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A ROMANESQUE CAPITAL FROM READING ABBEY IN THE READING MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

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The capital of fine-grained Caen stone, which at first glance depicts "in slow motion" two simultaneous dragon-fights, was carved about 1130 AD for the great Abbey church at Reading.[1]

Among the common features of the capital's four sides are a semi-circular arch, two roundels at the bottom and two huge dragons on the right and left side. The dragons' bodies are interlaced at the corners; their tails are entangled in the arch and in one another. Where the tails divide in a few branch-like ends, two male persons are sitting. In the mid twelfth century there was "a variety of hair dressing and a style falling loose and thick over the forehead, and down to ears and shoulders would not have been unusual".[2] Both persons are dressed in tunics of some soft material; the collars, sleeves and cuffs are just discernible. By means of thick trousers of hide ending in horse's hoofs they disguised themselves as supernatural beings and tackle the dragons with their bare hands.

The curiously propped up, identical dragons, are neither aggressive nor daunting and their movements are remarkably restricted. A row of beads indicates their spine; deep, parallel grooves, arranged in a kind of herring-bone pattern, reveal their thick scales or horny skin. With a wolf's head, reptile's body and the feathered wings of a gigantic bird, they belong to the well-known Romanesque compound type of dragons which perfectly express the fears of the dangers supposed by medieval man to lurk on the land, in the water and in the air.

Phase 1 (pl. 1)

Two male persons, sitting back-to-back with bent knees, grip the long, grooved tongues of the two dragons. The body of the bearded man on the right side is frontal and his large, square, slightly damaged face is in three-quarter view. Moving his arms freely, he seems master of the situation.

The boy on the left sits sideways, with his round face in profile. Possibly he takes the dragon for a real being[3] and stares with terrified, wide open eyes and open mouth at its curled tongue quite close to his face. His stiff, erect posture and his elbow pressed closely to his body also reveal his fright.

Both dragons, though weathered, look lively with wide open jaws, large eyes and pricked up ears. The feathered wings of the dragon on the right are folded and its front paw rests in a submissive gesture on its chest, whereas the dragon on the left shows its sharp wolf's teeth, and the lines around its mouth denote pain and anguish rather than fierceness.

Phase 2 (pl. 2)

Although the action continues, there are two different male persons not only gripping the dragons' tongues but pulling them out. On the right side is now a youth. His body is frontal, his head is in three-quarter view. The sleeve of his tunic is fairly distinct. With assured arm

[1] Exhibit Nr 100:77. The dimensions are 40·6 cm high and 38 cm wide on the abacus. National Art-Collections Fund, 68th *Annual Report*, 1971. London, 1972. p. 29.

[2] I am very grateful to Mrs M. B. Ginsburg, of London, who contributed this interesting information.

[3] W. Lange, *Der Drachenkampf*. Dissertation Munich, 1939. p. 28.

movements and relaxed knee he tackles the right-hand dragon at close quarters. He sits at a short distance from the boy on his left because he has pulled out the dragon's tongue so far that its curly end reaches his right ear.

The boy's body and his head are in profile. His leg is difficult to make out in the present state of preservation. Looking a year or two older than the boy in phase 1, he is correspondingly more composed and resourceful. His mouth is shut; he looks unperturbed at the left-hand dragon, but he keeps its slightly longer tongue at arm's length, lifting it up like a shield in front of his face as if he were not quite sure whether the dragon might suddenly breathe fire.

The right-hand dragon, which is rather worn, still offers some resistance, although a chain around its feathered wing (better visible in phase 3) prevents it from getting away. A bird's leg comes out from underneath its wing and with its bird's toes the dragon attempts to steady itself by holding on to the semi-circular arch. The ears of both dragons are no longer pricked up but flattened back; their jaws are less wide open and their eyes are semi-closed.

Phase 3 (pl. 3)

Again we have two different male persons, sitting once more back-to-back, after having pulled out the dragons' tongues much farther. The particularly successful person on the right side with a badly damaged face is probably a youth because the size of the head equals the size of the youth's head in phase 2. Since his leg, covered by hide and ending in a distinct horse's hoof,[4] is longer, he may be a year or two older than the youth in phase 2.

The boy's figure and round face are in profile. He is leaning back and still holding the dragons' tongue as a shield. A comparison of their backs suggests that the boy in phase 3 is about two years older than the boy in phase 2.

The right-hand dragon is extremely well preserved and only now can be seen the two lines which separate the head from the reptile's body. The lines obviously indicate that the head is a mask and the body is stuffed. All the other dragons are presumably also artificial; they are unfortunately less well preserved. Although the eye of the right-hand dragon is more open, it gazes in agony into the distance instead of watching the enemy. The grip of its toes has weakened. The chain around its feathered wing can be seen without any difficulty right above the bird's leg.

Phase 4 (pl. 4)

Once again there are two different male figures. This time their legs are hidden. The well-preserved bodies and heads with classical features are in profile. The bearded man is now on the left side and the curly haired youth on the right side. They had to change places on account of the long garlands of windpipes, lungs and hearts which they have drawn out together with the dragons' tongues. For the first time the two persons are face-to-face and act in unison as if the man accepts the youth as an equal. Triumphantly leaning backwards, with outstretched arms, they hold high up like a trophy the two curled ends of the dragons' tongues which meet and form a hideous, primeval mask with bulging eyes, more dreadful than any beakhead.

The bodies of the dragons have collapsed like empty wine-skins. The bird's foot of the right-hand dragon is hanging down limply whereas its wing is still up. The wing of the left-hand dragon is down.

It is fortunate that a few rather striking correspondences are preserved in the heroic Norse *Saga of Hrolf Kraki,* compiled about 1400, because only a small part of the medieval literature is known to us.[5] Two important statements about the Saga form a valuable introduction to the episodes which have been condensed here as much as possible. Firstly,

[4] According to advice received from Dr E. Beaumont, of Oxford, for which I am very grateful.

[5] Jan De Vries, "Über Keltisch-germanische Beziehungen auf dem Gebiet der Heldensage". *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur.* Vol. 75. Halle, 1953. p. 232.

PLATE 1. *Phase 1*

PLATE 2. *Phase 2*

PLATE 3. *Phase 3*

PLATE 4. *Phase 4*

Gwyn Jones's judicious evaluation: "It is deservedly among the best-esteemed of its episodic, savage, and legend- and folklore-laden kind".[6] Secondly, H. R. Ellis Davidson's perceptive remark that "memories of initiation into warrior societies" survive in the *Hrolf Saga*.[7] We shall later on briefly return to the initiation rites[8] and also to the sarcastic tone of the Norse story-teller. The main points of the story are two:

1. Elgfrothi was a "violent" *Mischwesen*, "a man above, but an elk from the navel down". He offered his younger brother Bothvar a strength-giving drink of blood which he drew from the calf of his leg, ensuring that he would "excel most men in strength and valour and every kind of hardihood and manliness".[9] Bothvar later became the champion of King Hrolf of Denmark.
2. The spiritless Hott told Bothvar about a huge and terrible creature which had come on two Yule-eves and done great damage at King Hrolf's residence. "It has wings on its back, and flies at all times.... No weapon will bite on it". On the third Yule-eve Bothvar killed the creature with his sword and at the spot "where the creature lay dead" he made Hott drink the beast's blood and eat some of the beast's heart, whereupon Hott grew strong and courageous. They both raised up the beast and fixed him so that the people "will think he is still alive". The next morning, in the presence of the King, Hott smote the beast and it "fell down dead". He also became a champion and was given the new name Hjalti.[10]

The resemblance between Elgfrothi and the youth in phase 3 is evident in spite of the sculptor's greater familiarity with horses' hoofs than with elks' hoofs. W. Lange offers several explanations for dragon-fighters disguised in animal skins, a motif, which has a long history. For our present purpose I prefer J. Fontenrose's remark about "trickery by disguise", which he traces back to the "magical change of shape".[11]

The winged creature[12] in the *Hrolf Saga*, which no weapon would bite, reminds us of the chained wings, thick scales or horny skin of the dragons represented on the Abbey capital. A further suggestion for the creature's dragon-like character—although Hott calls it once "the greatest Troll"[13]—is the magical effect of its blood and heart on Hott. Perhaps the tearing out of the tongue, lungs and heart, shown on the Abbey capital, indicates an attempt to obtain unharmed the heart credited with great inherent magical virtues. Bothvar and Hott followed an ancient hunting-ritual based on the belief that the essence of an adversary is destroyed only if its vital organs had been consumed.[14]

Eleventh and twelfth century sculptors usually depicted well-known themes either for

[6] *Erik the Red.* London, 1961. p. xv.

[7] *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe.* Harmondsworth, 1964. p. 68.

[8] For a concise and profound discussion of the close association between dragon-fights and initiation rites, *see* Jan De Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend.* London, 1963. 220 ff.

[9] For blood as a magical strengthening drink, *see* I. M. Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature.* Copenhagen, 1966. D1335.2.1

[10] Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 238, 276, 282–285.

[11] Lange, *op. cit.*, pp. 60, 74, 87, 116; Fontenrose, *Python.* Berkeley, 1959. p. 262.

[12] For flying dragons, *see* Boberg, *op. cit.*, B.11.4.1 A winged dragon in the Isle of Rhodes is mentioned as late as 1594 by Giacomo Bosio: Deodat de Gozon (in 1346 elected Grand Master of the Order of the Knights of St. John) vowed to kill that dragon and returned to his brother in Provence [the home of La Tarasque, the most celebrated artificial dragon in Europe], where he made a model in order to accustom his horse and dogs to the petrifying sight of the dragon in Rhodes. After preliminary exercises with the model, they returned to the Isle and fearlessly overcame the dragon. (*L'Histoire des Chevaliers de l'Ordre de S Jean de Hierusalem.* Translated by P. de Boissat. Paris, 1859. p. 58).

[13] Jones, *op cit.*, p. 282. According to Fontenrose, who investigated extensively dragons as chaos monsters, Trolls "are certainly one kind of being that the chaos monsters might become in folktales" (*op. cit.*, p. 527, note 12).

[14] E. Ploss, *Siegfried-Sigurd, der Drachenkämpfer.* Cologne, 1966. pp. 110, 133.

the instruction or for the entertainment of the churchgoers.[15] "A good precedent for the Abbey capital", to use Mr Stanford's words, is the narrative frieze (probably from 1016–35), discovered in 1965 during the excavations of the Cathedral Close in not so distant Winchester, which shows the scene from the Norse *Volsunga Saga,* where Sigmund is biting and tearing out the wolf's tongue and thereby freeing himself.[16] The rivalry between churches is a well-known fact. Perhaps twelfth century Reading wished to do better than eleventh century Winchester by depicting the tearing out of tongues on a larger scale.

For the investigation of the theme shown on the Abbey capital some impressions left by the detailed descriptions of the four phases should be repeated here and interpreted in the light of the knowledge gained in the meantime. The artificial dragons, the semi-circular arch (perhaps alluding to the underground lair of the dragons while obviously serving as their support) and the two roundels (which may represent pieces of a treasure guarded by the dragons, a very popular motif)[17], all recurring in each scene, strongly suggest the props of a stage.[18] The reactions of the eight dragon-fighters and their limited actions, which accord well with their different age-groups, are cleverly characterized. In great contrast with the *Hrolf Saga,* not the slightest trace of ridicule can be found on the Abbey capital. The smallest boy, for instance, is treated with paternal care and the bearded man and the youth on the threshold of manhood in phase 4 are both idealized.

Bearing in mind the submissive artificial dragons, the good humoured sculptor and last, but not least, the approving monks sent from Cluny to supervise the building of Reading Abbey,[19] we can safely assume that the subject represented on the capital is a cheerful and popular one. The three boys and three youths seem to demonstrate in a *ludus draconis* courage, self-reliance and resourcefulness, virtues which were severely tested in the past, but not yet forgotten, initiation rites. The play is certainly more elaborate than the *ludus draconis* in the Midsummer Show at Chester, whose still extant records were pointed out to me by Miss Jacqueline Simpson.

"The famous Midsummer Show ... was instituted in 1498, and appears to have been composed of processions of the different companies, attended by various pageants and devices. Among the Harleian MSS is an agreement between Sir Lawrence Smith, Mayor of Chester, and two artists 'for the annual painting of the city's four giants ... one dragon, six hobby-horses, and sixteen naked boys'. In another MS in the same [collection] (No. 2125)[20] it is said, 'AD 1599, Henry Hardware, Esq. the mayor, was a godly and zealous man; he caused the gyauntes in the midsomer show to be broken, and not to goe; the devil in his feathers he put awaye, ... and the dragon, and the naked boys' ... But in the year 1601, John Ratclyffe being mayor, 'set out the giaunts, and midsomer show as of oulde it was wont to be kept'. ...

During the government of the puritans, all these shows and pageants were of course suspended. ... At the restoration of Charles the Second, it was determined to revive 'the ancient and laudable custom of the Midsummer Show'. ... In the ordinance by which the show was restored, we are told 'that all things are to be made new, by reason the

[15] One glance at the illustrations in G. Zarnecki's *English Romanesque Sculpture 1066–1140,* London, 1951, will bear out this statement.

[16] *Winchester Saxon and Norman Art.* Winchester, 1973. p. 12, no. 18 & pl. xv.

[17] *see* Boberg, *op. cit.,* B11.6.2

[18] The restricted movements of the dragons' eyes, ears, jaws, wings and toes could easily have been manipulated.

[19] Zarnecki, *op. cit.,* p. 17.

[20] "A Book in folio written by several hands (but principally by the second and third Randle Holmes) and treating almost wholly about the City of Chester and its affairs" (*Catalogue of the Harleian MSS in the British Museum. vol. 2.* London, 1808, p. 512). According to information gratefully received from The British Library, "the dates of the second and third Randle Holmes are 1601–1659 and 1627–1700 respectively (*see* J. P. Earwaker, *The four Randle Holmes of Chester,* Antiquaries, 1892)"

old modells were all broken'.... [Among the expenses we find] 'For makinge new the dragon, and for six naked boys to beat at it, one pound sixteen shillings'.... The whole expense for this pageant ... was paid in portions by the mayor, sheriffs, and leave-lookers.... The observance of this ancient custom continued until the year 1678, when it was finally abolished by an order of the corporation."[21]

The *ludus draconis* represented on the Abbey capital as well as the late survival in the Chester Midsummer Show, whose changing fortunes we can still follow from 1498 until 1678, may be the first rays of light thrown on a document issued in Germany on 20 December, 1416 by the Dean Thidericus and the Chapter of Our Lady at Halberstadt:

Insuper statuimus, ut ille ludus detestabilis (!), qui pocius nominandus est abusio, videlicet ludus draconis, qui in octava Epyphanie, a scolaribus nostris fieri conswevit, penitus abiciatur et decetero nunquam in perpetuum exerceatur, quoniam ex ipso ecclesia nostra non modicum posset incurrere dispendium et gravamen.[22]

Nothing more seems to be known about this German *ludus draconis*, which raises two questions. Firstly whether the German students of 1416 acted in a similar way to the three boys, three youths and two bearded men depicted about 1130 AD on the Reading capital. And secondly, whether the play shown on the Abbey capital was likewise performed in mid-winter. Miss Jacqueline Simpson wrote to me about the performance in Germany a week after Epiphany and the annual appearance on Yule-eve of the dragon-like creature and its death in the *Hrolf Saga*: "There is a very, very frequent tendency in Iceland for dangerous supernatural creatures of all types to come and prowl round human homes at Christmas/Yule period, force their way in, carry people off, etc. This is true both in sagas and in modern folktales, and is reflected in folk customs...". Indeed, I remember well when staying on the Eve of Epiphany 1952 at Professor Rudolf Kriss's in Berchtesgaden, how Bertha, the old housekeeper, still fumigated the whole house against all kinds of evil spirits.

Perhaps future research will provide the answers to these two questions and also explain in greater detail the veiled references in the *Hrolf Saga* to the *ludus draconis*, which is more explicitly revealed by the scenes on the earlier Abbey capital in the Reading Museum.

[21] J. Hemingway, *History of the City of Chester.* Chester, 1831. Vol. i, pp. 201–204.

[22] Staatsarchiv Magdeburg, Repertorium U7, Nr. 662 quoted by Lange, *op. cit.*, pp. 189 f ("In addition we ordain that the detestable game ... viz the dragon game, which in the octaves of Epiphany is accustomed to be played by our pupils should immediately cease and not recur since it can give our church a bad name").

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