artist has included a straight vertical (**see arrow**), directly after the *-l*. There the vertical is certainly is no *i*; as on the right side the *i*-rune crumples in the manner of an accordion. Beyond this vertical is another which ends the hollow of the area in which the runes were carved. I further note that this has occurred in the middle of an a-verse poetic line (*agl | drigith*) and does not indicate a caesura or line boundary.

On the left side of the casket, the artist has followed the word *romæcæstri* with a vertical column of three small dots (fig. 16, **see arrow**). Once again, there was visually too much space between the end of the word and the margin, but not enough to include the

next word *othlae*. Therefore he has filled this space with dots; but why dots, and not an unbroken vertical? It is because the straight vertical would too much resemble the letter *-i* which precedes it.

Now from these instances we gather that the artist has something of *horror vacui*: he is prepared to compensate excess space, and at least twice on the casket has done so directly after a word. However, if with these two instances we consider a third in the mark that follows *Ægil*, we demand to know why he has used the vertical instead of the dots, which would have caused less confusion. But surely the multitude of hail has persuaded him to render the shaft instead of dots, which would have appeared similar; and probably the shaft is the norm for the purpose.

But again we demand: if he wished to fill the space, why did he not instead carve more hail? Perhaps when this need occurred to him, he had already carved away too much matter to distinguish hailstones. On the other hand, it is plenty likely that he carved the vertical to good design.

For he loves to box text where he can; thus on the back he has given the words *dom* and *gisl* their own shrines in the margin, instead of setting them into the scenes. On the front, he has preferred to etch *mægi* on its own tab than squeeze the letters between the three wise men. Moreover, it should be apparent that the casket has boxes of text which frame its four sides.

Only the casket's right side has text carved directly into the scene, for several reasons: the panel is already very dense and cramped; the artist has several referents to label in the picture (*viz.*,

wudu, riscu, bita); and he must label them, because those referents were otherwise obscure.

Again we demand: why should he label the figure? As the dimensions of the casket lid measure somewhat smaller than those of the casket bottom, it has been supposed that some material is missing along the lid's edges, and with it a runic inscription like those which frame the other four sides. But if there were an inscription, what would it have said? Presumably - if the other sides of the casket are any indication - something about the event depicted, and about the persons involved.

As with the left side of the casket (and in contrast to the right, front, and back), the artwork on the lid is all of one scene, the battle involving Ægel, Alrūn and their enemies. I cannot believe that any lid inscription was lost which did not mention Ægel or Alrūn; that is to say, I cannot believe such an inscription was ever there to begin with. The artist would have had no need both to mention Ægel in the verse *and* provide the label beside his head.

I find that in passing I have addressed much of that doubt which continues to read a letter after that which truly ends the name. There remains the problem: if the artist intended the stave as bounding off the word *Ægil* on its right edge, why did he not bound the bottom edge of the word as well? It need only be pointed out that he has omitted the boundary elsewhere, as on the right side (fig. 16, right side, above Christ's head). Here on the lid, there simply wasn't room to make it worth underlining the word, and the space below it was already half blocked by Ægel's shoulder.

Besides boxing off the word, the the vertical also helps to visually balance the triquetra on the other side above the bower, in the corner of the panel (fig. 16, **3**). But whether the mark is in fact a letter or a vertical, whether the form of the word is *Ægil* or *Ægili*, remains beside the point. It is *myth* which binds this panel to the other Germanic sources, and *myth* which helps us recover a lost tradition celebrating the husband and wife heroes *Ægel* and *Alrūn*.

AFTERWORD

I sent out the original version of this essay to some thirty scholars last July, the same month another amateur chanced on a rather large treasure hoard in a country field which at one time long ago would have belonged to the kingdom of Mercia. There was a scrap of gold in the hoard that quoted the Book of Numbers:

surge Domine et dissipentur inimici tui
et fugiant qui oderunt te a facie tua

“Arise, o Lord, and let thy enemies be dispersed; and let those that hate thee flee from before thy face.” (Numbers 10:35) I think on the casket, and am reminded of another quote from Numbers (24:7-9):

7 Water shall flow out of his bucket, and his seed shall be in many waters. For Agag his king shall be removed, and his kingdom shall be taken away.

8 God hath brought him out of Egypt: [God] whose strength is like to the unicorn. They shall devour the nations that are his enemies, and break their bones, and pierce them with arrows.

9 Lying down he hath slept as a lion, and as a lioness, whom none shall dare to rouse. He that blesseth thee, shall also himself be blessed: he that curseth thee shall be reckoned accursed.

Amazingly, the verses fall in direct sequence. Verse 7 puts God in terms of water, as did the Nativity scene on the right side of the casket (Section 1) and the inscription on the front (Section 6); and like ‘Agag his king’, Satan or Hell has had his kingdom taken away (Section 5). Verse 8 compares God to the unicorn, which the artist has carved into

the corners of the front, left and right sides of the casket. The Bible frequently identifies the unicorn with God's intractable strength; medieval legend would identify the unicorn with Christ, who was born of the Virgin (it was thought that only a virgin could tame the unicorn). The 'arrows' in the same verse recall the top of the casket (Section 15), where Ægel shoots arrows at his enemies as at the enemies of God. Verse 9 likens God to a lion, even as he was likened in the Passion scene on the casket's right side (Section 4). He hath lain three days in death, and roused on the third day.

I cannot end the paper without giving my opinion on 'date and provenance'. I sense that the casket is Mercian. There has been a readiness to give the casket to Northumbria, but on casual look I observe that the phonology of the inscriptions has nothing that hasn't been found in texts of either Anglian dialect. And the art is too unique to say that it belongs to a 'school', Northumbrian or otherwise. History would seem to favour Mercia. After all, wasn't Mercia in the ascendancy when we believe the casket was made (late 7th, early 8th century)? I should point out that the prefix *tae-* in the right side inscription occurs only twice outside of the casket, both times in Mercian texts; but they are early, and that isn't proof in itself.

And I'll stop here, a pretty arbitrary stopping point, but one which is personally necessary. There is no end to the things that can be said about the casket, and I have no doubt others will find words to say them. I shall have succeeded with this essay if I've managed to point out what has been there all along, dumb in the heart and manifest to eyes.