

**The Iconography of  
Viking-Age Stone Sculptures:  
Visual Evidence of Religious Accommodation  
in the Anglo-Scandinavian Communities  
of Northern England**

**Doctoral Dissertation**

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**Abstract**

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## **1. The scope of research**

### ***Historical background***

In England, the so-called Viking Age was a period of over two hundred and fifty years, during which the Anglo-Saxons experienced a number of different encounters with various groups of Scandinavian peoples. The initial phase, the beginning of which is traditionally marked by the attack on Lindisfarne in 793, was characterized by sporadic raids with the aim of plundering. The winter of 850-51, when the Danish army first wintered on the isle of Thanet, opened a new phase of Viking activity in England: the phase of landtaking and settlement. From fierce raiders, the instruments of divine wrath, the Scandinavians gradually (but not necessarily peacefully) turned into settlers, and over the course of time became integrated into the native communities of the settlement areas. The intensity of their cultural influence varied from area to area, but they left noticeable traces in nearly every form of intellectual production in early England. Growing scholarly interest in the Scandinavian settlement in England has refined the traditional fearsome image of the Vikings, and we are beginning to see the Scandinavian settlers as valuable contributors to the development of early English culture.

The study of Viking settlement in England has traditionally been based on three types of evidence: the testimony of written records, toponymic evidence, and the linguistic influence of Old Norse. Archaeology has played a fairly small role in the interpretations of the settlement, which is due, undoubtedly, to the relative poverty of the record. With the exception of the finds at York, the number of settlement structures, graves, and other forms of material culture of distinctly Scandinavian type is still relatively small. Stone carvings, however, constitute a unique group in this respect: not only do they display Scandinavian artistic influence, they also have survived in considerable numbers distributed over a large area. The majority of them are found in the northern part of England, which constituted the area of most intense Scandinavian settlement from the mid-ninth century onwards. These Viking-age carvings from the North of England are the object of the present inquiry.

### ***Christianization and cultural integration***

In the scholarly literature on the Scandinavian settlement in England stone carvings are mostly quoted when mapping settlement areas or trying to demonstrate the active presence of pagan traditions in the Scandinavian territories. In both cases, the focus of the inquiry is on distinguishing the new settlers from the native Anglo-Saxons by separating the two cultures. There is no doubt that the carvings discussed in this dissertation serve this kind of research very well, since they clearly demonstrate the impact of the non-Christian narrative and pictorial tradition introduced by the Vikings. However, the primary value of these artifacts as historical documents lies in the fact that they bear witness to the process of religious and cultural adaptation that was initiated by the settlement of the Scandinavians. Therefore, instead of—or rather in addition to—being witnesses of the *intrusion* of the Northmen, they are witnesses of their *integration* into the native population. The ultimate result of this process of integration was the birth of the so-called Anglo-Scandinavian communities. This integration was a political necessity and was facilitated by cultural convergence, which, in terms of religion, meant the gradual Christianization of the new settlers.

The study of the conversion and assimilation of the Scandinavian settlers has so far concentrated mainly on the circumstances and outcome of this process, that is on its political, social, and economic background, its chronology, and its influence on various aspects of English culture. However, conversion, Christianization, and cultural assimilation are primarily intellectual processes, and thus the surviving evidence should be re-evaluated in order to uncover traits of this intellectual process. The aim of the present study is to provide such a re-evaluation of the Viking-age sculptural material.

The best term to describe the intellectual process documented by the stone carvings is religious accommodation. In the course of religious accommodation elements of one narrative tradition become integrated, or accommodated, in the intellectual frame of a dominant world-view, while the receptive system of thought remains the dominant one. In this case, the dominant system of thought is the Christianity of the Anglo-Saxons, and the source of the accommodated material is the mythological and heroic narrative traditions of the Scandinavians. The

motivation behind the accommodation process was twofold. On the one hand, it promoted the understanding of the new religion, and yet provided a continuity of the native cultural tradition. On the other hand, it satisfied specific sociocultural needs. The (rather selective) use of pagan material on these stone monuments reflects these needs.

## 2. The corpus

The corpus of stone sculpture is the richest corpus of Viking-age artifacts surviving in the British Isles. Sculptures have two unique features that distinguish them from other art forms. On the one hand, they were public monuments, easily accessible to anybody, and thus probably created with an eye toward a more general audience than that of manuscripts, ivories, or jewels. On the other hand, by the nature of the material of the artifacts, stone sculptures were relatively immobile. Many of them are still *in situ* to this day in their original place of production, and thus they can provide information about the cultural and artistic tradition and tastes of the people of a particular area that can be closely defined.

Even though the chances of survival of stone monuments are, in general, greater than those of movable and perishable objects (such as wood carvings, textiles, manuscripts, etc.), we have to count with considerable losses, and thus the surviving material is not necessarily representative of the contemporary production. In later periods, many of the carved stones were reused as architectural decoration or simple building stones, which has led to partial or total destruction of the original carvings. Furthermore, the loss of iconographical representations in perishable media (especially wood carvings and textiles) creates serious gaps in the reconstruction of the transition and distribution of motifs. Iconographers have to deal with yet another kind of loss in connection with stone carvings. According to archaeological evidence, as well as some aspects of stone carvings techniques, we can be certain that the majority of carved stones of the Viking period were colored or painted. From an iconographical point of view, the loss of the original paint means, on the one hand, the loss of the significance of colors or color coding, and on the other, the loss of fine details that were possibly

painted but not carved.

The present study concentrates on a special group of Viking-age stone sculptures, those with identifiable pagan iconography. They constitute only a relatively small percentage of all surviving monuments from the Viking period, but the total number of these carvings and their relatively wide geographical distribution suggests that we are not dealing with a unique local phenomenon. Monuments with pagan and secular iconography were probably subject to a greater degree of loss than purely Christian carvings, yet the corpus still comprises more than fifty monuments.

The somewhat arbitrary distinction between secular and pagan iconography, which is frequently used in scholarly literature, is based on the nature and explicitness of the Scandinavian iconographical material and our limited knowledge of the meaning of the carvings. In this context, secular images are horsemen, warriors, and male and female figures of Scandinavian style that we cannot associate with any known myth, as well as serpents and dragons that show Scandinavian influence in their designs but which cannot be clearly identified as mythological characters. The function of these figural elements was either commemorative or decorative. The majority of these stones served as grave markers or commemorative stones, and it is their (mostly cruciform) shape, their location, and sometimes elements of Christian iconography that suggest a possible Christian context. The value of these carvings as documents of the integration process lies in the fact that they indicate the adaptation of Christian commemorative and burial practices. Of course, this is not necessarily proof of the conversion of the Scandinavians, but it certainly indicates a degree of social and cultural integration.

The focus of the present study is on Viking-age monuments with pagan iconography. These depict mythological and heroic stories and characters that we can identify on the basis of literary and visual comparative material. As opposed to the wide range of themes depicted, for example, on the Gotland picture stones (pre-Christian monuments from Viking-age Sweden), there are only a handful of topics that feature on these carvings, which suggests a strong interest in, or even fashion of, particular themes and narratives, and the total neglect of others. The

mythological and heroic topics depicted are: the story of Weland the smith, Sigurd and the legend of the Völsungs, Ragnarök (the eschatological story of Norse mythology) and related scenes, various depictions of evil (the Midgard serpent, Fenrir the wolf, the Bound Evil, etc.), Odin, the valkyries, and Yggdrasil, the cosmic tree.

With respect to the present study, a further division of the carvings with mythological elements can be made. The first group includes monuments with no clearly Christian scenes accompanying the mythological ones, while the second one comprises those where the pagan and Christian elements are consciously combined in the iconographical program of the monuments. Even though most monuments of the first group also show elements of Christian cultural influence in their shape and location, it is the latter group, the stones combining pagan Scandinavian and Christian iconography, that are of special interest for the present study. The evidence value of these artifacts goes beyond that of social and artistic integration, and they bear witness to the intellectual process of cultural integration and religious accommodation.

### **3. Methodological concerns and the objectives of the dissertation**

In dealing with artifacts with pictorial representations, it is the methodological apparatus of iconography and iconology that seems most appropriate. The study of iconography deals with the identification of culture-specific visual representations with the aim of understanding the content and meaning of a certain representation and of tracing its visual and textual sources. The object of the study of iconography are artifacts with an intended textual referentiality, which presupposes a close relationship between the image and a text that exists independently of the visual representation. Consequently, iconographers are traditionally in search of that one text and the one single meaning behind the image or series of images, and their ultimate goal is to "translate" the images into texts. 'Text' in this context is broadly defined to include actual written texts, like the Bible, oral narratives in various versions, and even specific cultural and social practices manifested, for example, in rituals. While in Christian iconography the textual background is relatively easy to define,

in visual representations of primarily oral cultures the texts are rather fluid.

In the case of Viking-age carvings with mixed iconography the relationship between image and text is often not a one to one relationship, but rather a constant interplay of two (or more) texts. These artifacts are meant not only to recall particular texts, but to initiate and encourage the re-thinking of these texts by linking them to other texts. They not only include references to various narratives, but also suggest a *mental performative practice* acted out by an active observer. In his 1993 article on the "anti-iconography" of medieval art, Michael Camille pointed out the iconographers' and art historians' difficulty in the "double translation" of medieval images, that is, "to explore in writing, ideas that might have originated through writing like the Holy Writ, but which were then mediated outside or beyond it, in rituals, prayers, sermons, but most importantly of all, in images."<sup>1</sup> This statement refers to the impossibility of grasping the texts behind the images because of their oral and/or performative nature. In my opinion, by concentrating on texts, scholars have neglected an additional, non-textual, mental performative aspect of these artifacts. Let us look briefly at an example from what is probably the most famous Viking-age stone monument, the magnificent cross at Gosforth, to illustrate this visual and textual interplay.

The bottom of side C (east) of the Gosforth cross displays a somewhat unusual three-figure Crucifixion scene. This is the only clearly Christian image on the cross, with Christ, Longinus, and a pigtailed female figure in a long dress, holding a horn-like object. The standard iconographical tradition of a three-figure Crucifixion scene would support the identification of the female character as Mary, but that would require John to be on her side. Longinus, the spear-bearer, on the other hand, should be paired with Stephaton, the sponge-bearer, according to the standard depictions. The image on the cross seems, therefore, to suggest the mixing of two different iconographical conventions (Christ—Mary—John and Christ—Longinus—Stephaton). Who is the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Camille, "Mouths and Meanings: Towards an Anti-Iconography of Medieval Art." In Brendan Cassidy, ed. *Iconography at the Crossroads. Papers from the Colloquium Sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 23-24 March 1990*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993, 44-45.

female figure then? Knut Berg suggested that she was intended to be Ecclesia with a chalice,<sup>2</sup> but then she should be placed so as to be able to catch Christ's blood. Richard Bailey argues that "the object is an alabastron, the symbol of Mary Magdalene, and that both attendant figures are types of the converted heathen and the establishment of the Church."<sup>3</sup> Taking into account the rest of the iconographical program (which depicts Ragnarök, the apocalyptic episode of Germanic mythology, and related events), the reading of the pigtailed female figure as a valkyrie also seems possible. Both the hair style, the clothing, and the gesture of the figure holding a drinking horn recalls Scandinavian and insular depictions of valkyries receiving warriors in Valhalla. Since the panel depicts a particular moment of the Crucifixion narrative, namely Christ's death by the spear, it does not seem odd at all to have a valkyrie there to receive "the victorious warrior," as Christ was often understood among the Anglo-Saxons, into the realm of death. Through this slight modification, the well-known Christian iconographical motif becomes enriched or "footnoted" by a further sub-text, and the image serves as a link between the Christian narrative of the Crucifixion, and the rest of the carvings on the cross. Consequently, the image is not about one story or the other any more, but it is about both stories at the same time, the interplay of these stories, their distinctiveness *and* oneness.

An interest in the interplay and overlap of various narratives is what characterizes the process of religious accommodation. The choice of pagan iconographical elements and the iconographical program of some of the monuments reflect a particular way of thinking which facilitated the integration process. This thinking is based on an interest in shared patterns as links between narratives, which patterns range from recurring objects or natural phenomena to similar characters, shared ethical concepts, and narrative structures. This *figurative thinking* largely disregards causality and the modern concept of the linearity of time, and

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<sup>2</sup> Knut Berg, "The Gosforth Cross." *Journ. Warburg Courtauld Inst.* 1958: 21, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Richard N. Bailey, "The Sculpture of Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Lancashire, North of the Sands in the Viking Period." Ph.D. dissertation. University of Durham, 1974, I, 320-1; also see Richard N. Bailey, *Viking Age Stone Sculpture in Northern England*. Collins Archaeology Series. London: Collins, 1980, 130.



in this it recalls one of the most popular biblical interpretative strategies of the Middle Ages, typology. Similarly to biblical typology, figurative thinking is also based on the unity of time and the interplay of past, present, and future, in which the past becomes a melting pot of narratives of different cultural origins. In the process of religious accommodation, the Christian salvation story becomes the core narrative in which other narratives participate by their shared patterns. Unlike in biblical typology, however, in our case the so-called "antitype" does not fulfill the type, but rather is "illustrated" or exemplified by it. This is a process of enrichment, a special way of explanation, but not biblical exegesis in the traditional sense. It promotes primarily the understanding of a new cultural situation.

The present dissertation is an exploration of the intellectual process that underlay the creation and reception of these monuments. It seeks to identify their various functions in the contemporary cultural context, in order to shed light on the intellectual aspects of the integration of the Scandinavian settlers.

### ***State of research***

Anglo-Saxon stone sculptures attracted the attention of local antiquarians from an early date. Antiquarian and later scholarly interest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resulted in the first descriptions and interpretations of single monuments, as well as detailed regional surveys of the pre-Conquest material. Later surveys of medieval English or specifically Anglo-Saxon art, architecture, and sculpture also included valuable summaries of the Viking-age sculptural material. They treated the monuments primarily from an art historical point of view, described their stylistic development and iconography, and established the dating and chronology of the carvings.

In the past three decades the study of pre-Conquest stone sculpture has undergone significant changes. A modern scholarly interest and new approach to these monuments, focusing on influences on style and iconography and on local groups, was initiated in the 1970s by Rosemary Cramp, Jim Lang, and Richard Bailey, among others. They mapped out local "schools" and identified particular masters based on the use of motifs, templates, and cutting and carving techniques. The only

monograph on the subject, Richard Bailey's 1980 book on Viking-age sculpture, shed new light on this special group of monuments and has constituted a starting point for the present study.

Stone sculpture has played an important role in recent studies of the Scandinavian settlement in England. In the past decade there has been growing interest in questions of identity, conversion, cultural assimilation, and the development and character of Anglo-Scandinavian settlements, and sculptural evidence features prominently in these studies. Recent works on sculpture (e.g. by P. Sidebottom, D.A. Stocker, and P. Everson) have gone beyond mere archaeological and art historical analyses to focus on the communities in which the artifacts were created and examine the monuments in their social and cultural contexts.

My dissertation is in line with this latest trend, and proposes the re-evaluation of the existing sculptural material in order to answer a new set of questions concerning the intellectual background of the creation and reception of Viking-age monuments with pagan iconography. The aim of the dissertation is to interpret the sculptures as historical and cultural documents of an intellectual process that facilitated the integration and conversion of the Scandinavian settlers.

### ***The structure of the dissertation***

In order to achieve this goal, a number of preliminary questions have to be answered about the historical background, the process of conversion, and the corpus itself. Each chapter of the dissertation is designed to answer a particular group of questions. Chapter two defines the historical context of this study and provides an overview of the Viking period, focusing on various aspects of the Scandinavian settlement and the conversion of the Scandinavian settlers as a historically documented public process. Chapter three, the longest chapter, is dedicated to the sculptural evidence. The complete corpus of Viking-age stone sculptures with pagan iconography is surveyed in a "philological manner." The carvings are presented in thematic groups. The discussion of each group begins with an overview of the textual and visual sources. This is followed by a pre-iconographical description and iconographical interpretation of each monument. Finally, in the discussion the monuments are reviewed in a Christian cultural context

and possible links and instances of overlap, which might have contributed to the survival and accommodation of the specific narrative are pointed out. Chapter four examines the specifics of the process of religious accommodation in the Anglo-Scandinavian communities, while chapter five explores the characteristics of figurative thinking that enabled members of the Anglo-Scandinavian communities to cope with new cultural situation. In chapter six, the sculptures themselves, having been contextualized historically, culturally, and intellectually, are examined for the function they might have had in their original context.

#### **4. Conclusion: Summary of the findings**

The pagan iconographical elements displayed on Viking-age stone carvings of northern England were imported from the Scandinavian homeland and circulated on perishable media in the Scandinavian settlement areas. The transference of these images to stone is the result of an integration process and marks the adaptation of local Anglo-Saxon artistic traditions by the Scandinavian settlers. In pre-Viking England stone sculpture was an exclusively ecclesiastical art form, and therefore the adaptation of the new artistic medium suggests some degree of familiarity with the original context of stone monuments. Despite the secular patronage of Viking-age sculpture and the appearance of pagan and secular subject matter on the monuments, these sculptures show obvious links with the Christian cultural context. Compared to the rich iconographical material that seems to have existed in Scandinavia, the northern English carvings display only a relatively narrow selection of pagan topics. My survey of the monuments and their functions has shown that the selection of the material seems to have been made on the basis of certain social needs, but the Christian context of the monuments also suggests another criterion: compatibility with the new religion.

Indeed, each depicted topic shows possible links with various Christian narratives, which probably promoted the circulation and survival of these topics. Some monuments even display a combination of pagan and Christian elements, which suggests a connection between or even comparison of the two narrative traditions. The juxtaposition of pagan and Christian iconography has often been explained as serving the

needs of the Church by demonstrating the inferiority of the pagan tradition. Considering the function of the monuments, this seems improbable: the commemorative use of pagan motifs presupposes a positive attitude towards the heroes and gods depicted. The iconography of the carvings points instead to the coexistence of the two traditions, and indicates a cultural integration and religious accommodation process, which is otherwise poorly documented. In this context the carvings serve as cultural-historical documents for the modern scholar and reveal some aspects of the integration process. First, the dating of the carvings indicates that the conversion of the Scandinavian settlers (on a personal and intellectual level, not just formally) was largely completed by the first half of the eleventh century. Second, the appearance of pagan iconography on the carvings over a period of more than 150 years suggests a gradual process of integration. Third, the secular patronage of the carvings points towards the growing significance of parish churches, which were established as a consequence of the influence of the Scandinavian settlement on monastic land-holdings, and the role of these churches in the conversion process.

In addition to accounting for the selective use of pagan motifs, I have also attempted to explain their status in the accommodation process. Since the sculptural evidence suggests a certain degree of comparison between the pagan and Christian narrative traditions by way of various kinds of shared patterns, typology seemed to be an obvious starting point for understanding the logic behind the iconographical programs of the monuments, as well as the working of the minds of those who created them. Having provided an overview of the concept of typology and a criticism of the use of the term in the present context, I have arrived at figurative thinking, which provides an intellectual framework by means of which the heroic figures and demythologized gods of the native Scandinavian tradition came to be integrated into the grand narrative of Christian history. The comparable Norse and Christian concepts of time and history promoted this integration and the shared patterns served as anchors for the integration of non-Christian stories and characters. Of course, the two religions never merged in the traditional sense of syncretism. The system of Christian thought remained largely unaltered, and it was enriched by the pagan elements, because a need was felt to

accommodate certain aspects of the native tradition in order to promote the understanding of the new religion, and to satisfy specific sociocultural needs. Besides their "social functions" as funerary monuments, commemorative stones, markers of sacred places, and indicators of political and social status, the sculptures invited their observers to contemplate the carvings and discover new meanings of well-known stories in a new cultural context.

The contribution of my dissertation to the scholarship of Viking-age culture in England is twofold. On the one hand, I provide a catalogue of all Viking-age monuments with pagan iconography from the North of England, offer new readings of specific carvings, and discuss the significance of each theme and subject matter in the Anglo-Scandinavian cultural context. On the other hand, I examine the sculptures as cultural-historical documents of the integration process that took place in the Anglo-Scandinavian communities, and contribute to our understanding of the integration as an intellectual process. Due to the lack of other kinds of documentation, the visual evidence of the carvings provides a unique means of reconstructing aspects of this exciting period of Anglo-Saxon history.

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