X.—ILLUSTRATIVE CARVING OF THE VIKING PERIOD AT SOCKBURN-ON-TEES[1]

J. T. Lang

Sockburn, lying on the eastern side of a peninsula formed by an extensive meander of the Tees to the south-east of Darlington (NZ 349070), consists now of a hall and a ruined church, but towards the end of the 8th century it was of some ecclesiastical importance. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle it was there that in 780 Hygebald was consecrated bishop of Lindisfarne.[2] In Symeon of Durham's *Historia Regum*, under the year 796, the death of Archbishop Eanbald is recorded, immediately after which "another Eanbald" was elected bishop, "Ethelbert and Hygebald and also Badwlf, the bishops, assembling for his ordination in the monastery which is called Sochasburg".[3] The only further reference to Sockburn in the pre-Conquest period comes in a gift of lands to the Community of St. Cuthbert by Snaculf.[4] When the ruins of the mediaeval church, which had been abandoned in 1838, were cleared by Knowles at the beginning of this century, remains of a pre-Conquest church were revealed on the lines of the nave and also some foundations of what Knowles described as a pre-Norman chancel which contained sizeable fragments of 10th century cross-shafts.[5] In the 1890s a number of sculptured stones were lying about at the east end of the chancel and others

[1] I am grateful to Mr. R. N. Bailey for his useful comments on this article.

[2] ASC 780 (E).

[3] *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, ed. T. Arnold, RS 75 (1885), II, 58.

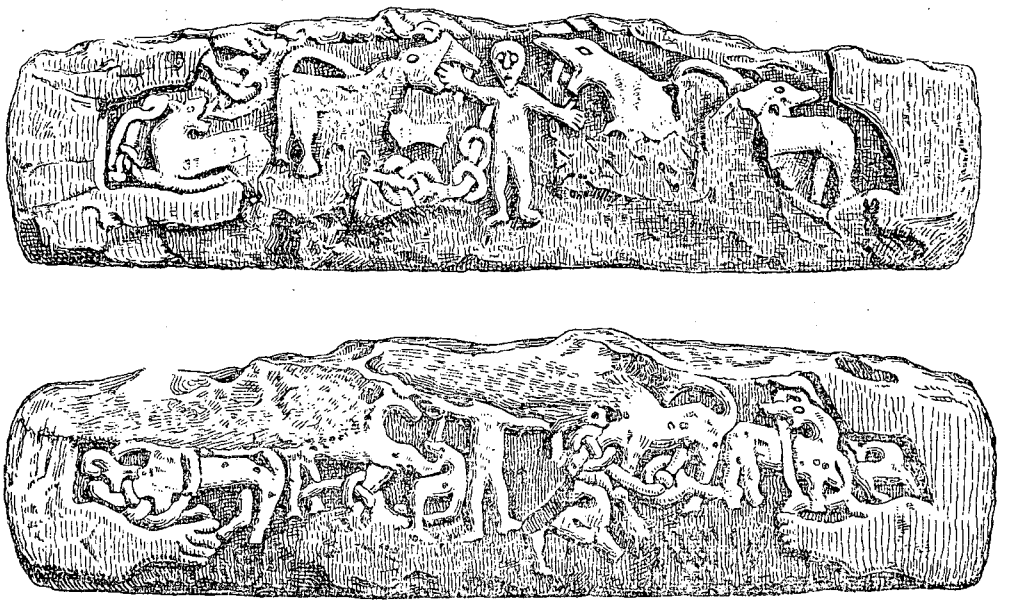
[4] Ibid. RS 75 (1882), I, 83.

[5] W. H. Knowles, "Sockburn Church", *Trans. A. & A. Soc. Durham & Northumberland* V (1905), 105. H. M. & J. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture* (1965), II, 555.

were preserved in the hall.[6] With the exception of one elaborately carved hogback which was taken to Matfen Hall and is now lost, all the sculptured stones are now in the shelter of the Conyers Chapel on the north side of the nave.

It is odd that none of these pieces is earlier than the Viking period and so far no monumental evidence of an Anglian character which might be associated with the monastery has appeared. The decoration of the shafts has a distinct Scandinavian flavour with varieties of ring-chain and Jellinge and Borre style animal ornament. Even the form of some of the monuments is indicative of Scandinavian taste, since there are several recumbent hogback tombstones, a type of memorial first produced in Allertonshire by Norse-Irish settlers from the north-west sometime in the 10th century. Some of the hogbacks are almost identical to the earliest types at Brompton and Ingleby Arncliffe, villages only a few miles from Sockburn, with prominent end-beasts and side niches; indeed they are probably from the same workshop. Other hogbacks now in the Conyers Chapel, however, carry illustrative carvings on their sides, a feature which is more common on examples from the west of the Pennines. The most famous of these north-western hogbacks is that at Heysham whose enigmatic illustrations have yet to be interpreted satisfactorily, but others of the type occur at Bolton-le-Sands, also in North Lancashire, Gosforth and Penrith in Cumberland and Lowther in Westmorland. Sometimes the scene depicts a man contending with a great serpent though the monuments at Gosforth and Lowther carry carvings of warriors in contexts which can be related to mythological scenes found in Viking Age art in Scandinavia. Whilst such figural carving has received very full attention when it occurs on a monument of major importance and completeness, such as the Heysham hogback and the great Gosforth Cross, the pieces at Sockburn have been disregarded, probably because of their remote position,

[6] J. R. Boyle, *Guide to Durham* (1892), 659.



After W. H. Knowles

FIG. 1. HOGBACK AT SOCKBURN (Knowles no. 11)

though they are highly relevant to any study of the art or mythology of the period.

Perhaps the most strikingly ornamented stone is the full length hogback, Fig. 1 (Knowles no. 11), both sides of which are decorated with the same scene. A human figure, apparently unclothed, stands full face in the centre, flanked by two large beasts, their gaping jaws furnished with long fangs. They have long, bushy tails which sweep over their backs, and though the carving is fairly crude they are naturalistically rendered and recognisable as canine beasts. Other smaller beasts of a similar type fill the remainder of the panel. On one side of the hogback a small dagger can be seen in the man's left hand, but both versions show the right hand, with extended fingers, placed within the open jaws of the largest beast. From behind the man stretches a band threaded through free rings which fetters the beast and some of its fellows in exactly the manner, with a ring and a crossing band, that is employed on Harald Bluetooth's stone at Jelling and on the "bound devil" shaft at Kirkby Stephen. Both Knowles and Hodges, whose occasional cautious sentences are all that has been written about the Sockburn sculptures,[7] looked for a biblical interpretation and thought the largest beast "apparently a lion" and other beasts to include reptiles, presumably the serpentine fetter, so being led to identify the scene as "possibly" Daniel in the lions' den. Given that the carving is crude and that lions were often rendered in a peculiar way in 10th century England, there are objections to the Old Testament interpretation. The man is not bound whereas some of the beasts are, and on one side he certainly carries a blade. Moreover, emphasis is placed on both sides upon the position of the right hand within the jaws of the largest beast. Without exploring the long tradition of the man flanked by beasts in Germanic, Irish and Scandinavian art, for example, the Sutton Hoo purse and the Öland plates, it is possible to find a literary analogy for the scene depicted on the Sockburn

[7] Knowles, *op. cit.*, 116; C. C. Hodges, *VCH Durham* I (1905), 238.

hogback. Such literary parallels must be used cautiously since the earliest manuscripts of edda and saga are often mediaeval even though traditions of the Viking period are preserved within them, and literary versions of a story in an Icelandic colonial context can differ from its counterpart in sculpture in the north of England. Nevertheless, the Sockburn carving can be related to an incident contained in the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson[8] which concerns the binding of Fenrir, the great wolf who is destined finally to break loose and destroy Odin before having his jaws rent by Viðar. Fenrir was bred among the gods but only Tyr had the courage to feed him. The gods, aware of the threat of Fenrir, attempt to bind him in order to delay his ravages. They bind him twice unsuccessfully, once with an iron fetter, Loeðing, and again with Dromi, which is twice as strong. Finally an enchanted fetter is forged called Gleipnir. It is made from the noise of a cat, a woman's beard, the roots of a mountain, a bear's sinews, a fish's breath and the spittle of a bird. Despite its strength it is also as smooth as silken string. The wolf is taken to an island and there tempted to test the strength of the fetter. Fenrir suspects a trick and makes a condition.

> "I will consent, provided one of you put his hand into my mouth as a pledge that ye intend me no deceit."
>
> The gods wistfully looked at each other and found that they had only the choice of two evils, until Tyr stepped forward and intrepidly put his right hand between the monster's jaws. Hereupon, the gods having tied up the wolf, he forcibly stretched himself as he had formerly done and used all his might to disengage himself, but the more efforts he made the tighter became the cord, until all the gods, except Tyr, who lost his hand, burst into laughter at the sight.[9]

[8] J. I. Young, *The Prose Edda* (1966), 56-59; Bishop Percy, *Mallet's Northern Antiquities* (1847), 423-426.

[9] Percy, *op. cit.*, 425; Young, *op. cit.*, 58.

The Sockburn carving illustrates the act of Tyr sacrificing his hand to Fenrir who is fettered by Gleipnir. The presence of the other beasts may be explained simply by the desire to fill the panel with free animal carving, like that found at Heysham and on the Manx slabs, and the second large beast, whilst possibly the hound Garm who eventually kills Tyr at Ragnarok (and who may well be Fenrir by another name), may flank the figure simply to reflect the sort of symmetry which the three-dimensional end-beasts give to the hogback as a whole. The Edda does, however, refer to other monstrous beasts who join Fenrir in the last attack upon the gods.

> All grim and gaunt monsters
> Conjoin with the wolf.[10]

The carving is much worn and damaged in places but on close examination in some lights one detail of the scene is open to alternative interpretation. The upper fang of the biting beast is shaped very much like an axe blade of Wheeler's Type 4, a common 10th century form,[11] and what might be the shaft passes behind the wrist of the extended hand. The fingers of the hand are extended and the shaft is quite clearly behind the wrist, and therefore not grasped. The upper fang of the beast on the man's left side is of a similar shape and it would seem perverse to deprive the dominant biting beast of his fang and upset the symmetry. Yet even if the axe is accepted, the subject of the carving remains the binding of Fenrir, for after the gods had weighted Gleipnir with a chain passed about a boulder they gagged the wolf with a sword. The substitution of a different weapon in the Sockburn version can be explained in terms of a regional variant of the story.

If the Sockburn hogback were the only example of eddaic illustration then such a reading might seem fanciful. It must

[10] Percy, *op. cit.*, 454.
[11] R. E. Mortimer Wheeler, *London and the Vikings* (1927), 22-25.

Fig. 1. Hogback at Sockburn (Knowles No. 22).

Fig. 2. Cross Shaft at Sockburn (Knowles No. 3).

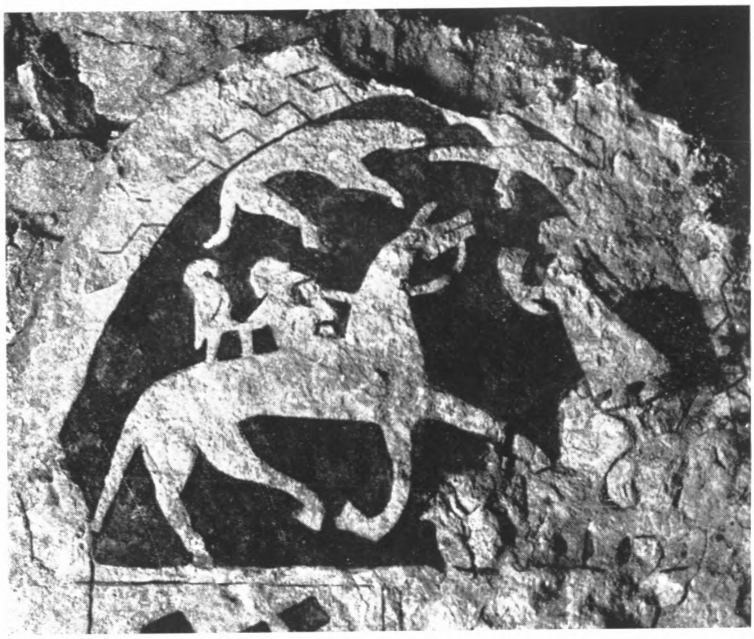


Fig. 1. Detail of picture stone, Klinte by Gotland.
Photograph: Antikvarisk-Topografiska Arkivet, Stockholm.

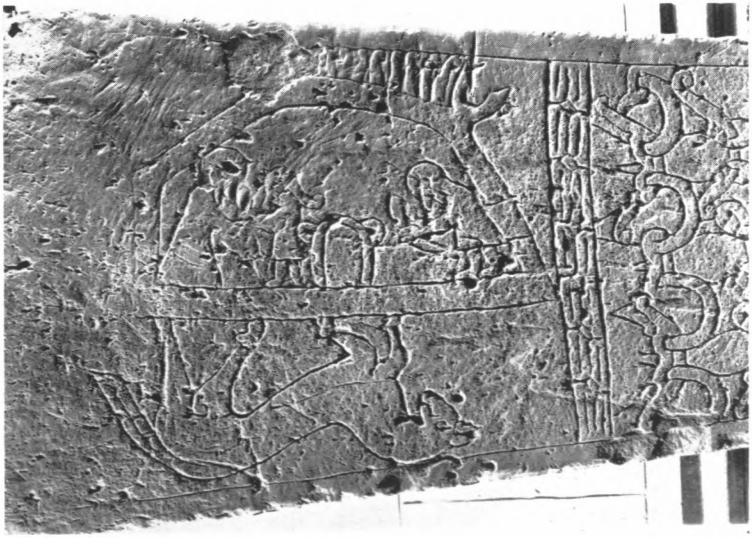


Fig. 2. Detail of the Dynna stone, Norway.
Photograph: Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo.

be seen, however, in the context of other monuments in the north-west of England where Thor is seen fishing for the World Serpent or wrestling with it, for example at Gosforth and Bolton-le-Sands, and where Heimdall, Loki and Viðar are depicted along with Christian iconography on the Gosforth Cross. The Fenris wolf appears again in the Isle of Man upon a cross slab from Andreas where he attacks the one-eyed Odin in an incident from Ragnarok.[12] A hogback from Tyninghame in East Lothian, now in the National Museum of Scotland, shows two canine beasts flanking and laying their forepaws upon a sphere, a motif interpreted by Mr. A. Fenton[13] as the wolves who consume the sun and the moon at Ragnarok.

> The wolf shall devour the sun, and a severe loss will that be for mankind. The other wolf will take the moon, and this too will cause great mischief.[14]

A second fragment at Sockburn, Plate XXI, 1 (Knowles no. 22), retains part of another illustrative carving which depicts a scene familiar on monuments in the Scandinavian homelands. The piece is one end of a hogback, as may be inferred from the end-beast, though the top is missing. On one side is the standing, profile figure of a woman, her gown trailing to a point behind her and her hands stretched before her holding an object which, to judge from the Swedish parallels, is probably a horn. Behind the woman stands a rather proud breasted bird. Unfortunately the recipient of the horn is lost, though a shaft fragment at Sockburn, Plate XXI, 2 (Knowles no. 3), probably carries the same scene. On one of its faces two figures confront each other; the one on the sinister side is much damaged but his head and arm are preserved. The round shield with rim and central boss is probably his also. The figure facing him wears a flowing

[12] P. M. C. Kermode, *Manx Crosses* (1907), 192, Pl. LII.

[13] R. B. K. Stevenson, "The Inchyra Stone and some other unpublished early Christian monuments", *PSAS* 92 (1959), 47.

[14] Percy, *op. cit.*, 452.

cloak held on the left shoulder by a round brooch. As the face is turned towards the viewer, the hair style is not revealed but it appears to fit the head closely as though pulled back. The figure holds a drinking horn from which the sinister figure drinks. Knowles described the shaft in similar terms to these though Hodges rather wildly saw the horn as a sword descending on the draped figure's ear. Such a scimitar-like blade was unknown in the 10th century and a close examination of the carving reveals that it is indeed a horn at the lips of the damaged figure.

The motif is a common one on the Viking Age picture stones from the Swedish island of Gotland. These upright slabs are carved in low relief with a series of heroic and mythological scenes which, in their restored condition, stand out against a painted background. Lindqvist's corpus of these monuments[15] illustrates the stones with excellent photographs taken before and after restoration. A comparison of these plates leads one to exercise caution in relying upon the repainted pictures, but so frequently does the horn-bearing woman appear that it may be accepted as an original representation. The picture stone Halla Broa IV (Lindqvist, Fig. 116) and the cruder one from Nar Bosarve (Lindqvist, Fig. 175) show the horn being extended in welcome to a horseman, as it is upon Stenkyrka Lillbjars III (Lindqvist, Fig. 112) where the woman's drapery, roughly depicted by incised lines, flows to a short train behind her. The more professionally executed monument Alskog Tjängvide I (Lindqvist, Fig. 137), however, displays greater detail: the woman's hair is tied back in a knot and falls to her waist, and her draped robes, trailing to a point behind her, are partly covered by a shawl or short cloak. Such features have a very close analogy in the small amulets in silver or bronze-gilt found in the graves of the Viking period in Sweden,[16] even to the shawl and hair-knot, some of which can be placed by associated objects to the 10th century, for

[15] S. Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*, I & II (1941).
[16] D. M. Wilson & O. Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art* (1966), Pl. XXIV cde.

example one from Klinta.[17] A silver ear-pick from Birka bearing the motif also occurred in a grave containing brooches from the same century.[18] Such small, portable objects, popular from the end of the 8th century, could well have been the means by which the device of the horn-bearer was spread throughout the Viking colonies. Whilst the occasional female figure, such as the woman standing below the Crucifixion on the Gosforth Cross or those on the Manx slabs,[19] often resembles the horn-bearer, it is primarily on the Gotland stones that she is seen in a narrative context involving the death of warriors. The stone from Alskog Tjängvide puts the figure in an heroic setting of fighting and fallen warriors; she welcomes the horseman to a hall very reminiscent of a Sockburn hogback, perhaps Valhalla itself. A similar scene is glimpsed in the *Prose Edda*'s account of life in Valhalla:

> "A mighty band of men must be in Valhalla," said Gangler, "and methinks Odin must be a great chieftain to command such a numerous host. But how do the heroes pass their time when they are not drinking?"
>
> "Every day," replied Har, "as soon as they have dressed themselves they ride out into the court, and there fight until they cut each other in pieces. This is their pastime, but when meal-tide approaches they remount their steeds and return to drink in Valhalla."[20]

The associations with Odin on this stone are also to be found in the depiction of the horse which has eight legs. The first assumption must be that the animal is Sleipnir, Odin's own steed, but it remains in doubt as to whether the rider is the god himself or a fallen warrior claimed by him. Lindqvist makes the interesting suggestion that the eight legs represent the two equine bearers of the dead man's

[17] W. Holmqvist, "The Dancing Gods", *Acta Archæologica* 31 (1960), 113.
[18] H. Arbman, *Birka I, Die Gräber* (1943), 147f.
[19] Kermode, *op. cit.*, Pls. XLVIII & XLIX.
[20] Percy, *op. cit.*, 431.

bier.[21] At Sockburn the deceased warrior is missing in one case and standing in the other, so there is no direct evidence of the Odin cult except by comparison with the Swedish monuments. However, it seems clear that the arrival of a warrior in heroic style depicted on a funerary monument is in the same tradition as the Gotland stones. Two picture stones from Larbo St. Hammars carry variations of the motif. The usual horn-bearing woman in trailing robes greets the horseman in both cases but on stone III (Lindqvist, Fig. 83) she holds a basket whilst a second figure behind the horseman holds a ring or wreath. Lindqvist uses these examples to argue that the scene has its origins in classical illustrations of Victoria crowning the conqueror with a wreath. Certainly in an earlier period bracteates and medallions so ornamented were to be found in the north,[22] and the tradition may have succumbed to insular development so that Victoria became a Valkyrie. Lindqvist demonstrates that the wings and the ring/wreath are inherited from the classical illustrations but points out that the horn-bearer is given prominence, possibly because the Valkyries' duties were said to include attending to drinking vessels and to the pouring of wine.[23] A number of Valkyries are seen on the picture stone Stenkyrka Smiss I, where three women with trailing robes greet a man leading an army, a scene which may be related to carvings on hogbacks at Lowther and Gosforth.

If we return to the shaft fragment at Sockburn, Plate XXI, 2 we see above the horn-greeting scene a horseman riding beneath a knotted serpent. He holds the rein of his somewhat hang-dog horse in one hand, and a bird perches upon his left wrist. Be it Odin and his raven or merely an aristocratic warrior, he has his counterpart on a picture stone from Klinte by (Lindqvist, Fig. 134) Plate XXII, 1. The Valkyrie proffers her horn to the horseman, whose

[21] Lindqvist, *op. cit.*, I, 100.
[22] Lindqvist, *op. cit.*, I, 97.
[23] N. Kershaw, *Anglo-Saxon & Norse Poems* (1922), 187.

mount is considerably more vigorous than the Sockburn animal, and on the rider's right arm, in profile, perches a proud-breasted bird with its head bent forwards. Whilst the stance of the bird differs from that of the one on the Sockburn shaft, it very closely resembles the bird which stands behind the train of the figure on the broken hogback, Plate XXI, 1. Here the bird seems to be associated more with the Valkyrie than with the warrior and one is reminded of the Old Norse poem, *The Hrafnsmál*, which consists of a dialogue between a Valkyrie and a raven returned from a battlefield. On the picture stone Larbo St. Hammars III (Lindqvist, Fig. 85) there is a highly stylised bird of considerable size being welcomed by the horn-bearer, as well as, below this scene, the winged Valkyrie holding high her horn, but Lindqvist publishes earlier drawings which suggest that a large bird hovered directly over the head of a smaller woman (Lindqvist, Fig. 384). The damaged hogback at Sockburn would have provided a panel broad enough to include the whole scene, but the limitations imposed by the shaft have forced the sculptor to carve the horseman separately (even the stance of the horse is dictated by the proximity of the serpent) and in the scene below he is portrayed dismounted and actually drinking from the horn, a moment never illustrated on the Swedish stones.

This is not to suggest that the Gotland stones exerted a direct influence upon those at Sockburn; it is largely coincidence that both places enjoyed a tradition of carving in stone. We have seen the horn-bearer in the portable form of amulets, and account must be taken of other, more perishable media, for example, wood-carving and tapestries, which we know to have carried heroic and mythological scenes and which are now lost to us. Whilst such objects undoubtedly found their way from Scandinavia to the colonies and, as has been suggested, influenced isolated scenes in the figure sculpture of northern England,[24] oral

[24] H. R. Ellis Davidson, "Gods & Heroes in Stone", *The Early Cultures of North-West Europe* (1950), 135.

and literary sources were equally mobile as the story of the wandering Egil's poetic tribute to Eric Bloodaxe testifies.[25] It is always possible that the Sockburn carvings are half-remembered motifs copied from Scandinavian objects but literary evidence indicates that the significance of the illustrations was thoroughly understood and that they were part of an heroic, aristocratic cult, probably associated with warrior gods like Odin and Tyr. There exists a fragment of an Old Norse poem, *The Eiríksmál*,[26] which laments the death of Eric Bloodaxe, last Viking ruler of the Kingdom of York, who was killed either in battle or ambush on Stainmoor in 954. The author of the poem is unknown but there is a tradition that it was composed, possibly in Orkney, at the request of Eric's widow, Gunnhildr. The diction of the poem has some similarity to that of the Edda poems, thereby indicating an early date. Two passages are of particular relevance to the Sockburn sculptures.

Vacta ec einherja, — bað ec uprísa
becki at strá, — borðkær at lyðra,
valkyrjur vín bera, — sem vísir come.

I was awakening the einherjar, and bidding them rise up and cover the benches and cleanse the beakers—I was bidding the Valkyries bring wine as if a prince was coming.

Fyr Æiríki glymr, — er hér mun inn koma
jöffur í Oðinns sale.

The noise betokens the approach of the hero Eric, who must be coming here into Othin's abode.[27]

Not only do the lines support the mythological interpretation and, indeed, to some extent help to explain it, but

[25] G. Jones, *Egil's Saga* (1960), 160f.
[26] Kershaw, *op. cit.*, 93f.
[27] Kershaw, *op. cit.*, 96-97.

they also quite clearly link the tradition to an historical figure of the 10th century whom we know to have been active in the area adjoining Sockburn.

The two hogbacks which have been the subject of this discussion carry no Christian iconography whatsoever so their motifs are exclusively pagan, unlike the mythology depicted on the Gosforth Cross[28] where Ragnarok is juxtaposed with the Crucifixion or perhaps seen in terms of Doom's Day, a notion which must have assumed some importance in the 10th century. The Valkyrie shaft did have a cross-head, however, as may be seen from the reverse face where the lower arm of a lorgnette cross remains near the top of the tapering shaft. Such a cross, as opposed to a crucifix, could well have been a purely conventional terminal by analogy with genuine Christian stone crosses. Perhaps perversely, a pagan-Christian overlap could be seen in the Tyr-Fenrir hogback since it does express the idea of a sacrificial god, but if this were the case then one would expect to find unambiguous Christian iconography in juxtaposition to eddaic scenes in the Gosforth manner. The Sockburn material appears to be uncompromisingly pagan and does not lend itself to Christian interpretation; in this respect it resembles the Gotland picture stones rather than the "overlap" carvings of Gosforth.

Yet the Sockburn Valkyries and their literary counterparts may throw some light upon two particular Christian monuments. We have seen that the woman who stands at the foot of the Crucifixion on the Gosforth Cross closely resembles the horn-bearer in details of dress and hair-style; she also carries an enigmatic object which has been drawn in reproductions with much variety. If this object is a horn, perhaps viewed end-on, then notions of Christ as a slain hero would allow for the Valkyrie of Scandinavian paganism to act as a Resurrection symbol, welcoming the speared Christ to the after-life, an interpretation in accord with the

[28] K. Berg, "The Gosforth Cross", *Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institutes* XXI (1958), 27-43.

scheme of the cross's decoration and tending to support Collingwood's tentative hint that Christ is depicted in terms of the hanged Odin,[29] especially since the Valkyrie seems to be associated with that god. Secondly, a runic stone from Dynna in Norway[30] has one of its sides decorated with figure carvings of the Magi and the Star of Bethlehem below which a house with a curved roof-ridge is seen in section resembling the houses of the Gotland stones, Plate XXII, 2. Within the house are three figures, possibly the Virgin, the infant Christ and one of the Magi whose horse waits outside. The Virgin wears a long, full-skirted robe and the bowing Magus proffers a horn. Whilst the context is undoubtedly Christian, many of the elements are paralleled in the pagan horn-greeting: the horseman's arrival, the woman's greeting and the horn, at Dynna, adapted to the Nativity story by becoming the gift of the Magus. The Christian after-life promised in the Nativity may be echoed in the emblems of the reception into Valhalla.

The Sockburn sculptures indicate that the site was in the 10th century the burial place of a secular aristocracy whose beliefs and mutual tolerance allowed both pagan figure carving and Christian cross-heads within the one cemetery. The patrons of these monuments were probably connected politically with York but held lands in Allertonshire and Teesdale, and the warrior motifs together with the excellent workmanship of many of the memorials demonstrate that the stones are prestige monuments. They can be seen as belonging to a continuing tradition of myth depiction and our view of the art and religion of the Viking colonies must be modified by them.

. Photographs were kindly supplied by The Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm and Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo. Fig. 1 is reproduced by courtesy of The Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland.

[29] W. S. Calverley, *Early Sculptured Crosses, etc. in the Diocese of Carlisle* (1899), 167.

[30] B. Hougen, *Norges Innskrifter med de yngre runer*, ed. M. Olsen (1941), 162f.