

Burning Down the House

Mythological Chaos and World Order on Gotlandic Picture Stones.

Nanouschka Myrberg

Hold tight wait till the party's over
Hold tight we're in for nasty weather
There has got to be a way
Burning down the house

Here's your ticket pack your bag: time for jumping overboard
The transportation is here
Close enough but not too far, maybe you know where you are
Fighting fire with fire

My house 's out of the ordinary
That's might don't want to hurt nobody
Some things sure can sweep me off my feet
Burning down the house

David Byrne

The Gotlandic picture stone monuments of the oldest type constitute a material manifestation of a “concept” which basically deals with world order and balance, from the single picture to the monument as a whole. This concept is detectable in myths, sagas and material culture alike. Only by paying more attention to the female agents of the sagas is it possible to reach an understanding of the common content of ideas between the different expressions. That the elements play an important role in the sagas is reflected in the setting and execution of monuments and artefacts.

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It has been suggested that some of the Gotlandic picture stones of the later type (c. AD 800-1100) illustrate the *Volsunga Saga*, the story of the dragon-slayer Sigurd Fafnisbani (Andrén 1989, 1993) (Fig. 1). I shall take this argument further by showing that the same type of motifs is in fact present on the picture stones of the earlier type (c. AD 400-600) as well (Fig. 2). These pictures express myths and beliefs that are older than the Volsunga Saga and basically deal with world order and balance.¹

¹ This article is based upon an essay of mine in 1996, “Hur völvan tappade sin stav – gotländska bildstenar ur genderperspektiv” [How the volva lost her staff – Gotlandic picture stones from a gender perspective]

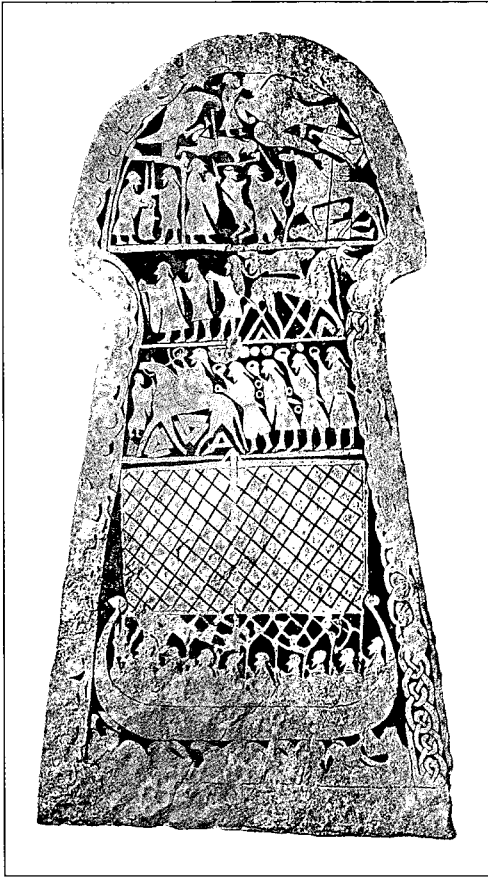


Fig. 1. The Volsunga Saga? Picture stone from Tängelgårda (1), Lärbro parish, Gotland. (After Lindqvist 1941, Taf 31, Fig. 86)

I start from the idea that there are certain recurrent patterns of thought which constitute central themes and metaphors in mythology and which may also be detected in material culture as well. This is a somewhat fashionable idea, which is to be found in the works of, for example, Birgitta Johansen (1994, 1996, 1997), Michael Olausson (1995), Anders Andrén (1989, 1993, 1998, 2004), Lotte Hedeager (2001), Anna Hed Jakobsson (2003), Catharina Raudvere (2004) and Anders Carlsson (forthcoming). The terminology differs slightly (for example, “concept”, “central metaphor” and “figure of thought”), but the basic idea is the same. I do not mean to say that such concepts are fixed and unchanging “archetypes”; rather, they change according to context and over time. Some of the original meaning

will anyhow still be present as the changed or reinterpreted concept will be referred back to and allude to the one precedent, whether this is entirely conscious or not.

In the myths, the elements and the physical and emotional movements of the protagonists are used to clarify the underlying messages. The myths may be regarded as models for action, showing how to behave and what the consequences of certain actions will be, but they are also a way of dealing with human conditions (cf. Bertell 2003:51; Nordberg 2003:92f). However, the myths are only one way of expressing these themes. The same metaphors find their material expressions in, for example, pictures, objects of art or monuments. Such expressions reflect and refer to partly different things, depending on which specific expression was chosen and the context in which it appears. Still, it may be possible in every case to detect the core of the metaphor and the common content of ideas. The scope

(Stockholm University). In the present paper, I have made an attempt to take the argument a bit further, and to connect my original results with some works that have been published since then and which support the argument of my essay. The song “Burning down the house” (the Talking Heads 1983; cf. Tom Jones with the Cardigans 2000) inspired the title of this article, and I dedicate it to all the heroes of the archaeological world.



Fig. 2. Dragon fighting, Martebo Church (I), Martebo parish, Gotland. (After Lindqvist 1941, Taf. 3, Fig. 6)

between the generic metaphor and the individual expression offers a possibility of catching a glimpse of the interplay of “sender” and “receiver”, of the actual reinterpretation taking place, and thereby of the purpose of the specific representation. In this way it is, at best, possible to contextualise the general and generalize from the specific.

In this paper, I shall pursue three major paths: the first is the theme of how different cultural expressions affect each other; interact over time and between contexts as stated above. The second path is the aim of distinguishing a “figure of thought” in the thinking of the Nordic Iron Age society, with a focus on Gotland in the Baltic Sea. Thirdly, I shall try to distinguish and discuss some of the material manifestations of this concept. The point of departure for the first theme has already been clarified; I shall jump right to the second one.

MYTHOLOGICAL CHAOS AND WORLD ORDER

One metaphor or concept which has been identified and discussed, mainly by Johansen (1994, 1996, 1997) and Cassel (2004), is the *dragon*. This “dragon concept” is, according to these authors, to be seen in the mythological dragons of the sagas, but it is also expressed in, for example, the dragon ships carrying the men abroad, as well as in the stone rows in the cultivated landscape, in the walls of the “hill forts” and in the edging (border) of the rune-stones (Johansen 1994:53f; Cassel 2004:169). In a university essay in 1996 I started from the idea of the “dragons in the landscape” and the dragon as a central metaphor, and connected these ideas with other materials, including gold foils (the works by Gro Steinsland in 1989 and 1990), “volva” graves (Hjörungdal 1991), the family sagas and, chiefly, the Gotlandic picture stones of the older type (c. AD 400-600). The results made it apparent that what Steinsland wrote on the *hieros gamos* motif (as a central element in poetry and mythology) being expressed on some of the gold foils may be applied to other archaeological materials as well.

Steinsland argues that the “holy marriage” motif was used in the sagas during the later Iron Age and early Middle Ages, to legitimize royal power by making it illustrate and symbolize how the ruler took possession of the earth – that is, of the kingdom (1989, 1990; cf. Sundqvist 2000). The woman is, then, equated with the land, with the earth, and is modelled upon the mythological giantesses like

Gerd in *Skirnismál*.² In the holy marriage of the myths, the male is not just any of the gods but a *vanir* (Freyr, Njord), which is something between a god and an elemental being, or a giant/trickster (Loki). Of the *aesir*, it is mostly Odin that is involved, a contradictory character who is able to change shapes and overcome death and who possesses both male and female abilities. It seems, accordingly, as if the groom should be of a certain, unbounded character, somebody out of the ordinary.

The giantess has a particular position within Scandinavian mythology. The giants as a group represent chaos and cosmic disorder, but they are also older than the gods and possess knowledge that the gods do not have. The giantesses often play a crucial part in the meetings between gods and giants, and sometimes procure the desirable secrets, as when Gunnlöd gave the skaldic mead to Odin (Meulengracht & Steinsland 1990:22). The giantesses are also connected with the earth. Odin had a wife, Jord [Earth], who was a giantess. This personification of the earth originates from a concept of the earth as being a giantess, which belongs to the oldest parts of the mythic poetry (Steinsland 1989:221). The giantess Gerd has also been interpreted as a personification of the fenced earth or the arable field (Olsen 1909; Bertell 2003:192). The giantess is, thus, connected with inherent *chaos*, with the *earth*, with divine and mystic *knowledge*, and with timeless *wisdom*.

By entering into a holy marriage with a giantess, or with any metaphor for her, the male part gains access to and acquires her characteristics and properties, in particular to her mystical knowledge. There is often an offspring, which is obviously no ordinary child. The thunder-god Thor (from Jord and Odin), the Midgard Serpent (from Angrboda and Loki) and a royal dynasty (for example, from Gerd and Freyr): what do such disparate progeny have in common? Apparently, they all *structure and protect the world and society against chaos*.

The struggle against chaos is at the core of the holy-marriage motif. This vital concept was efficiently expressed in the mythological figure of the powerful giantess/earth being courted/conquered by a very special male, with a new balance or structure resulting from this union of their powers. This idea was expressed in the myths of the holy marriage (the beginning), but also metaphorically in the figure of the Earth, Midgard, being surrounded and held together by the Midgard Serpent (the result). In material culture, I believe that this metaphor may be identified in numerous other shapes, as, for example, in the famous pendant from Hagebyhöga (Fig. 3) which has been interpreted as the goddess Freya (Arrhenius 1962) or as a volva during trance (Jakobsson 2003:150; Price 2003). I do not think that these interpretations are contradictory. Rather, they point to different aspects of the notion of a giantess: love, fertility and mystic knowledge

² It should be noted that a true "holy marriage" has to take place between a sky god and an earth goddess. According to Sahlgren (1928) Gerd is not to be considered a *goddess* proper and the union between her and Freyr may accordingly not be considered a *hieros gamos* in that sense.



Fig. 3. Who's that girl? Pendant from Aska, Hagebyhöga parish. (After Arrhenius 1997)

(the volvas were also connected with the goddess Freya). In the present context, I wish to give prominence to my interpretation of it as representing *Jord*, the personification of the female and fertile Earth, surrounded and protected by the serpent.

THE DRAGON – THREAT OR PROTECTION?

The dragon appears as a guardian of women or treasures, which in the stories often appear to be synonymous. It also constitutes a line of demarcation that has to be surmounted by whoever wishes to get access to the treasures

hidden within the enclosure, which is the dragon's own body. The dragon is a borderline as well as a mediator. It guards and protects, demarcates and delimits, exceeds and transforms (Johansen 1994:52ff).

Archaeologically, the dragon may be identified as such a line of demarcation or enclosure for example in the borders of the rune stones, in the stone enclosures or stone rows of the earlier Iron Age, and in the wall enclosures ("hill forts") of the Bronze and Iron Ages (Johansen 1994, 1996, 1997; Cassel 2004). Basically, the dragon and the snake are synonymous, as may be exemplified by the dragon Fafni, who is described as being "in the shape of a snake" (*Reginismál*) but also as walking, that is, having legs and feet (*Fafnismál*). This creature is conceptually connected with water/waves, on the one hand, and with a staff, on the other. As an example, the Midgard Serpent lives in the water around Midgard and is called Jormungandr, "the great staff". At the same time, the dragon is obviously connected with fire, and in the real world it may be created out of stone.

The reinforced mountain

The term "hill fort" (Sw. *fornborg*) has been much discussed and found inadequate, in particular since the term gives the impression of a great fortification while numerous such structures definitely do not qualify as defensive works. Rather, most of these structures appear to be places for ritual activities and connected with graves, burning and boundaries (Johansen 1994, 1996, 1997; Olausson 1995; Wall 2003; Zachrisson 2004). Åsa Wall has suggested the term "hinged mountain" to replace "hill fort", and I think this is an important step towards the understanding of what these structures are all about. Instead of focusing on the wall (the "dragon"), I here wish to direct attention to what is inside it for a while.

In my opinion, the "hill forts" are truly hinged or fenced mountains, with an

emphasis on the mountain itself. The wall accentuates the mountain, but the essential qualities of the mountain probably exist whether there is such a wall or not. This is indicated by the fact that the place names (-borg, -sten) used for a fortified mountain may also be used for a certain mountain without wall constructions, and the wall and the mountain itself sometimes seem to be mixed up (Johansen 1996:108; Wall 2003:170ff). These particular mountains are generally rather rocks or hills than mountains of any great size, and often of a certain shape (bare rock on the top, sloping on one side and very steep on the other) (cf. Johansen 1997:119, 124f; Wall 2003:171) (Fig. 4). They are situated in particular settings in the landscape, in places that may be characterized as “where elements meet”: on the borders between the elements, elevated with a great view, often overlooking water. I suggest that such mountains may have been selected and reinforced because they were perceived as holy places where contact could be made with the supernatural (cf. Bradley 2000:29). The walls are there to demarcate and direct the attention to the centre of the henge. The centre does not always but often consist of two parts: a “shelf” or plateau immediately inside the wall, and the rock itself (Wall 2003:116-129; cf. Zachrisson 2004). I also suggest that they are to be compared with the places described as *axis mundi* (the centre of the world and the very place upon which cosmic order depends; cf. Bertell 2003:98; Zachrisson 2004:377f) and that they are representations of the same basic ideas, that is, the centre of the world and cosmic order.

Bearing the interpretation of the “dragon in the landscape” in mind, I suggest that *borg* (fortress) in the sense of fortification is in the end not a bad interpretation of the meaning of the walls. I just think that the fortifications are to be understood on a metaphysical level rather than a realistic one (as pointed out above, the fortifications often do not qualify as defensive works to any extent), and without

losing focus on what the walls are there to “defend” – the mountain itself. This fact, I believe, should be considered in connection with the notions of the giantess/earth/treasure secured within the dragon. A hint of the connection between these notions and the hinged mountain structures is given by the fact that the name Gerd is linguistically connected with the

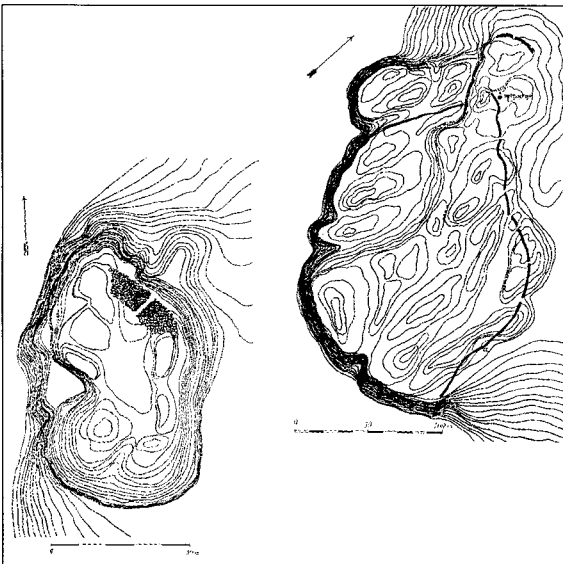


Fig. 4. The top of the world. Hinged mountains in eastern Sweden (Borgberget, RAÄ 624, and Lövvreten, RAÄ 625). (After Wall 2003:227f)

word for fence or the field within the fence. This word [*gardr*], in turn, is connected with the place names with “-*gård*” that during the Viking Age were probably used for particular and likely fortified places, such as Gräsgård (probably the original name of the ring fort of Eketorp on Öland) (Hed Jakobsson 2003:96ff). Another such hint is to be found in the poem of Brynhild’s journey to Hel, where the dead Valkyrie in her chariot passes the home of a giantess. The giantess tells Brynhild that she cannot enter within her [the giantess’s] “fences built of stone”, and Brynhild entitles her “woman from the rock” (Edda:249f, my translations).

By connecting the mythological theme of the marriage between a giantess and a god (or metaphorical stand-ins for them), with the ideas of the dragon/snake manifest in material culture, I think it is possible to reach some understanding of a figure of thought which was essential in the Nordic Iron Age society. This figure of thought deals with the structuring of human society and of the natural world, and comes in various shapes: in myth, in sagas, in artefacts, in pictures and in monuments. These expressions are different between them, but not so much as to make it impossible to recognize the common content of ideas. The variations and the choice of expression are, of course, meaningful in themselves, and the variations due to different contexts such as time, region or the associated ritual. Starting from the hill forts, the gold foils and the pendant from Hagebyhöga, I venture out on the third path of this article, that is, the attempt to identify this “concept” in material culture.

The mountain and the picture stones

I suggest that this “giantess concept” was present and important on Gotland during the Iron Age as a whole, though developing and changing its content and physical expressions. While the fortifications and stone enclosures were mainly constructed during the middle of the Iron Age, the concept found another material expression in the subsequent period: the picture stone monuments.³ This, I believe, is signalled in the pictures on the stones and in particular in the symbol of the *spiral wheel* (Figs. 2, 5, 10, 11). The spiral wheel is designed in a very similar way to what has been pointed to above for the figure of Midgard and for the hinged mountains: a round shape surrounded by a snake or a dragon and positioned between what might be interpreted as the sky/sun and the underworld.

When “reading” this symbol with a pre-understanding of the concept that I tried to distinguish above, there are apparent parallels to be found between the hinged mountains and the spiral wheel: in the surrounding elements (dragon and wall), the positions of the symbol and of the mountain (spiral wheel and “earth”)⁴,

³ It has been suggested that the traditional dating of the first picture stones to c. AD 400 should perhaps be brought forward to c. AD 100 (Måhl 1990:13), which would make them contemporary with the hinged mountains and enclosures. For now, I shall stick to the traditional dating, since the matter is not crucial to my interpretations here.

⁴ It is perhaps weak as an argument, but it is still interesting to note that, just like the spiral wheels, the hinged mountains often come in “pairs” (see, for example, Wall 2003:23ff).

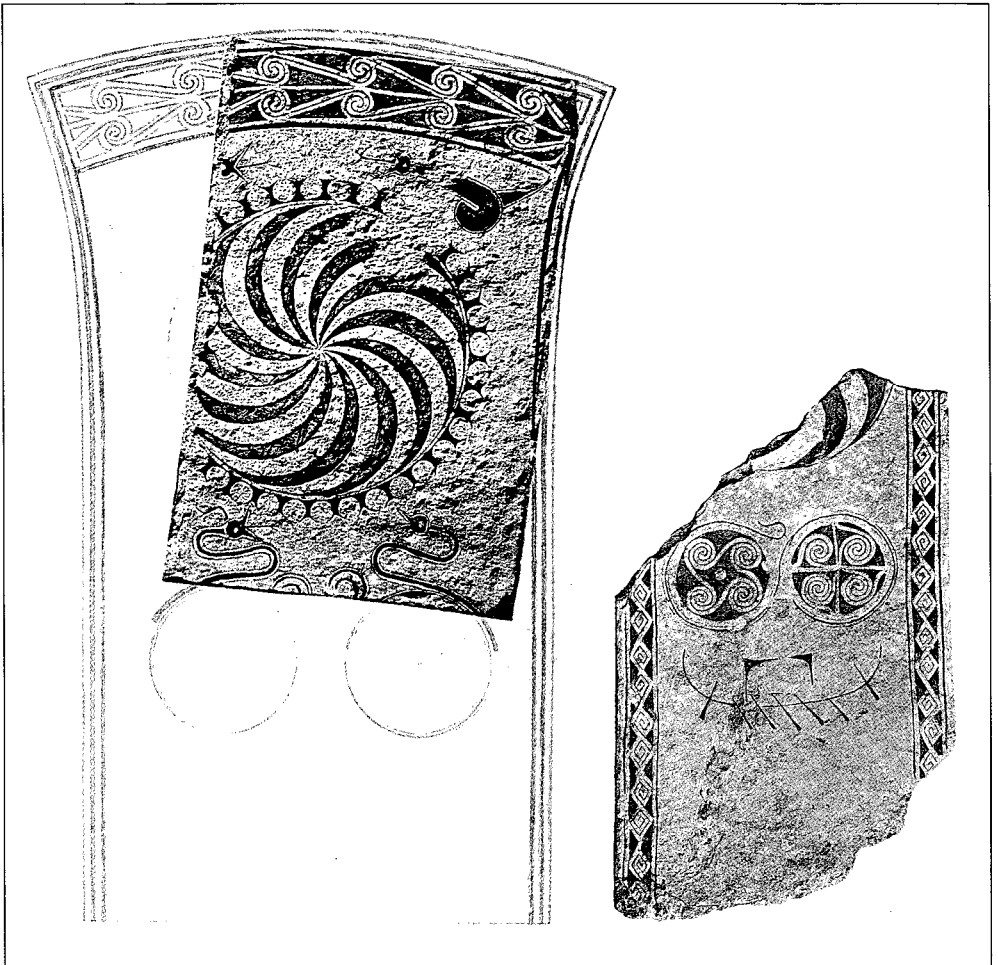


Fig. 5. Spiral wheels and dragons. Bro Church (II) (Lindqvist 1941: Taf 7, Fig. 13) and Björkome I (ibid: Taf 4, Fig 7). (After Lindqvist 1941)

between the metaphorical qualities of the symbol and the hill fort (miniatures of the fenced earth) and thus, in my interpretation, between the symbol of the spiral wheel and the giantess. I do not mean that the artist intended to depict a hinged mountain as such, but what is drawn on the stone is a symbol, a miniature of the same basic ideas that were connected with the mountain and which were made manifest through the outlining and building of the walls. This may well be compared with Johansen's idea that the hill forts are such "miniatures" of Midgård (1997). Burning, outlining and building the walls, as well as later carving and painting the stones, were likely ritual activities. In this ritual, a mythical episode may have been enacted and recreated as a way to strengthen and legitimize social structures and relations (Wall 2003:180). Such rituals may also have been essential to guarantee the success of important events such as giving birth, initiation,

marriage, warfare or burials. Perhaps it is this ritual itself that is depicted on the stone, codified in this metaphorical shape?

The figure of the spiral wheel is symmetric and balanced, but not idle. Instead there appears to be an inherent movement inside it, perhaps only as a possibility; possibly abiding its time. Despite its connections with order, balance, fertility and love, the concept in question was not entirely a peaceful one. This also results from the inherent chaos in the giantess, as well as through the connections with fire and death in the hinged mountain structures, in the stone enclosures and in the picture stone grave monuments. It also results from another element of the pictures on the stones: the armed man, the dragon-fighter.

THE DRAGON SLAYER – THREAT OR SAVIOUR?

As noted above, the saga of Sigurd Fafnisbani has been suggested as being depicted on the picture stones of the later type. The story as a whole consists of a sequence of connected Edda poems starting with *Gripispá*, in which Sigurd's destiny is foreseen (Edda:195-290).

In order to make some points from it in the following, I will briefly repeat the well-known story, often referred to as the Volsunga Saga:

Sigurd was the greatest of all men, son of king Sigmund and stemming from Odin himself. After his father's death, he was raised by his stepfather Alf and the dwarf Regin. Regin asked Sigurd to help him recover a treasure, which was once stolen from him by his brother, the dragon Fafni. Regin forged a sword for Sigurd, who slew Fafni with it. On accidentally tasting the dragon's blood, Sigurd started to understand the birds speaking. When the birds told him that Regin was about to betray and kill him for the gold, he anticipated his old tutor and decapitated him.

Sigurd took possession of the treasure and rode off on his horse, Grane. On his way, he passed a mountain where it seemed as if a fire was burning. Coming closer, he saw that the light came from a wall of shields. Within it, the Valkyrie Sigrdriva was sleeping. Sigurd used his sword to cut up her coat of mail and when he took it off, she woke up and thanked him for awakening her. She had been punished by Odin for disobeying him and killing the wrong man, and was told that she could not go to war any more; she had to get married. But she answered that she would not marry any man who could feel fear, and Oden then pricked her with a thorn which put her to sleep. To thank Sigurd, she taught him wisdom and runes, and they made promises to be together.

Sigurd then went on to stay with the great chief Heime, where he one day laid eyes on the beautiful Brynhild, sister of the king Atle (Attila), and fell in love. Brynhild was a warrior (Valkyrie) and was at first not interested in marriage, but after some persuasion agreed to marry him. After this, Sigurd went on again, to stay with king Gjuka where he became a close friend of

Gjuke's sons, Gunnar and Högne. Queen Grimhild gave Sigurd a drink that made him forget Brynhild, and after that, he married the princess Gudrun. Sigurd gave Gudrun some of Fafni's heart to eat, and this made her more cruel and wise than she was before.

Grimhild suggested that Gunnar should court Brynhild, and Sigurd went with him to her house, which was surrounded by a wall of fire. Only a man able to pass through the fire could marry her, but Gunnar's horse would not go, and when Sigurd tried to lend him Grane, the horse refused. Sigurd and Gunnar changed shapes as Grimhild taught them, and Sigurd entered the house of Brynhild. When sleeping together, he put his sword between them and did not touch her. After coming home, Brynhild and Gunnar got properly married. Sigurd then suddenly started to remember but did not say anything.

One day, Gudrun told Brynhild about the deception and after this Brynhild could not find peace any more. She urged Gunnar and his brothers to kill Sigurd and after this she killed herself. Gudrun was struck by grief after the death of her husband, but was eventually lured into marrying Brynhild's brother, Atle, in an attempt to make peace between the families. Despite this, Atle did not forgive the death of Brynhild and finally killed Gunnar and Högne. Gudrun, who could not forgive the death of her brothers, in revenge killed her sons by Atle and gave him their hearts to eat. After this, she killed Atle and his men and burned down the hall building. Finally, she tried to drown herself but could not sink, and she floated away across the sea to the land of king Jonaker, whom she married. Svanhild, the daughter of Gudrun and Sigurd, was killed by her husband Jörmunrekk, and Gudrun then made her sons by Jonaker go to take revenge for Svanhild. Reluctantly, they went and were finally killed (summary after Collinder 1964).

The connections between the women of this great and complex tragedy and the notions of a giantess or a bride from Utgard⁵ are clear: for example, Sigrdriva and Brynhild are Valkyries and not ordinary women; Sigrdriva also possesses secret knowledge; Brynhild is a Hun. Valkyries may be daughters of giants (cf. Raudvere 2004:84). The connection between Sigurd and the male contracting party of the holy marriage myth, on the other hand, is pointed out through Sigurd's genealogy and his likeness with Odin in character and appearance. He is at the same time connected with Freyr, ruler of the Elfs, through the references to being fostered by Alf and the dwarf Regin. The sequence in which Sigurd sees and falls in love with Brynhild (Edda:222ff) is, again, a close parallel to the story of how Freyr falls in love with Gerd (*Skirnismál*). These are some examples that underline that although the Volsunga Saga was clearly inspired by German poetry, it was based on existing Nordic myths (Sahlgren 1928:16; Kristjánsson 1992:348f), and is simply an old motif appearing in a new and elaborated guise.

When discussed, this epic cycle is generally referred to as the story of Sigurd

⁵ The land of the giants and the unknown; the land which is out of Midgard.

Fafnisbani, the dragon-slaying hero, and is considered as a metaphorical description of male initiation and growing (cf. Näsström 2002:74f). Reading it, I find it rather obvious that the saga just as much elaborates on the theme of the giantess. It is equally the story of three betrayed and men-slaying women, being initiated and growing through life.

Three times, Sigurd “slays the dragon” to achieve new things: killing Fafni to get the treasure; passing through the henge of flaming shields to get knowledge; surmounting the wall of fire to win a bride. All these situations accentuate and increase his heroic status, but, in all situations, he is also betraying someone. Sigrdriva and Brynhild (who are sometimes regarded as the same character but in the older poems they were two; cf. Meulengracht & Steinsland 1990:99) are both seduced but the promises are broken, and when Sigurd finally returns to Brynhild, it is to trick her into marrying an unworthy suitor. These ill doings are the reason for the tragedies that are unleashed upon the families. The second half of the story is mainly concerned with the fulfilment of this tragedy and goes on long after Sigurd himself is dead.

In these sagas, the dragon-slayer is not quite as much a hero as he might appear, neither are his accomplishments very positive for those who are “liberated”. Rather, it may be said they were safe and protected within their defences, just like the figure of the giantess, surrounded and protected by the dragon.

AN EFFICIENT FIRE WALL WILL NOT LET ANY BUGS IN (OR OUT)

In the myths, the elements are used as a signal system, underlining for example characteristics. Tension and crucial moments are accentuated by fire. This is recognized and developed in the Volsunga Saga, describing Sigurd’s three deeds. The tension and the value at stake increase in every situation, and so does the element of fire: first the dragon who *could* spit fire but does not (actually, the references to fire rather concern the qualities of the golden treasure), then the shields which *look* like fire but are not, and finally the real wall of fire.

The following part of the story ends in chaos when Gudrun sets her home, king Atle’s hall, on fire – clearly signalling the importance of the moment. The choices of fire as a weapon, as well as of the hall/house as the setting, are significant. The fire is controlled by the woman, and she here uses it to destroy her own family. When pushed too far, she “unleashes her dragon”, so to say. This is also a symbol of the total apocalypse: the hall or home (often interpreted as a microcosm) in flames, the destruction of the family (and a royal one at that), and a mother killing her offspring.⁶ This motif may be seen as a parallel to the Scandinavian eschatological conception of Ragnarök that includes the burning

⁶ The motif of *brenna inni*, burning the enemy in his own hall, has several correspondences in the sagas (for example, the Saga of Njal). With the Saga of Njal in mind, Gudrun’s acting appears even more extraordinary, since that saga clearly points to the desirable behaviour of a wife: to choose death in the flames with her husband.

of the world tree Yggdrasil, the world axis that holds the universe with Midgard in the middle. Burning down the house is, indeed, the end of the world.

But fire is also a fertilizer and a protection. Thor, the god of fire and thunder, was a fertility god and also in control of the rain. He was also the protector of marriages, and had the particular task of protecting the world from the giants (for Thor, see Bertell 2003). In his eagerness to do so he sometimes risks it all, for example, through trying to capture the Midgard Serpent, which as a giant is his enemy but is indispensable for holding the world together. Fire, and Thor, offered protection against all kinds of trolls and gnomes (ibid:204). Thor, as mentioned, was the son of Jord and Odin, and he seems to have been very intimately connected with his mother. Fire and dedication to Thor were, for example, important elements of the taking of land during the Viking Age, and used to demarcate its extent (ibid:204f). Fire may also be used as a fertilizer of the earth, through burning. Through fire and rain, Thor thus provides the prerequisites for the fertility of the earth. Fire, then, can be a threat, destruction and chaos, but it may also imply protection, fertility and structure. Everything depends on how it is handled.

PICTURES, STONES AND MONUMENTS

The picture stones of the oldest type were sometimes several metres high, and shaped into high “blades” with straight but at the top slightly concave sides (Figs. 6 and 7). They are generally dated to *c.* AD 400-600 but there are suggestions that they may have been produced from *c.* AD 100 (Måhl 1990:13). They were parts of grave monuments; circular stone settings with the stone either marking the centre (Lindqvist 1941 fig 1; Burenhult 1999:257; Nylén & Lamm 2003:28, 159) (Fig. 8) or standing outside the stone setting as a pendant (Måhl 1990:16-19) (Fig. 9). J. P. Lamm’s catalogue of picture stones (Nylén & Lamm 2003: 180-206) includes 116 stones of the oldest type (“T” in the catalogue). Of these, 55 stones have more of the motif than the decorated border preserved. On 52 of these, the motif includes a wheel shape: a whirl, a spiral wheel or both. On two stones, there is only a ship preserved, very likely on the base of the stone, which is typically the lower part of a “wheel” composition (the figures on the 55th stone, no 382, are in too poor a condition to classify).

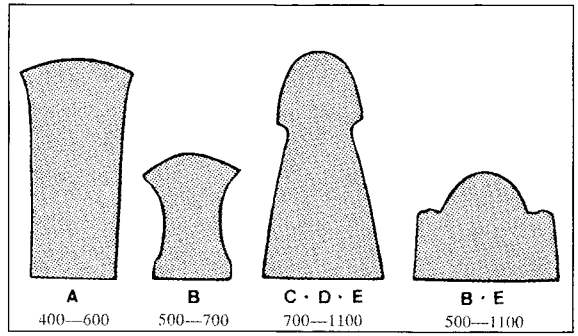
Accordingly, the wheel is a fundamental element of the pictorial compositions of the oldest picture stones. The other typical elements are the border, the dragon/s, the horse/s, the warrior/s, and the above-mentioned ship. It appears to be the wheel and the ship that cannot be excluded from the composition. There is much to say about those symbols and all the variations, but I will have to restrict myself to a few aspects, focusing on the theme of the article.⁷

The spiral wheel has above been interpreted as depicting a concept of the Earth (or giantess) circumscribed by the dragon. The whirl appears to have a slightly different meaning, since it often appears in combination with one or two

⁷ The individual elements are more thoroughly discussed in Myrberg 1996.

Fig. 6. Changes I. The dates of Gotlandic picture stones according to Sune Lindqvist. (After Nylen & Lamm 2003:172)

spiral wheels, and, though often in combination with snakes or dragons, it is never surrounded by one. It may be regarded as a sun symbol, as it has traditionally been interpreted. Perhaps it is a symbol of Freyr, if a name should be necessary, who is the ruler of the Elfs and thereby connected with the “alfrodull”, that is, the sun wheel. In *Skirnismál*, Freyr complains that the sun is shining in vain, when he does not have Gerd (cf. Hed Jakobsson 2003:146). Its connections with the male sphere can be seen in other examples, in which small whirls are shields carried by human figures



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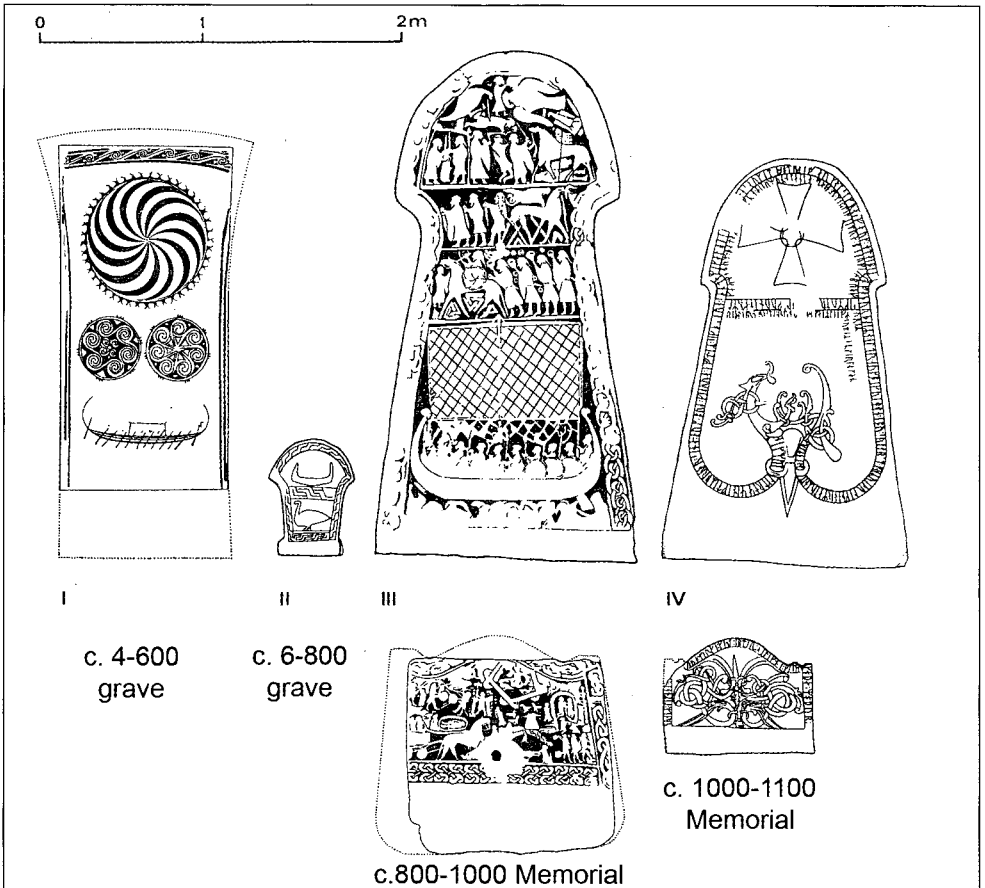


Fig. 7. Changes II. The periods of Gotlandic picture stones according to Anders Andrén. (After Andrén 1993:35, with additions)

interpreted as male (for example, Vallstenarum, Vallstena parish, Lindqvist 1941, Taf. 9, Fig. 16; Lillbjärs (III), Stenkyrka parish, *ibid*: Taf 46, Fig. 114; cf Lindqvist 1962:13). However, it might just as well be interpreted as a spindle-whorl, representing the female art of divination (cf. Hjörungdal 1991:105). There is no real contradiction, I believe, in the interpretations of the spindle, producing the thread that measures the lifetime and destiny of human beings, and the sun, measuring their days. Rather, this underlines that these symbols cannot be neatly put into a “male” or a “female” sphere – they are items of common interest.

The dragon-fighters appear on a few stones of the oldest type (for example, Austers I, Hangvar parish, Lindqvist 1942 fig. 403, 404; Martebo Church, *ibid*:fig. 6; Vallstenarum, Vallstena parish, *ibid*: fig. 16; Martebo Church II, Nylén & Lamm 2003:32ff) (Fig. 10). It has been suggested that Austers I could be one of the oldest illustrations of the Volsunga Saga (Nylén & Lamm 1987: 30f; 2003:30), but this is hardly likely since the time elapsed between the death of the historical persons (Attila, Gundahar, Ermanaric; 4th-5th centuries AD) described in the Saga

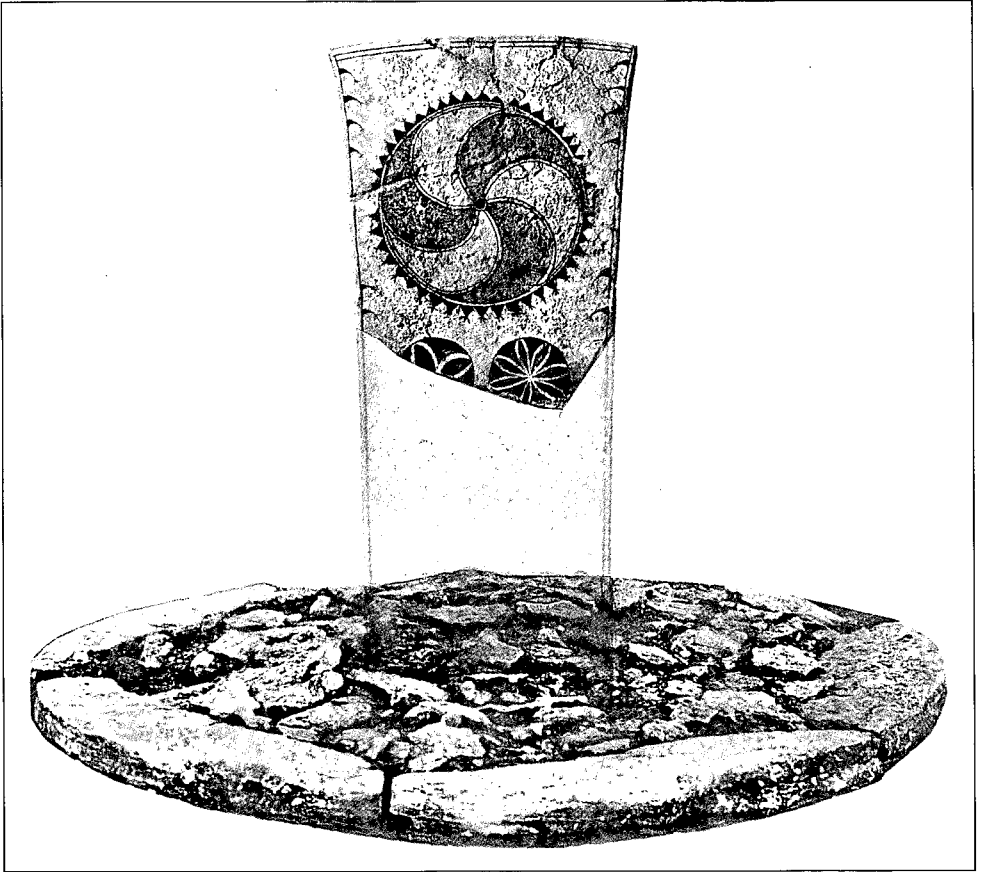


Fig. 8. Two in one. Reconstruction by Sune Lindqvist of a monumental picture-stone. L. Ihre (I+II), Hellvi parish, Gotland. (After Lindqvist 1941, Taf. 1, Fig 1)

Fig. 9. One in two. A picture stone root standing in original position beside a stone setting at the Bjärs cemetery, Stenkyrka parish, Gotland. (Photo Per Widerström)



and the raising of the stones is too short. Instead, I suggest that these pictures elucidate how the later saga of Sigurd is simply a new shape for an old motif and a *literary expression* of an older, metaphorical concept – a concept concerned with questions of the beginning, the end and the structure of the lives of individuals, of society and of the world itself. On the later stones, the scenes are of a more “narrative” character but they still only show certain “key scenes” of the sagas. On the older stones, this is even more pronounced – the same concept, thus, in its later narrative shape as a saga and as “narrative” pictures on the later stones, and in a symbolic shape as the spiral wheel on the oldest stones.

Sitting on top of the world

In my interpretation, not only the symbols on the picture stones convey the message of this concept, but the stones themselves and indeed the monument as a whole. The pictures, the stone slab and the grave monument interplay and reinforce each other. To begin with the pictures, the main elements of the composition always appear in the same internal structure. The whirl, when there is one, is on top, the spiral wheel appears under it or, if there is no whirl, at the top, and the ship is always at the bottom. The association between the “knoll” and the wheels is thus clear.⁸ This composition has been interpreted (concerning a stone



Fig. 10. Who’s that man? Picture stone from Austers, Hangvar parish, Gotland. (After Lindqvist 1941, Taf 13, Fig. 27)

⁸ All types of picture stones have such a “knoll” and the scenes which I consider to be a development from the same content of ideas as is expressed in the spiral wheel (that is, the “welcome scenes” or the “royal couple”, cf. Bugge 1904:230) also appear on the later stones in that same position. The type of scene that has been interpreted (Jungner 1930:68f) as Odin in Hlidskjalf (or any parallel for this) is, of course, located on the knoll – he is, literally, “sitting on top of the world”.

from Sanda church, Gotland, see Lindqvist 1962) by Andrén to be a cosmological representation (2004:404f). Andrén refers to the small tree in the middle of the Sanda composition (Fig. 11) as a representation of the world tree. This may well be, but, as a second step in my analysis of the picture stone metaphors, I shall take this interpretation just a small step further by arguing that this cosmological message is developed, strengthened and further conveyed through the stone itself, and that the stone slab is in itself a representation of the world tree⁹ – the world pillar, the *axis mundi* or the holy mountain, as it comes¹⁰ My conclusion is that the stone slabs as a whole are to be paralleled with the hills of the hinged mountain structures, with the convex top of the slab perhaps representing the “lid” or canopy of heaven – or the canopy of the tree crown.

Finally, the circular stone setting which the picture stone marks further accentuates this, since the setting with its carefully hewed kerbstones (cf. Fig. 8) may be regarded as another representation of the stone-encircled earth or mountain (for the conceptual similarities between graves/cairns and mountains, see Johansen 1997:117-124, 138f), mirroring the spiral wheel. Thus, I conclude: the ideas of a world tree may well be read into the picture stone monument, and may, though not entirely the same, be interpreted as closely connected with the conceptions of world structure, of the human body protected/kept within stone fences and of a special place at the centre of the world. The different parts of the monument interplay and cooperate; a small pictorial element strengthens and is strengthened by the whole.

Interestingly, almost all slabs of the oldest type were re-used: most have been found in later graves or in churches (Måhl 1990:16ff). When in churches, the slabs of this type were, as were the contemporary border stones from the stone settings, mainly fitted into the tower (Johansen 1997:215) – a position well suited for expressing ideas of the vertical and of the communication between heaven and earth. The later slabs, just like rune-stones, were rather put in the “body” of the church itself. This phenomenon was in the latter case interpreted by Johansen as a sign of recurrent ideas of liminality and of re-connecting with the ancestors (ibid:244ff). It may, accordingly, be argued that the stones of the oldest type were still in the church- or tower building period of the 12th and 13th centuries recognized as embodying the ideas of an *axis mundi*.

But why a representation of the world tree as a grave marker? I suggest that this was because it symbolized life, death and resurrection in this context, and because the world tree was the place where the worlds met – the universal structure which joined all worlds together. Figure this: a (perhaps prominent) member of society dies; there is disturbance, an old era goes into the grave, the new generation takes over. Things inevitably change, yet they must remain apparently the same. The cremation is a burning of a metaphorical house, the body; the death of the

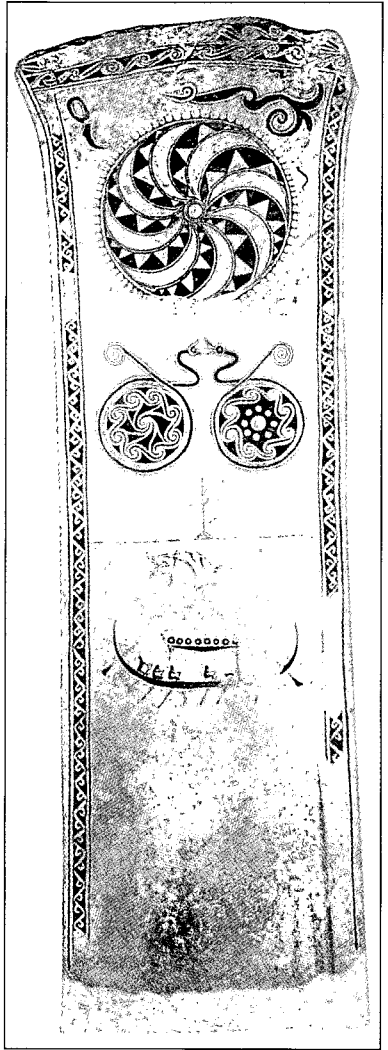
⁹ This has also been argued by Petruchin, 1978:166.

¹⁰ These notions clearly coincide, as shown by Bertell (2004:98-104).

Fig. 11. *The world is a manifold place. Picture stone from Sanda, Gotland. (After Lindqvist 1962:9)*

individual is a small Ragnarök to the family or to society. The deceased must be guided and find his or her way to the next world; death and the dead have to be kept under control. The carefully shaped stone slab and the equally executed stone setting subtly interplay to show the different stages of this drama of destruction and resurrection (Fig. 12).

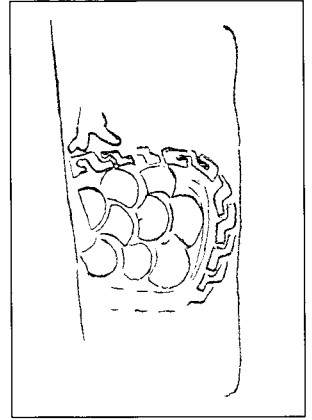
Contact with the other world was to be made in particular places – such as hinged mountains, graves or picture stone monuments. Rituals and invocations of great importance very likely surrounded death, the transformation of the body and the soul's transportation to the other world. This would ensure a successful result for the deceased and maintain balance in the world of the living. Perhaps the picture composition of the slab does not only depict Iron Age cosmology, but also just as much the concept of transformation or the grave ritual itself? The painting and raising of such a stone may have been part of this very ritual, as well as the way to demonstrate and manifest that the ritual had been properly executed, and that the dead person was an important person and was to be honoured in this way. On a profane level, this perhaps at the same time augmented the honour and reputation of the heirs.



Where elements meet

The world tree or pillar was probably intimately associated with the god Thor (see Bertell 2004), the guardian of and a symbol for the good and structured life, but also the carrier of a potential threat to it. The “giantess concept”, as we have seen, in a similar way carried within it contradictory qualities of balance and fertility along with mystic knowledge and chaos, of life and death. Within the metaphor of the hinged mountain, such a contradiction is displayed and balanced, and so it is within the picture stone grave monuments. Individual gods or names are not the most essential part of this; rather, they express different aspects of the world and the story. The slabs with their deep roots may represent a tree, a staff or pole, or a mountain, and it could be regarded as made of wood or stone. This

Fig. 12. Hall or grave? This picture was interpreted by Bugge (1904) as representing Odin's hall Hlidskjalf, covered with shields, with the tree Leradr standing above (in the middle) of it. Within another interpretative frame, it may just as well be seen as a circular stone-setting with hewed kerbstones and a picture stone tree. Picture stone from Jurby, Isle of Man. (After Bugge 1904:205)



ambiguity seems not to have been of great concern to the people of the time, and a word like “staff” could be used to denote objects of wood or stone alike (Måhl 1990:24), as well as a runic character and the great Serpent itself.

Aptitude to transform seems to have been a normal, not to say desirable, trait in many symbols of the Iron Age. This is reflected in the sliding-between-expressions in art, such as poetry or animal ornamentation (cf. Hed Jakobsson 2003:132). Thus, the elongated and the round shapes seem to interact in a particular way, as when the staff/serpent/dragon curls up around what is protected (cf. Myrberg 1996:10). The shapes carry within them their opposites. Similarly, water and fire are connected, as are fertile earth and arid stone, and the top of the mountain with the roots in the underworld. Within the figure of the earth or mountain, surrounded by the dragon, they are all present: it is the place where elements meet, a place out of the ordinary, from where one could go any way.

BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE

The sliding-between aspects, or “conceptual siblings”, such as water-snake-dragon, or stone-wall-fortress, or earth-giantess-woman, appear to be consciously used in the sagas as a means of repeating the same sequence or metaphor in new ways, thereby augmenting the literary quality of the story and simultaneously underlining the importance of the sequence. It is also a way of staging the story in different settings – among the gods, among the heroes, among human beings. As exemplified by the saga of Sigurd and Gudrun, the elements also play a prominent role, with fire as the code for danger and destruction, but also as the prerequisite for a new start. The dramaturgy effectively conveys the message: this goes towards chaos. This is underlined by repetition, and by literally turning up the heat in every situation.

Perhaps these stories were also staged as dramas, just as the Greek myths were, as has been proposed by Terry Gunnell (forthcoming).¹¹ Or perhaps, the other way round: the stories are literary expressions of concepts and rituals, which

¹¹ Maybe a reminiscence of such a ritual or drama is behind a comment from the 18th century, that “hill tops were made into castles with (...) walls of stone which were called *dragons* or *snakes* (...) The daughters of kings and chiefs liked to have their maiden’s bowers in such places, [to be protected from] shameless suitors, who often used violence and besieged the fortress, which was called *slaying the dragon*” (my translation, after Carlsson 2005).

contemplate and attempt to explain human behaviour as well as the nature of the world. Analogies and metaphors are useful in such a process, but also visualising and modelling. In the myths, individual behaviour and collective ritual were described, enacted and reinforced through the naming of persons and events – similar to myths naming and explaining features of the landscape. What may have been acted ritually in one situation might also have been given a literary or pictorial shape or been constructed in stone. The fear of chaos, destruction and death are fundamental human issues, which in a burial context during the Iron Age on Gotland were dealt with by all these means. The burning of the body, the individual's temporary house, is only one aspect of a grave ritual that includes many moments. Together they reinforce each other and convey a message of threat and chaos, but also of a strategy of how to handle this. Burning down the house is the end of the world – but it is also the ticket to a new one.

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