

Franks Casket Revisited

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1 Introduction

Exactly 30 years ago I could actually touch it in the rooms of the *Department of British and Medieval Antiquities* at the British Museum. And I did. It must have been at that moment that it cast its spell on me. Then the subject of my thesis¹, it has continued to be on my mind for the span of my working life. Now retired from teaching I have taken up the thread again.

A first look at some recent publications showed me that within these three decades no final explication has been found². The articles on it show their authors' brilliant scholarship but they still do not offer a convincing answer as to the nature and the purpose of the box. This is due to two circumstances. Mostly just a single one of the panels is dealt with – sometimes only picture or inscription, and from such approaches we cannot expect clues as to the concept of the casket. The other obstacle on the way to an answer is the assumption that it must be a piece of Christian art, and as such it is generally taken for a reliquary, of course. If so it would have belonged to a monastery (as they hardly had any parish churches at that time), or was owned by a high-ranking clergyman, a bishop, may be.

1.1 Christian reliquary or Royal hoard box ?

The casket, as most scholars believe, was carved around 700 AD somewhere in Northumbria, most

¹ Alfred Becker, **Franks Casket** Zu den Bildern und Inschriften des Runenkästchens von Auzon, Regensburger Arbeiten zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Bd. 5 (1973). - This essay is based on findings and readings presented there which are here reported in a very condensed version. There are almost 900 annotations, which refer to several hundred titles of the bibliography. Essays on the meaning of ornaments, on iconography, runes and magic and on the Weland saga are included. This essay is to be seen in context with the treatise.

Pictures and more recent findings in www.franks-casket.de

² See the contributions of L. Webster, J. Lang and C. Neuman de Vegvar in **Northumbria's Golden Age**, ed. by J. Hawkes & S. Mills (1999).

likely in the vicinity of the library of some monastery. And it is tempting to think of Jarrow and Monkwearmouth, where Benedict Biscop, as Bede used to call him, kept the manuscripts and all the other purchases (maybe some reliquaries among other pieces of art) he had acquired on his five trips to Rome. At that time Wilfrid, the great orator at the Synod of Whitby (663) and later archbishop of York, known to have been keen on displaying splendour, went to Rome, too, and returned certainly not without similar items in his baggage. This would explain the range of topics the carver could employ. On the other hand the choice of topics indicates that the casket was not meant to be a religious piece of art. If not, for what purpose and for what kind of person was it made?

None of the four runic inscriptions refers to a Christian item, and among the carvings there is only one biblical scene, the adoration of Jesus by the Magi (front panel, right). And they are the ones who matter, not as kings but as **MFXI** (mægi, Magi), as the inscription within the carving indicates. They had travelled a long way and they had brought gifts, and that is why they were quite popular even with people who were not Christians yet but used to wear a picture of the three magi on their amulets³. Apart from this one, none of the other carvings would have suited religious purposes, neither that of Weland, the elfish smith (front panel, left), nor the picture of Romulus and Remus, fed by the she-wolf, a piece of pagan Roman mythology (left panel), nor the mysterious scene with Germanic background (right panel), and the same goes for Ægili, the archer on the lid. But even Titus (back panel) is not mentioned in the Gospels and would not have served as an object of devotion. Nevertheless Titus was seen as a brave warrior, a prudent ruler and a lord, just and generous, quite the example of a Germanic king!

³ At that time they were not yet thought to be kings. In order to avert the popular belief in their magic qualities, Bede says: “Magi non propter magicam artem sic nominantur, sed propter aliquam philosophiam ...” (Becker, Casket, pp.134 –143, Magierdarstellungen und Inschriften).

And that makes it very likely that it had been meant for some noble layman, for a king, an *æðeling* or a thane. As a king's jewel box it might have been a bit too small (and its pagan aspects would not have been tolerated by the clergy, omnipresent at court). But if anyway, it could have contained smaller pieces like rings, which the king would hand over to his followers. Likewise it is possible that it contained the material resources of one among his well-to-do retinue, of an *æðeling* (nobleman), a *gesið* (member of king's warband) or a *þegn* (thane)⁴, who in turn had to reward his *ceorls* (yeomen).

Necessarily any statements on the casket and on its purpose remain hypothetical, – for the moment at least. But let us assume that it once used to contain the hoard of some noble warrior, king or thane, and that the carvings and the runic inscriptions were meant to augment his fortune (from all aspects of this word) and fate by means of magic. If so, we should be able to establish a logical, even chronological program, supported by the pictures and runic inscriptions, which conjure our hero's life from birth to death and, maybe, beyond. In the following I shall outline the program as I see it and then try to prove it by employing the same criteria to each panel.

1.2 The casket; a magic box to rule a warrior's life?

Here now is our Anglo-Saxon warrior. If the place is Northumbria between 650 and 700, his king might be Ecfrið (d. 685) or, which is less likely, the pious Aldfrið (d. 704). In this box our hero, we imagine a thane, would keep his valuables, that is *feohgift*, the source of bounty and largess, among others the gifts he had received from his lord, the king. And he would want to augment his riches. Since he believes in the power of runes (even a generation later the Venerable Bede thinks it to be possible), he turns to a carver who is still familiar with the old ways. And he would want a (pagan)

⁴ For details see: Stephen Pollington, **The English Warrior from earliest times to 1066**, Anglo-Saxon Books (Norfolk 1996) p. 84.

charm that rules his life as a warrior. He still believes in Woden and Tiw (O.Norse *Týr*), in valkyries and in the way of *wyrd*, the course of fortune and fate, which he wants to be influenced by the spell of the carvings and inscriptions.

All this does not necessarily exclude some form of syncretism, which is typical of a society that is gradually turning Christian. Our hero may have been torn between church and temple.

And this would be the kind of life a rune master (*erilaz*) would try to procure for his warrior client:

Our hero's course of life begins with his birth into a noble family and into a (small) fortune (*feoh ƿ*). He may gain more wealth by gifts (*gifu X*) from his lord and by the produce of his estate, so that he can lead the life of a thane, married to a faithful wife, who helps him to reach that goal.

He will have to leave his inherited estate (*oplae unneg*, far from home), when he goes to war along with the *ceorls*, the free and land-owning troops, which he has to support.⁵ He needs divine protection on his ride (*rad R*).

He will have to fight (*her fegtap*) and to win, of course, and thus gain fame, honour and glory (*tir T*) as a warrior.

And when *wyrd* decrees his end, he wants to meet his valkyrie and die as a warrior in the hailstorm (*hagal H*) of his last battle, from where he will be taken to Valhalla. If he died, let's say, of old age, he would have to enter the less desirable realm of shades instead of Oðinn's celestial palaces in the region of the sun (*sigel U*).

In Valhalla he will meet departed warriors, chosen by their valkyries, to fight the Frost Giants the final battle, known as *ragna roek* in Northern mythology.

Without doubt, this would be the ideal course of life for our warrior. But how did his *erilaz* translate

⁵ Pollington, **Warrior**, pp. 82.

these wishes into pictures and words, runes and numbers? In other words, what were his means to create a charm in the old pagan tradition?

1.3 Magic worked with runes and numbers

The Germanic *fupark* comprised 24 (3 x 8) runes with a name to each one. The rune itself was believed to be magic with regard to the subject expressed by its name. The runic row was divided into 3 groups (*ættir*) with 8 runes in each group (*ætt*). The values 3 – 8 – 24 and any multiple, especially 3 times the amount of each, was regarded to be magically effective. That is 9 – 24 – 48 – 72. But also 10 or 11 (comp.: *elvish*) and 12 times the amount could work positive results.

So the *number* of runes of an inscription (3, 9, 24, 48, 72 etc.) works magic. Apart from a particular *number* of runes the magician aimed at a certain runic *value*. To achieve this, the rune-master would bend and twist words and grammar. If he was close to the value intended, he could insert a number of dots, each counting 1 in number and value, in order to arrive at precisely this sum. The runic value itself results from the position of the rune in *fupark* or *fupork*, respectively: f has the value 1, u counts 2, þ counts 3, etc.

Though Anglo-Friesian *fupork* eventually developed 27 (3 x 9) and finally 33 (3 x 11) runes, the numeric system remained unchanged. The most sacred, i.e. magic number among these, anyway, was the magic 9, as we read in the *Nine Herbs Charm*:

Þýrum com ꝛncan, τoꝛλατ he man;
Ða Ʒenam Þoden VIII puldoꝛτanaꝛ,
Slōh ða næddan þæτ heo on VIII τoꝛleah. (ASPR; VI; pp. 119-120, lines 31-33)

“A snake came creeping, it wounded someone. Then Woden took nine ‘glory-twigs’, then struck the snake, so that it flew into nine pieces.” Nine runes, carved on twigs, seem to work the magic cure.

Since *all* runes and most numbers are part of the magic system, one may find it hard to put a finger on them. But, as we shall see, certain runes, numbers, and values appear so frequently in similar constellations and positions that we cannot think of mere chance. This emphasis on particular runes at particular spots in particular numbers may identify them as magic.

Pictures and symbols were thought to work magic all by themselves. Each and every detail was functional, nothing was just ornamental. Dots and knots, plants and trees, man and beast, their gestures and bearings, even the way they turn their heads, each and every feature had meaning and magic function. The fact that we do not know what they mean, does not mean that they do not mean anything. As long as we do not know how to read them, our findings are not entirely reliable

Charms composed of letters, symbols and numbers were not only pagan practice, but they were and still are in use in the Christian world, as amulets and crucifixes and even certain inscriptions show. For example, to win the help of the Magi against fire and other mishap, the date, here 2001, and the initials of their (of course not historical) names 20 C + M + B 01 is still used. Even the custom of having a priest draw two alphabets crosswise into scattered ashes is reported.

2 The Front Panel

Feoh byþ fr̥ofur fira zehp̥ylcum
 Feohgift – or how to make money

..... Beowulf zehah
 ful on flette, no he hæne feohz̥fete
 for fceotendum fcamizan ðofete

..... Beowulf received
 a cup on the hall-floor, of that gift of wealth
 he had no cause to be ashamed before the
 warriors⁶

2.1 The inscription

At the first glance the runic inscription, so the general opinion, is not related to the pictures of the front panel. It would have been difficult, of course, to come up with a single text for two pictures with topics so very different as “The Adoration of the Magi”, a Christian theme, and “Weland’s Revenge”, a saga rooting deep in pagan mythology.⁷ But since the runic inscriptions on the other three panels refer to the pictures, we may suspect some hidden link here as well. We may have to shift to the next higher level.

For reasons to be explained later we shall begin the reading on this panel on the left-hand edge, lower left corner. From here, across the top and down the right-hand edge it runs from right to left and continues so on the bottom line, but with the runes carved retrograde, as viewed in a mirror. Thus they continue the reading in reverse, ending at the lower left corner. Words were not separated.

hronæs ban
 fisc' flodu · ahof on ferg
 enberig
 warþ ga'sric grom þær he on greut giswom

Whalebone: The fish threw the flood onto the (wooded) mountain (or: The flood threw the fish ...) The savage animal turned sad when he swam (i.e. stranded) on the grit.

The reading begins on the left edge (just as it does on the back panel) with the word *hronaesban*, bone of the whale. This is not a label like “Pure New Wool” or “Genuine Plastic”; but it refers to the magic quality of the material. When, for example, skulls were used as drinking vessels, it was not due to lack of other material, – the drinker rather profited from the qualities of victim and material. Thus the term, composed of 9 runes, could be some kind of incantation, a formula

⁶ Pollington, **Warrior**, p. 35

⁷ Becker, **Casket**, pp. 154 -186, “Zur Wielandsage”

in prose, meant to enforce the following sorcery. It continues in the *upper left corner* with ‘F’, \mathfrak{F} , a very particular spot, as we shall see.

The following text, *fisk* flodu* ...*, may well be the oldest piece of Old English poetry, kept in alliterating verse. The first line alliterates on ‘F’, \mathfrak{F} (*feoh*), the second on ‘G’, \mathfrak{X} (*gifu*). With these runes contracted, we read *feohgift*, which is the term for “bounty-giving” and “largess”. And that would suit a warrior’s hoard box better than anything else.

If the dots within the text do not just fill space but bear a meaning, the single ones could bear runic value, which would be \mathfrak{F} again, and thus go quite neatly with the alliterating words (*fisk* flodu**). If so, we wonder what the two dots in *ga:sríc* (the ‘savage animal’ that provided the material) may mean. If they indicate runic value, they stand for ‘U’, \mathfrak{U} (*ur*, auerochs) and emphasise the power and potential that the incantation *hronæsban* was supposed to carry.

This interpretation has to be rechecked with the dots elsewhere on the casket. If the interpretation of dots as indicators of runic values works in about all cases, it should be the proof for this assumption.

But what about the runes in alliterating position, ‘F’ and ‘G’? The *Runic Poem*, with a grain of Christian neighbourly love, puts it like this:

\mathfrak{F} (wealth) is comfort to all men; yet must every man bestow it freely, if he wishes to gain honour in the sight of the Lord.

\mathfrak{X} (gift) brings credit and honour, which support one’s dignity; it furnishes help and subsistence to all broken men who are devoid of anything else.

2.2 The pictures

2.2.1 The Magi (Front, right)

If wealth and presents are alluded to by the runes in alliteration, the same topic should come up in the carvings. Moreover the pictures are meant to direct our hero’s course of life. Nevertheless, the carvings never depicts our warrior; the scenes are rather emblematic and try to determine the way of *wyrd*, his fortune.

As far as a noble birth is concerned, the carver’s choice is quite obvious. The adoration of Christ by the Magi (a pictorial composition very close to tradition) reflects dignity on our hero: By putting mother and child under an arch (a construction we also find on the back and the lid)

Mary and Christ are distinguished and sacred in some way. And like them our little hero is a special person. But our carver did not really choose this scene because of the glory of Christ (though – as the pagan creed was open to any successful newcomer – he would not have minded His help), he picked the topic because of the Magi and in particular because of their gifts (*gifu*). Thus we see the three wise men approaching devoutly with their precious gifts. Just to make sure that *they* were meant, he rendered the Latin word ‘*magi*’ in runes as *mægi*. And finally, as birth is the beginning of life, epiphany is – likewise – the beginning of the year. The carver could hardly have chosen a better topic.

To increase that power, he added an endless knot (always found with particular beings) behind the third man, and a rosette in place of the star⁸. Strange are the 13 leaves or rays of which it is composed. Normally you would find 8 or 12, but here an additional 13th is squeezed in. Since the rosette stands for the star, the odd number of rays may have calendrical meaning. More about that later.

Again we have two single dots by the arch. It is the throne, a well-to-do site to which the Magi bring their offerings, their gifts, *feohgift*, of course.

And where you would expect the guiding angel you find a big (gooselike) bird. Why should *erilaz*, the rune magician, want that bird instead of an angel? This is not the birth of our warrior, of course, but a *topos* for ‘noble birth’ in general. But the scene, in an emblematic way, also stands for the birth of our warrior. His following-woman, his *fylgjur* (O. N.) or *sigewif*⁹ (O. E.) – who will be with him all his life, then merely sensed but to be seen again only at his death – his valkyrie is present in the guise of that bird. She assists him at the start of his life and will be with him invisibly all his life till he meets her in the guise of a petrifying creature, when he is doomed to die. And after his death he will meet her, the beautiful maiden, in his grave from where she takes him to Valhalla.

In short, the picture stands for a noble birth, and with the gifts brought to this place, it relates to the 3 alliterating ‘G’ (‘*gifu*’ X) of *gasric*, *gorn*, and *greut*.

⁸ Becker, *Casket*, pp. 120-123, “Dreipaß und Rosette”.

⁹ See Wolfgang Golther, *Handbuch der Germanischen Mythologie* (1895), pp. 98-116.

2.2.2 Weland, the elfish smith (Front, left)

The other picture on the front shows Weland¹⁰, the smith, with a human head in a pair of tongs, under the anvil the decapitated body of a prince. The elfish smith passes a cup (with drugged beer, so the tale) to Beadohild, sister of that slain prince and daughter of his tormentor, Niðhad. He is about to transform the boy's skull into a chalice. As the final part of his revenge, he will seduce the girl and make her pregnant. The lady with the flask is very likely the one who supplies the drugged drink, presumably his valkyrian spouse. If Niðhad imbibes his beverage from the skull of his son, and if his daughter bears the child of his captive, the elfish smith can escape in the shape of a bird (right scene).¹¹ Like valkyries, beings of his kind are spirits which can adopt any material appearance without actually being that nature.

Basically the same setting is used on the standing stone Ardre VIII (see ...). Two decapitated bodies, the smithy and a woman leaving the place – the other victim, Beadohild – and a bird flying away from the scene, the now freed Weland. Different from the Swedish standing stones and the cross shafts from Leeds (see ...), the casket shows two women. As there is no detail without meaning, this feature must have some importance. It is probably meant to secure the assistance of our hero's valkyrian companion, his *sigewif*.

Two objects between the smith and his victims, shaped like †, could be interpreted as n-runes, *nyd*, 'need, trouble, distress'. One † could mean the rape of the princess, the other † – if a rune at all – would refer to the fate of the prince. And since even "ornaments" are not meaningless the two plant-like symbols can be read as Y runes. The Anglo-Saxon *Runic Poem* says that *eolhx* Y (*the elk-sedge*) "...is mostly to be found in a marsh; it grows in the water and makes a ghastly wound, covering with blood every warrior who touches it". Even in its Christian revise (if revised at all) these lines clearly refer to valkyries, fortune and fate of warriors. Due to the assistance of Weland's valkyrian spouse, the elfish smith is able to complete his revenge, which sets him free.

More speculative still at this stage may the interpretation of the remaining symbols sound: There is a dot to the left above Weland's head. If we take it for the *value* of a rune, it is 'F', F (*feoh*), the first rune of the row. It means "wealth", exactly what the smith produces, and what

¹⁰ On the saga see Becker, *Casket*, pp. 154-186.

¹¹ Very often scholars mean to see Egil, catching birds for his brother, so that he can make some kind of flying machine. But our smith is an elf, and when he has had his revenge he can turn into a bird and is free to fly!

his name seems to express, if it comes from *wel* or *wela*, which means ‘jewellery, cunning trinket’ or ‘prosperity’. Weland, the goldsmith’s name, eventually became synonymous with wealth.

And further more: The next symbol (which looks like a forge) reminds us of the rune ᚢ(*yr*), which is supposed to mean ‘bow, gold, ornament, (drinking)horn’, something the *Runic Poem* names “... source of joy and honour to every prince and knight; it looks well on a horse and is reliable equipment for a journey”. If that does not sound like *‘feoh’*. At the same time, the ‘horn’ comes in, where the cup is passed to the princess and the skull of the prince is turned into a drinking vessel.

At first sight and from our point of view, a scene of murder and rape does not seem to be appropriate for securing a good relationship of husband and wife. In those days, anyway, revenge mattered more than humane reflections; and in this particular case the elfish smith is being freed from servitude by the help of his loyal wife, a valkyrie! What kind of scene could fit better than this? The relation of the warrior and his valkyrie is “ambivalent ... partly filial, partly erotic, they become at once ‘foster mothers’ and sometimes bear the heroes’ children.”¹² That is one aspect why our carver picked this scene; he wanted to secure valkyrian assistance for our warrior in times of trouble.

But at the same time the smith in general is the source of goods, of *feoh*. A *hoard*, often gained as booty, was necessary to secure the loyalty of the *ceorls* and, of course, it showed the social rank of its owner. The hoard

“... was later redistributed among the warriors and at some point could be lost to a foe. The supply of such goods was constantly replenished by the work of smiths who produced new artefacts ... Nevertheless, the competition for the means of acquiring prestige goods was always present among early chiefs whose own reputation and power depended on these resources.”¹³

This is reflected in the lines from the Exeter Book, Gnostic Verses ll. 28-9:

... cyning sceal on healle beagas dælan ...
... in the hall a king shall bestow rings ...

Since the smith produces the goods the warlord depends on, this picture clearly relates to *ƿ*, *feoh*, which means any movable goods from cattle to money (compare Lat. *pecus* [cattle] →

¹² Pollington, **Warrior**, p. 46.

¹³ Pollington, **Warrior**, p.168.

pecunia [money]).

2.3 Magic and how it works

If we now count 72 symbols (68 runes and 4 dots) supporting the charm, it is difficult to think of pure chance. Should we find similar numbers on the other panels, these values are certainly based on a plan.

hronæsban, a possible incantation, numbers 9 runes (the magic 3 x 3). Chance?

The *value* of ‘F’, *ƿ*, is 1, that of ‘G’, *X*, is 7; $3 \times 1 + 3 \times 7 = 24$, the *number* of runes in the *fuþark*! Chance?

Calculating the runic *value* of the entire inscription of the front panel, we arrive at 716 plus 4 (dots), 720 (10 x 72) altogether. And 720 contains 30 times 24, the value of the alliterating three *ƿ* and *X*.¹⁴ This is an astounding example of Anglo-Saxon arithmetic, and too striking for simply being accidental! To arrive at such results our *erilaz* had to “bend” some spellings, a fact, which led many scholars to ascribing the casket to certain times and places!

In conclusion, our carver has used the magic power of pictography and poetry, of runes and numbers to provide our warrior with what he needs most at his start: *feohgift*.

¹⁴ 3 is magic, 10 x 3 or 100 x 3 even more so. (Even in the Christian “trinity” is founded on the - now holy- number 3) The value of 24 runes [1+2+3+4+5...24.] adds up to 300. Another example is the old magic formula *ƿΓN* (*alu*, ‘beer’). Its value (4 + 21 + 2) adds up to 27 (= 3 x 3x 3). This word, found on urns and amulets, was obviously thought powerful enough to wake the dead.

3 The Left Hand Panel

Rad byth on recyde ...
or: On the road again

(a ride) seems easy to every warrior while he is at home,
and very courageous to him who traverses
the highroads on the back of a stout horse.
(*Runic Poem*)

Now that he has got the means necessary for his keep and that of his warband, our warrior will have to ride out in order to follow his lord, who invited him to war. In those days one was an alien anywhere but at home (Germ. ‘*Heim*’, home → ‘*unheimlich*’, weird). A safe journey was most desirable, indeed. Only the gods can help. But what does our *erilaz*, the rune master, do to secure their help?

3.1 The inscription

Again we start our reading on the left edge, taking the words as a kind of incantation. The runes read from left to right with those on the bottom line kept upside-down. The wording:

oplæ unneg
Romwalus and Reumwalus twægen
gibroðær
a-fædde hiæ wylif in Romæ cæstriꝥ

home un-near (far from home)
Romulus and Remus, two brothers; the she-wolf fed them in Romeburg.

The text refers quite obviously to the scene depicted. The phrase “far from home” may reflect the situation the twins are in (though, Alba Longa is not that far from Rome), but it is rather an incantation or prose introduction to a charm which is meant to work in a situation when our hero goes to war. “If you are far from home...” He has to adventure a perilous ride, and he needs all the divine assistance he can possibly get.

The phrase *oplæ unneg* is a proper incantation, composed of 9 runes, and just like *hronæsban* (front) and *her feġtaþ* (back), which also number 9 runes each, it is placed on the left edge of the panel.

There are no alliterating verses as we had them on the front panel, but there are 3 nouns alliterating on ‘R’, 𐀀. The O.E. name of the rune is *rad*, which means ‘ride, travel’, and that is

the theme of this panel. Again we find the topical rune, \mathfrak{R} , in the *upper left corner*. Remember, this seems to be a very particular spot!

The text ends with three *dots*. If we read them as before, we get to the rune $\mathfrak{Þ}$, which stands for *Þorn*, “thorn”, but in its original pre-Christian version it referred to Þor, the ancient Northern god, Woden’s son! What could make more sense, since the twins are the sons of his Roman counterpart, Mars?

3.2 The picture

As said earlier, our *erilaz* turns to Romulus and Remus, the divine twins¹⁵, who are known as helpers at travels and at war!¹⁶ They are most appropriate on the way to war, as their father is Mars, like Woden and Tiw, the god of war. Our artist may have learnt about them through the books at Jarrow.

Nevertheless, he did not follow the Roman iconographic tradition. He did not place baby twins under a *lupa*, he did not render any shepherds with crooks, he did not place the scene at the Tiber or in a cave. His helpers at travel and war, the Dioscuri, are as big as adults and are depicted as if standing on their heads. They are in company with two wolves, Woden’s famous beasts of battle, and their site is the holy grove (“...*wulf sceal on bearowe...*”), the pagan Germanic place of worship.¹⁷

And there are four men with spears, kneeling as if in adoration, Germanic warriors evidently, by no means Roman shepherds. One of them, on the left, seems to be clad in armour. He might be the leader of the group and might have been seen as a thane among his *ceorls*.

But why does the carver refer to those Roman twins at all? There are numerous other pairs like Ybor & Agio with the Lombards, Ambri & Assi with the Vandals, Castor & Pollux with the

¹⁵ According to Indo-European tradition, divine twins travel and protect travellers. Tacitus reports that they (here called the Alcis) were venerated by a priest of the Naharvales in an old grove. He compares them to Castor and Pollux.. See Wolfgang Golther, **Handbuch**, p. 214.

¹⁶ See C. Neuman de Vegvar, “The travelling Twins: Romulus and Remus in Anglo-Saxon England” in **Northumbria’s Golden Age**, pp. 256-267. Though the author refers to my ‘pagan’ thesis quite critically, she adopts my view on the function of the divine twins without crediting the source.

¹⁷ See Pollington, **Warrior**, pp. 47-53 “Beasts of Battle, Gods of War”

Greeks, just to name some. If he had wanted to be particularly Christian, he would have followed the *Old English charm* that meant to protect the traveller with the help of the *Almighty and the Son* “*and eac þæ gebroþru, Petrus and Paulus*”.¹⁸ Of course, they had not been (and had in no ways felt like) brothers; but their names alliterate properly. If the carver had wanted to be particularly pagan and Anglo-Saxon, he could have referred to Hengist and Horsa, also said to be divine offspring. Why didn't he?

He picked them because their names suited his purpose best, since *Romwalus* and *Reumwalus*, alliterate with *Romaecaestri*. The rune for ‘R’, \mathfrak{R} , bears the name ‘*rad*’. The *Runic Poem* says: \mathfrak{R} (a ride) “seems easy to every warrior while he is at home, and very courageous to him who traverses the highroads on the back of a stout horse.”

If the artist had chosen the mythological pair Hengist and Horsa instead, H would have alliterated and ... spelt trouble, as we shall see later.

And more: The twins seem to be standing on their heads, as the Germanic travelling twins on a number of rock carvings (e.g. Ryland, there as if joined at their heads). The runes \mathfrak{A} and \mathfrak{Y} often accompany those drawings. It is a runic symbol connected with battle, protection and victory, and so we often find it on weapons like spears. It refers to the trees of the holy grove, a place shown here in the carving. It symbolises the travelling twins as well as valkyries¹⁹.

With regard to that, it may be another clue that 3 alliterating R-runes (\mathfrak{R} has the value 5) sum up to 15. The 15th rune in the runic row is \mathfrak{Y} , the symbol of those helpers on the way to and at war.

If each and every detail is likely to bear a certain meaning, we may have to return to one group of objects just mentioned: the trees. It seems to be odd that their roots should show. It is tempting to think of *tree runes*, a secret script to hide runes.

The system works like this: The runic row is divided into 3 rows (*attir*) of 8 runes each. Consequently a tree rune can have up to 3 twigs (roots, branches, or leaves) to the one side, and up to 8 on the other. In our case there are 1 or 2 roots to the left side of each tree and up to 4 to the right side. A stem with 1 root to the left and 2 to the right indicates the 1st *att* and its 2nd rune

¹⁸ See Becker, *Casket*, pp. 106-8

¹⁹ The same aspects of this rune (protection, twins, valkyrie, holy grove) are rendered in *A Handbook of Rune Magic*, pp. 48-49 by E. Thorsson.

ℒ = U. And that is what we have here with the first tree on the left. The second tree from the left would be the 2nd ætt, 2nd rune ᚠ = N. It continues on the left of the she-wolf with the 2nd ætt, 3rd rune l = I, and with 1st ætt, 4th rune, ᚦ = O; the next one is just the same, i.e. ᚦ = O. The fifth stem indicates the 2nd ætt (the shaft of the spear not included), 1st rune, ᚱ = H, and, finally, the 6th log roots in the 1st ætt and its first rune, which is ᚿ = F. Let us translate that now.

3.2.1 Fortune or fate: The way of *wyrd*.

There are six beings in human shape and six trees. Each of the four warriors is holding ‘his’ tree (of life?). Two stems not grasped by anyone, are left for the heavenly twins. Their roots show the same rune ᚦ, *os*, which means deity! What could be more appropriate for our heavenly twins? And we remember the three dots at the end of the text, which – if they stand for ᚠ – refer to the god of war, the father or his sons.

The tree rune with the armoured leader on the left is ℒ, which means *ur*, ‘aurochs’, and expresses vigour and vitality, strength and power (the same as the two dots beneath *gasric*). If the tree stands for his *way of wyrd*, it is positive. The next one will suffer ‘need’, *nyd*, but not the fate of the warrior facing him. His tree spells l, which stands for *is*, ‘ice’, meaning death. The warrior behind him will make a fortune in this battle, since his tree spells ᚿ, *feoh*, wealth!

All these runes seem to suit the warriors’ *way of wyrd*. In other words, these trees – if this approach is correct – describe the fate decreed to those going to war. Very likely there is a further spell in the foliage. But reading it would include too much guess-work.

If there were not the two identical trees which stand for the twins, naming them *os*, ‘gods’, I might doubt these findings, but this again is more than mere chance! Assuming our interpretation is correct, we have a most outstanding piece of rune magic right before us, as these cuts would be virtually “tree runes”, closest to their name, ‘tree’. If so, the trees on the right panel should be readable in the same way.

3.3 Magic and how it is worked

Now that we have had a closer look at the text and picture, we need to analyse the magic means our *erilaz* applied.

As mentioned above, *oplæ unneg*, which is preceding this text, is some kind of incantation. It

should work when our hero is far from home, *on the road to* or *at war*. And this is why it is composed of 9 runes, the magic 3 x 3.

Next we count the symbols of the entire inscription. Here we have 69 runes and 3 dots. Again we arrive at *runic number* 72, which is the magic 3 x 24.

If we figure the *runic value* (i.e. accrediting each rune the value of its position in the *fupork*), we get 910. I would not know of any particular magic function here, but at least it can be divided by 5, which is the value of \mathfrak{K} , the rune with which the names of the Dioscuri begin. And we remember that 3 times \mathfrak{K} (as alliterating in this text) leads us to the rune \mathfrak{Y} , which stands for them and the valkyrie. Chance again?

4 The Back Panel

Tyr bith tacna sum, healdeð trywa wel wiþ æþelingas
or: Worldly power and glory

Having led our warrior safely into hostile territory, our rune master now has to procure success in battle. Victory defines the warrior's *weorþ*, his rank and honour. This to achieve is his highest goal in life.

And again our *erilaz* rummages through the material in the library of the local monastery. In some illuminated manuscript, a "*Historia Mundi*" perhaps, he may have come across an illustration with Titus conquering Jerusalem. This Roman general destroys the 'Holy City' and its Temple (70 AD); and later, when he is at the peak of his glory, he becomes emperor. This was just the right kind of person, the fitting name and the particular event the magician had been looking for. For more than one reason!

4.1 The inscription

Here the runic text starts on the left edge and ends in the middle of the of the top line where the arch is. Right of the arch it continues in Latin language and (at first glance) Roman letters. Down on the right edge it changes back to runes. Two runic words in the right and left corner on the bottom seem to comment on the pictures above them.

her fegtap
titus end giuþeasu HIC FUGIANT HIERUꝢALIM
afitatores
dom gisl

Though the words *giuþeasu* (instead of *iuþeas*) and *afitatores* (corrupt Latin for *habitatores*) are odd (probably for the sake of runic numbers and values), we translate:

Here fight Titus and the Jews – here flee Jerusalem's inhabitants
doom (or: power, glory) hostage(s)

As the two words on the left edge are composed of 9 runes again (that is never the case with any right edge of these three "wishing" panels) we may think of another incantation or prose introduction to: "when at war".

What about the rune in the *upper left corner*? It is ᚦ. This rune, shaped like a spear, stands for *Tiw* (Old Norse *Tyr*), the leading god of rule, warfare and justice, protector of the Germanic

Thing. In Old English the name is identical with ‘fame, glory, honour’. Warfare (*her fegtab*) and a ruler (Titus) exercising justice (*dom, gisl*) are the topics of this carving, as we shall see. What other rune could be more appropriate at this spot?

If the carver used the form ‘*and*’ on the left panel but now spells it ‘*end*’, he does so probably because of numeric reasons. The same may go for the odd form *giuþea(su)*.

Why does the text change into Latin? Is it because of the negative contents, *hic fugiant* (here they flee)? Or is it to save a certain runic number? This would explain why our rune master inserted a runic ‘s’ in a shape (Y like on Chessel Down or St. Cuthbert’s coffin, etc.) he does not use elsewhere. If so, we might include the other letters into our counting, letters which are of identical shape with runes. Besides Y these would be four l’s and one R – six runic characters altogether.

dom and *gisl* certainly comment on the carvings with which they go, but at the same time they might hide a name, Domgisl. If that is our *erilaz*, the rune master, his mere name already works magic.²⁰

4.2 The picture

On the upper left section we see five armed warriors attacking the Jews. About 15 people are trying to escape across an arch, some still struggling to get over that structure. The last one in that crowd lets his sword go as if being slain. Behind the dominant Roman warrior we detect a man distinguished by his armour. It might be Titus among his troop. The arch in the centre may stand for the temple.

Victory is one aspect of glory; justice the other. And so (lower section, left) we see the commander in chief on a throne, a cup in his hand. A servant below the throne is holding something like a scroll and another cup, which he seems to be passing on to a person on the right of the royal seat. This man, accompanied by a soldier, also seems to hold a scroll. It is very likely that a brave warrior receives his reward, maybe some land or rank. This donation is confirmed when the leader drinks to his loyal follower. The repetition of scroll and cup may indicate an exchange or a handing over of documents. On the left we see a warrior in his armour.

²⁰ Gregory from Tours mentions an Anglo-Saxon Domigyslus at the Merovingian court. Becker, *Casket*, p. 65.

He is being held by his hair, probably condemned because of cowardliness. Maybe they will cut off his hair and send him into servitude. With the word *dom*, ‘verdict’ and ‘glory’, the runic text comments on it. Man’s ‘*doom*’ is fortune for the one and fate for the other.

To the left of the arch we detect a group of eight people, *gisl*, hostages, the one in the middle under a yoke, as it seems²¹. Was he the leader of the Jewish revolt? Titus did not take any hostages, but certainly captives, who as part of the booty will be sold into slavery.

In the manuscript from which the scene was adopted the arch (rather not Ark of the Covenants) may have represented the temple. But our carver certainly did not cut these animals, believing he was depicting Seraphim and Cherubim, as repeatedly assumed. (If these were angles, one would hesitate to go to heaven, in case one were admitted.) With the endless knots formed by the tails the carver returns to the Anglo-Saxon way of describing a sacred place, using elements as we know them from Irish illuminations.

The heads under the arch are those of birds of prey and could refer to Woden’s ravens, Hugin and Munin, while the horses could be connected with Tiw²². If the two creatures between horses and birds were wolves, we would be in the pagan zoo of war, the beasts of battle arranged in a way we often find with the animals at the tree of life. Though the maybe-wolves do not look like anything biology teaches, we detect ears on them. And for the sake of interlaced presentation, the long muzzles, like those the beasts with the Roman twins have, become even longer here. If that interpretation is correct the plant like thing on top of the arch (the same ornament which accompanies the flask-carrying valkyrie on the front panel) would make sense. Thus it is very likely that the Jewish sanctuary has been turned into an Anglo-Saxon temple. The carver would have transformed the picture as he did on the left panel, where he placed the twins into the grove in the company of two wolves.

4.3 Magic and how it is worked

The words do not alliterate. But we remember that it was always the first rune on the upper edge that alluded to the topic of the panel: *ƿ* on the front for wealth, *ᚱ* on the left for a safe journey (and *ᚱ* on the right panel, as remains to be shown). It has become most evident that – preceded

²¹ It could be a neckring as a mark of servitude, a slave’s collar shackle. See Pollington, **Warrior**, p 72.

²² Pollington, **Warrior**, p. 51.

by a cross – ↑ was placed here with full intention for the sake of some magic effect. Maybe ↑ and X (because of that the odd spelling of *giuþeasu*) have to be taken together. Their runic value would be 24.

How did the carver expect the charm to work? Quite obviously to provide victory and glory. But did he see our thane in the part of the Roman general or rather in that of the one who is being rewarded by the future emperor? We do not know.

As to the *number of runes*, we have counted 9 characters to form a magic spell, which is meant to work when it comes to war. But how about the rest? Is there any multiple of 24? We have got 42 runes, where 48 would be necessary if their number should be of magic effect. These missing 6 runes can be found, as said before (3.1) in the Latin part: one S-Rune, one R-rune and four times the letter I, which could also be regarded as a runic I. If this was intended by the carver, he may have had a plan why he selected these letters. In this case the rune l, referring to death would make some sense, if connected with the fate of the refugees, likewise the R-rune, if it indicated their journey into exile. But they may have been chosen simply because of their runic value.

And figuring the *runic value*, here: 612, we somehow get a proof for this assumption. It can be divided by 17, the value of the topical rune ↑. The score is 36 or 3 times 12.

5 The Right-Hand Panel

Haegl byth the hwitust corna,
or ... how to die a heroic death

The *luck-procuring* charms on three panels have led our warrior from birth to the peak of his earthly life. If magic extends to the realm of death, the charm is meant to *avert harm*. Thus the means of magic may be different from the rest.

As every life must end some day, the decisive question is: How? If a warrior dies in his bed of straw, he will pass into the realm of shade. But if he dies in battle, chosen by his valkyrie, he may enter Valhalla, Woden's celestial palace, and join the other deceased heroes. Our rune master would have been overtaxed if he had to find a classical topic in Benedict Biscop's library at Jarrow. So he sat down and carved a panel according to the oral tradition.

5.1 The inscription

The text starts quite clearly on the left of the upper edge, runs down the right edge, continues upside down on the lower border and ends on the left edge. The structure of this inscription is the same as on the left panel, only without an introducing incantation on the left edge. Whether we have got one at all, we shall discuss later.

As on the left panel, the bottom line is kept upside down, which may have its reason in the circumstance that both panels touch a hallowed realm. Different is the direction of the heads with the beasts in the four corners, they turn to look back wishing charms (front and left) but look away from the harm-averting spell here.

The reading of this text, kept in three alliterating verses, is not really simple as the number of quite different interpretations show²³. It is uncertain how to separate some words from each other, and beyond that, all vowels are rendered by symbols, which look like runes but are not. Already the Romans used to encode their messages in a similar way. And Wynnfrīþ Boniface (?680-754), a contemporary of our rune master, is reported to have used this system.

The reason for cryptography at this place is simply this: The panel is meant to procure for our warrior a death on the battlefield, but not necessarily now. Only when *wyrd* (the weird sisters,

²³ For a different readings see Becker, *Casket*, pp. 39-41.

panel with the Roman twins.²⁶ A serpent (if not a long-necked goose) seems to be involved as well. All these beasts are attributes of northern gods.²⁷ Our *Herh-os* faces her hero, paralyses him (Woden's followers would not be overthrown by an aggressor better than they themselves) and – *agl(ac) drigith* – has him killed. Our warrior is chosen (-*cyrige*) to die in battle (*wæl*). How will she work that? Will it be with the help of the twig she is holding?

The middle section shows a bird flying away from that scene towards a grave (is it the slain hero's valkyrie?), a horse marked with two endless knots and, in front of it, a lady with a chalice grasping a stick, which seems to slide into the rune ↑ of *bita*, thus composing of shaft and head of a spear.

These elements correspond quite well with those on Scandinavian standing stones, where the valkyries present drinking horns to the fallen warriors. – The hero in his grave is joined by his valkyrie, his *sigewif*. She is the same one who was present at his birth (we remember the bird present at the birth of Christ; front). She has accompanied him invisibly all his life like a guardian angel. Now in her human appearance she is no “demure maiden” (Pollington) but rather his spouse. Revived by her loving affection and by a good gulp from that chalice, our warrior will mount that horse, which may stand for *Sleipnir*, Odin's famous stallion, – the knots seem to indicate that. It will take him to Valhalla, where he joins the war god's fighters.

Let us have a closer look at the three words in runes which are filled into this carving:

riski → wudu → bita

riski means rush, which is the same as *eolh*, ᚷ or ᚹ, ‘*elk sedge*’ in the runic poem, the type of plant that marks the valkyrie on the front panel and tops the temple on the back. Elk is also a kind of yew of which bows were made (OED) and it stands for the white swan (OED), one form of valkyrian appearance. These are clear hints as to the nature of the scene.

wudu could refer to the site, the forest (which would make little sense as it is depicted), but it can also be read as a poetic name for “spear”.²⁸ The rune ᚷ, which stands for the valkyrie and her realm, is often found carved into spears. Did she fling a bough at her victim, a twig that now

²⁶ see above, 2.2

²⁷ Pollington, **Warrior**, p.51.

²⁸ Pollington, **Warrior**, p. 101.

turns into *wudu*, a deadly weapon?

bita can be associated with “bite” or “sting” or “wound” (esp. sword cut). It could be the name of the spear. And if we have a close look at the lady by the grave, we realise that she is holding a wand, which blends into the ↑ -rune, thus forming a spear! This rune refers to (O.N.) *Tyr*, (O.E.) *Tiw*, the old Germanic sovereign ruler and god of warfare. Though replaced by Woden/Odin with his spear *Gungnir*, the spear-shaped rune still bears his name²⁹.

Throwing a bough that turns into a spear killing the victim is a well reported trait of northern legend. Baldr was killed by a mistletoe wand that turned into a missile. We find a similar event in the *Gautreksaga*, where a mock sacrifice was put up:

“ Then Starkathr thrust at the king with the wand and said “Now I give thee to Othinn. Then Starkathr let go of the fir bough. The wand became a spear and pierced through the king...”³⁰

So it seems to be most likely that our warrior met his fate impersonated by his valkyrie, a deadly monster. She flung the invisible rush (*risci*) at him that turned into a spear (*wudu*). The weapon (*bita*) ‘bit’ our hero and killed him. If so the spear-like composition of rune and staff identifies the lady at the grave as the hero’s valkyrie, holding the weapon as she had held the twig at the beginning.

As done above (2.2), we might have a closer look at the roots of the trees. If they are to be read as tree runes their message would fit quite well. Right behind our doomed warrior we see a little plant, two roots to the left, the 2nd *ætt*, and two to the right, which would point out the rune † = N with the name *nyd*, ‘trouble’. The next one between the hind legs of *Sleipnir* and right above the bird would be the 2nd *ætt*, the 1st rune: **Ń** = H, which as we shall see below signals danger of life. The one right below the neck of the horse would be the 3rd *ætt*, the 1st rune, which is ↑ = T, the divine symbol (*Tiw*) we have frequently come across in this context. Vague as such a reading may be, it could hardly fit any better. The foliage, again, might hold more news. Too vague for me, anyway!

A cross-shaped symbol separates three hooded beings from the rest. With regard to the third line: *saerden sorgae and sefa tornaе*, we may think of the three Weird Sisters, who weave man’s fate in a net of guts and skulls. Anyway, this picture does not seem to be part of the scene in the

²⁹ Pollington, **Warrior**, p. 51.

³⁰ Pollington, **Warrior**, p. 165.

forest. It is the sphere between this and that world. But, less likely, it could also refer to those left behind. Or we have two “guiding beings”, leading the dead warrior this into the other world. Anyway, that would not make much sense, as he has got Odin’s horse. – Since the cross-symbol is the same as that preceding the rune ↑ in Titus, it must conjure up something positive.

5.3 Magic and how it is worked

The carvings themselves were meant to work pictographic magic. We now turn to runes and numbers to see how they relate to the story told by the carvings.

With *herh-os* the rune **ᚱ**, which spells ‘mishap’ or ‘disaster’, is in the magic position (upper left) and alliterates with **ᚱ** in *harmberge*. The “goddess of the grove” is sitting on the “mound of sorrow”. This rune is not preceded by an incantation composed of 9 runes, so it is not necessarily magically effective.

In the following line *aglac* and *ertae* alliterate as both are vowels. Since the first rune, **ᚱ**, ‘*ac*’, means “oak”, it could indicate this place, the (sacred) grove, while the name of the other rune, **ᚱ**, *eh*, means “horse”. According to Krause and others, these vowels have protective quality. At least these two alliterating runes of the second line render the same as the second part of the picture shows: A grove, an oak-wood, maybe, and a horse. At the same time ‘*eh*’ relates to the man himself. The O.N. formular says: “*marr er manns fylgja*”, N.E. “the horse is man’s following spirit”. And if the rune stands for faithfulness, especially in the relation of husband and wife, the horse and the valkyrie in the carving match very well.

Referring to our interpretation so far, I should prefer a translation according to which the valkyrie works distress, as it is assigned to her by some *Ertae*, who is quite likely the Anglian Mother Earth, *Erce*, or *Nerthus*, as Tacitus cites her. She could well be identical with *Hel*, the goddess, who linked both realms, shade and light. The Christian prayerlike charm starts out with three invocations “*Erce, Erce, Erce, eorþen modor*”. One reason to spell that name ‘*Erta(e)*’ may be the numeric value of the runes, another reason for choosing the rune ↑ may be her part in the warrior’s fate.

It may be accidental that we have 9 runes on the right edge, but the two words on that segment *drigip swæ*, which could translate “(she/it) works this way”, may refer to magic and form the incantation as we had it on the left edges before. If so, it would make sense right here, since it precedes a positive runic sequence:

The third line alliterates on s. Again based on the interpretation of the three hooded beings, I would prefer a translation according to which these persons create grief and sorrow rather than endure. The “ornament” left of the group might hold the answer. The rune \mathfrak{H} at least indicates a positive development. Its name is *sigel*, ‘sun’, and stands for light and life. This way our artist makes sure that his hero will not disappear in the realm of shade, so that he can join the warriors at Valhalla. Remarkable in this context is the shape of the jagged symbols (secret script: all vowels are replaced by runelike symbols) here used in place of the runic l. These are variations normally used for S. This way the carver turns the spell of death once more into its contrary.

The spell worked by alliterations now reads like this: $\mathfrak{N}\mathfrak{N} \rightarrow \mathfrak{F}$ incantation $\mathfrak{M} \rightarrow \mathfrak{H}\mathfrak{H}\mathfrak{H}$
 meaning: *disaster* (death) \rightarrow *protection* (saved from *hel* by Woden’s valkyrie) \rightarrow *life* (led from realm of shade to realm of light, the other world). This positive wish for life is expressed by the magically effective $\mathfrak{H}\mathfrak{H}\mathfrak{H}$.

If we count the *number of runes* and symbols, we arrive at 74 characters, 9 of which appear on the right rim. As said before, this charm is meant to avert disaster. Due to that, the means may be different. No **72** runes! No magic? As we shall see even the two odd runes are functional. Nevertheless, there is a number of patterns which indicate magic intention. Is it just accidental that there are **27** ($3 \times 3 \times 3$ or 3×9) “fake” runes? They are placed on the rims in sets of **3** (upper, right, bottom, left): $9 + 3 + 12 + 3 = 27$. Chance or plan?

Even the *runic value* works the way we know. If we accept the above reading, we arrive at a value of **1008**, a number divisible by **4** (= 252), by **7** (= 144), by **9** (= 112), by **12** (= 84), by **16** (= 63), by **24** (= 42), by **72** (= 14) and by **144** (= 7). This is a mathematically most surprising result, since it can not only be divided by the value of each alliterating rune (\mathfrak{N} and \mathfrak{H}) but also by their common value ($\mathfrak{N} + \mathfrak{N}$ and $\mathfrak{H} + \mathfrak{H}$) in each verse:

1 st	line	$\mathfrak{N}\mathfrak{N}$	1008 :	(9 + 9)	= 56	(or 8 x 7)
3 rd	line	$\mathfrak{H}\mathfrak{H}\mathfrak{H}$	1008 :	(16 + 16 + 16)	= 21	(or 3 x 7)

As we shall see at the end, the carver saved his *magic number* of *runes* in a different and even more effective way.

6 The Lid

Valhalla, or the final battle

With the forth panel our hero's life here on earth has come to an end. Nevertheless, he has been revived by his valkyrie and taken to bright Valhalla. There he is preparing himself for the final battle with the Frost Giants. And that is – most likely – what the lid shows.

6.1 The inscription

Was there any inscription at all? The lid had been composed of three side-by-side segments, only the middle one of which has survived. As the outer right and left edges are a part of this section we know that there had never been a text, surrounding that panel. A text just on the upper and/or lower edge seems unlikely. And as our *erilaz*, the rune master, had tried to hide the contents on the realm of Death by secret script, he may have refrained from any comment on the realm of the gods³¹, a taboo, so to say. Maybe, we only lost some ornamentation. As every detail bears its own, very particular meaning, quite a treasure may have been lost with it.

6.2 The picture

Some famous archer, *Ægili*³², is depicted here, defending a stonewall construction with battlements, probably a fortification, a rare sight those days. The Jarrow library may have helped our carver. Anyway, the perspective is rather naive, showing the walls from above, just as it is done on the Scandinavian stones (see *Ardre VIII*).

The carving presents a battle scene: On the left we see a gang of warriors attack a fortification. The opening is not a window, as often assumed, it is the entrance, as you would find it on any ground plan today. Under an arch (similar to that of the “Temple” on the back panel) and adorned by a double-headed creature³³ and the endless knot³⁴, we find a lady, who seems to be supplying the archer with arrows. It might be some other deity of war, his valkyrie most likely. The door is safe, (once) blocked by the knob of the lid.

³¹ Another Anglo-Saxon Casket, the *Gandersheimer Kästchen* [MA 59] (Braunschweig, Germany) depicts the life of Christ on its four panels and likewise refers to the celestial part (God's hand blessing the scenes below) on the lid.

³² He is often referred to as a brother of Weland. At this early stage of tradition that is unlikely. Becker, *Casket*, pp. 154–186.

³³ See Becker, *ibid.*, pp. 123, “Das doppelköpfige Tier”.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 120, “Dreipass und Rosette”.

With regard to the battlements there must be more to the fortress. If we count the elements of which they are composed, we always arrive at 3, no wonder as long as they are composed of three “bricks”. But should our *erilaz* have carved six elements with the ones on the upper left corner, if not for numeric purposes? Altogether we count $(6 + 21 + 9 + 7)$ **63** (9×7) elements distributed over 12 battlements. These are magic numbers, but what do they allude to?

We remember the runic value (1008) of the right-hand panel with the theme of death and redemption. The redeeming rune was \mathfrak{H} (value 16). 1008 divided by 16, is **63** (or 9×7). Should this not be a clear clue as to the realm of redemption?

The site of the fortress is sacred ground, as the two endless knots (altogether 3) in the right and left corner behind the building show. The attackers seem to have successfully intruded into the outer court. They are within the curtain walls, indicated by the salient battlements.

Two of the enemies are much bigger than the defender. Two smaller ones are distinguished from them by their coats of chain mail. One of them is trying to sneak away, apparently attempting to kill his helmeted comrade, possibly the leader, from behind. Two naked bodies represent enemies already killed, two others are about to be hit or are fatally wounded while the two giants are continuing their attack. (Always *two* men of the same nature!) Their case is lost! You can look behind their shields, in other words, behind their defence, thus they can be struck at any time.

It looks as if the archer is defending *Asgard*, the home of the gods, against the *Jötunn*, the giants. Is it the hour of *Ragnarök* or is it just an episode in \mathfrak{H} unor’s everlasting fight against the primeval enemy? When Yggdrasil, the ash-tree that roots in *Niflheim* and transgresses the nine worlds to overshadow *Asgard*, starts to tremble, the final battle is near.

6.3 Magic and how it is worked

Æsc biþ oferheah, eldum dyre
 stiþ on staþule, stede rihte hylt,
 ðeah him feohtan on firas monige.

As we do not have a text with this panel we have to concentrate on the picture itself. \mathfrak{A} egili refers to some famous archer, who survived as such only in the *Þiðrekssaga* (14th century), where he is Weland’s brother. His name fits his role in this carving as properly as the names of Romulus or

Titus on their panels. The rune for $\mathfrak{Æ}$, \mathfrak{F} , bears the name *æsc*, ash, and the runic poem says about it:

“The ash is exceedingly high and precious to men.
With its sturdy trunk it offers a stubborn resistance,
though attacked by many a man.”

And as the name refers to Yggdrasil it might be chosen to hint at *Ragnarök*. What other rune could suit a defender better than this? May this be the final proof for our *erilaz*'s very conscious choice of persons and parts, he selected for his most special purpose.

But there is more to $\mathfrak{Æ}$ gili: 5 dots: There are 2 in front, 2 behind and 1 below him. We know such dots from the edges, where they (with number and value 1) were used to indicate the value of certain runes. 5 dots right here would refer to \mathfrak{R} , quite appropriate again, to the helpers at war. – The dots scattered among the aggressors might tell their tale and indicate their fate.

$\mathfrak{Æ}$ gil, helped by his valkyrie, stands for successful defence. The scene may conjure our hero's life thereafter, but this scene may have a second function. Pictures were also used to deter people. Since the lid allows access to the *feohgift* in the box, the archer may have had the task to protect the contents by scaring off unwanted visitors.

7 Conclusion

or: summa summarum

The pictures on the four panels, read from the front to the left, conjure the life of a warrior from birth to death and beyond, Valhalla in Germanic view.

Three incantations, texts on the left edge of each panel, consist of 9 runes. They accompany the charms which procure the hero's life, his way of *wyrd*. A fourth row of 9 runes is on the right edge of the fourth panel, preceding the redeeming rune \mathfrak{H} , which is meant to secure his afterlife³⁵.

The runes on the upper lines – each of them is the first letter of a name – begin with

\mathfrak{F} (F), \mathfrak{R} (R), \mathfrak{T} (T), \mathfrak{H} (H)

and clearly refer to the message of the pictures they go with, and likewise the other ones which are found in alliterating position (esp. front and right panel). Hardly any other rune of the *futhork* would suit instead. None of the ones used would make sense in the context of another panel.

The same goes for \mathfrak{F} ($\mathfrak{Æ}$), likewise part of a name, but not part of a text.

If we add the *value* of those runes which bear the magic spell supported by the picture and the *number* of runes, we arrive at another remarkable total:

Front:	\mathfrak{X} (7) + \mathfrak{F} (1) =	8	
left:	\mathfrak{R}	5	
back:	\mathfrak{T}	17	
right:	\mathfrak{H}	16	
lid:	\mathfrak{F}	26	The total is 72

The number of runes clearly aims at magic. 72 (front) - 72 (left) - 48 (back) - 74 (right) if taken with the 22 (pictures), which adds up to 288 runes and dots (sum of the digits is 9).

288 is 12 times 24 or divided by the magic 9 we reach 32, which is 4 times 8. – We remember: magic 3 times 8 ($\mathfrak{ætt}$) = 24 (*futhork*), the value of which is 300.

The runes within the pictures (e.g. *mægi* etc.) number 22, which is necessary to reach an overall total, divisible by 24. Their runic *value* is 295. If we add the 5 dots, commenting on *Ægili*, we arrive at 300, that is 100 times the magic 3! And again: 300 is the value of the 24 runes of the

³⁵ Another casket (see *Das Gandersheimer Runenkästchen*, ed., R. Marth (Braunschweig, 2000) pp. 105 - 106, seems to work on a similar principle: 9 runes on the short edges and, altogether, a text of probably 64 (8 x 8) runes. Here rune magic might have been used to augment the miraculous power of a relic the box may have contained.

fupark. In other words, the interspersed words work the same spell as complete runic rows on other objects – and this on a much higher level.

The overall value of runes can also be figured at this point:

(front) 720 + (left) 910 + (back) 612 + (right) 1008 + (pictures) 300 = 3550.

It is tempting to assume that 3600 was the number intended. Maybe the missing 50 are hidden in *symbols* or *tree runes* somewhere else. This value would be divisible among others by 5, 25 or 50 (with the scores 720, 144 or 72), and by 150, taking us to 24.

At this point we remember the rosette with its 13 leaves and the hint that it might have a calendar function: We know that the ancient Germanic week was 5 nights long (in O.Norse called *fimmt*). 72 weeks of 5 days each (actually nights, as they figured) made a year of 360 days; in our case it is a cycle of 10 years of 3600 days.

If we assume a lunar month of about 28 days and apply this to 3600 we get 10 years of 13 months of 27.7 days, i.e. 27^d 16^h 48^m. Quite close if we compare it to the sidereal month, which actually has 27^d 7^h and 43^m. But the value derived from 3550 is even closer to that, namely 27^d 7^h 9^m. Or does the number hint at the classical lunar year of 12 months and about 354 days? This would amount over 10 years to 3540 days.

10 years were certainly not meant to be an expiry date, and so this number may either stand for a certain period in the owner's life or just for something indefinite or permanent, which seems to be the case with decimal numbers.

Another astounding result is this:

The *number* of runes in the inscription is 288 (runes and rune like characters), which is 12 times 24, the *number* of runes in the *fupark*.

If the *value* of the runes in the inscription were 3600

this would be 12 times 300, the *value* of the runes in the *fupark*.

In other words, in that case the rune master would have produced a text totally equal in *number* and *value*.

These figures unveil some of the spell intended. Further research and refined computer

programs may detect more along this line. Since such an outcome by pure chance would be practically impossible, it can be regarded as a proof for the general direction of the above interpretation of the miraculous casket. It has always been regarded as a masterpiece, of course; but with what we know now, it is a unique testimony of pagan art and wisdom. Moreover, the long debated question, whether or not runes had any magic function at all, especially in Anglo-Saxon regions³⁶ – and more modern sources tend to doubt it altogether – might be answered at last. Yes, they had magic function.

We now may wonder, did the spell work? Did our thane live through a glorious and victorious life? Did his valkyrie take him to Woden's celestial battlefields and beer gardens? The records of Valhalla will know the answer, – surely kept in runes.

³⁶ Among those, who regard runes as a mere means of communication, Bill Griffiths, **Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic** (Anglo-Saxon Books 1996), pp. 138-145. He concludes his chapter on these Germanic letters: “Runes remain basically a neutral medium (...like any letters) – the magic, or the will to do magic with them, comes from elsewhere.”