



Thor Ewing unlocks the Perplexities of the Past
as depicted on

THE HOGBACK STONE

In

ST. PETER'S CHURCH, HEYSHAM

Previous studies and interpretations of the carvings on this ancient Viking grave cover have presented it as representing the dark and light sides of life.

It is shaped overall as a house, the tiled roof supported by four little human figures and the whole construction is held together by two bears, one at each end. They have massive heads and cradle the house in tiny little arms and legs. Between the arms and legs of one of the bears there can still be seen a plainly defined three-lobed leaf which is considered by some to be the Christian sign of the Trinity. We are told, by learned authorities, that the Vikings who came to Heysham had not come directly from their own homeland but had first been either to Ireland or The Isle of Man where they would, in all probability, have come into contact with Christianity, so this surmise could be correct although in Norse legend the three-lobed leaf also has great pagan significance. On the other side of the stone there is a somewhat worn carving of a fish, any legendary significance of which we are, to date, unaware but which was used as a sign by the early Christians during the time of intense persecution to identify believers one to another.

These accounts have been fully documented in "Guides to the Church" over the years but a complete revolution in our understanding of the carvings on this stone has taken place and revealed that we have not previously gone back far enough into ancient lore to unravel its secrets.

In the Autumn of 2000, the Lecturer in Viking Legend, Thor Ewing, visited the Church to give four sessions of story-telling in conjunction with the Heritage Week-end in Heysham Village. After the first of these, the Church guides asked him if he would care to take a close look at the Hogback Stone which he was pleased to do. Looking at the side of the stone which we had always been led to think of as the "Dark side of Life,"

his attention was immediately drawn to the carving in the top left hand corner which shows a wolf, with fairly obvious intentions, approaching a prostrate man. Thor said at once, "That is Sigmund". We eagerly awaited further enlightenment but none was then forthcoming. Only when he delivered his fourth and final story did he tell us the Legend of Sigmund. It was a long, tense and gruesome tale, only the gist of which I now set down.

Sigmund was one of seven brothers who were condemned to die by being tied out, one at a time, in the forest to be eaten by the wolves. (There are five more wolves depicted on the stone). Six of the brothers must have perished this way, Sigmund was to have been the seventh but there was a sister called Signy who was determined to save him from this fate. She went out to him and covered him all over with honey. When the wolf arrived it was very interested in the honey and licked it all off. Foolishly, when it reached his face it put its tongue into Sigmund's mouth whereupon he bit off a part of the wolf's tongue and the creature fled away in terror. Sigmund's life was saved.

We were delighted to hear this story for it seemed, as we listened, to close up the gap of hundreds of years between us, the present day spectators, and the original carver of the stone. Knowing the story that he had in mind, we almost felt that we were watching him bring it into being.

That was all we learned of the legend of the stone at that time but in September, 2001, as part to the Georgian Fair organised by Heysham Village, Thor visited us again.

On Sunday afternoon, 9th September, in the break between his first and second session of stories, a break of just over two hours, some of the guides asked him if he would kindly answer some of the questions which had occurred to us during the intervening year.

We were very interested in the deer which had previously been thought to represent the light of love in a dark world symbolised by the various wolves and the two snakes by which it is surrounded. Thor considered the stone very carefully and concluded that Sigmund was obviously the first turn of the complicated key to open the whole revelation of its meaning. The deer was not a natural deer but a man who could change himself into this form at will. When he did so he was known

as the Magnificent Stag but when he resumed his human identity his name was Sigurd and he was the son of Sigmund. We looked for a while at the other figures on this side of the stone, especially the four supporters of the roof without coming to any definite conclusions about them, two or more explanations offering possibilities but we must do a bit more research to be confident.

We next went round to the other side of the stone, previously considered to show the “Light Side of Life,” containing the Tree of Life. At once Thor recognised the central figure as Sigurd, now in his human shape, but we had to verify this by finding the “Signs of Sigurd,” a tree with nine branches and birds. The tree is indeed there, now “Yggdrasil”, and there are four birds, two resting below it and two flying towards it. In addition to these birds there are three other animals and a fish. One of the animals is a horse in motion and has a very arched neck, the second is a creature we had always supposed to be some form of humped ox, and the third is a strange animal with a very large head and forequarters, a sharply sloping back and tiny hind legs. One of our visitors suggested it looked like a hyena and this seems to be the nearest description possible. Our ox, however was revealed to us as a saddled horse, and not just any old horse at that, but Grani, the horse belonging to Sigurd who bowed his head to his master, as depicted here. Of the significance of the moving horse behind him we are not at all sure as yet. It certainly does emphasise by its arched neck and high-held head that Grani’s head is lowered in obeisance to his master.

The legend goes on to explain that Sigurd was famed for his extreme bravery as a consequence of which he had an enormous task to perform. He had to slay the dragon Fafnir – a terrible, awesome scourge. It was only possible to do this at the dragon’s drinking place and in preparation for the deed, Sigurd had to dig a pit in which to hide so that he could thrust his sword into Fafnir as he passed over the top of the pit. The fearsome creature, however, was so huge that one pit would not be sufficient to contain the dragon’s blood and Sigurd would surely be drowned as it submerged him. To avoid this fate he had to dig a series of pits connected by ditches so that the blood could flow away without harming him.

Having discovered Sigurd, the sign of his tree, the birds and then Grani his horse, we now needed to find Fafnir and the sword used to slay him. It was suggested to Thor that the hyena-like creature could perhaps be a dragon but this idea was immediately set aside as the animal was far

too insignificantly small – Fafnir was a massive, monstrous creature and in any case, the “hyena” had legs and Icelandic dragons had no legs but were snake-like slitherers. At the mention of snakes our chief guide took Thor back to the other side of the stone to examine the two snakes there but these again proved to be too minute to bear any resemblance to Fafnir.

At that point one of the guides said “You have not seen our sea monster.” The guide outlined a massive savage-looking head and scaly body directly above Sigurd’s upraised arms. Thor was standing well back in silence which then enfolded us all. “We’ve cracked it!” he breathed at last. “Look, that’s no sea monster, that’s Fafnir – he doesn’t end there where your hand is, see, he goes right along the top of the stone, down the side, all the way underneath, up the other side and back along the top with his tail almost to his head, just near enough for him to take it up in his mouth,” apparently a habit favoured by Icelandic dragons of repute.

There remained only the sword to find. One has to remember the considerable antiquity of the carving on this stone and that it has only been housed inside the Church since 1964. It is in a splendid state of preservation, indeed it is fair to say that it is the best example of a Hogback stone in this country, but the years have left their mark and we could not find the weapon, search as we would. It was a dull day but as we were about to admit defeat, a ray of sunshine pierced the clouds and shone directly on Sigurd’s hand and there, sure enough, was a very faint outline of a fat, flat-bladed sword tapering to a sharp point entering into Fafnir’s massive body.

All this discovery does not take long to record, less still to relate, but it took us almost the whole two hours to extract from the stone. Without Thor’s expansive knowledge of his subject and his extreme patience and kindness, to say nothing of the fact that he had foregone the chance of proper refreshment before the second of his compelling and enthralling narratives, the secret would still have been locked inside the stone.

We have yet more questions for Thor the next time we have the great pleasure of a visit from him as there remain some (very few) enigmatic details for him to consider if he will kindly consent to give us a little more of his precious time. He has our enduring and very great gratitude for all he has done for us already – and not only for us – for posterity. Thank you Thor.