A TEST CASE IN COMPARING TEXTUAL EVIDENCE WITH EVIDENCE FROM MATERIAL CULTURE

CONCEPTIONS OF VALHÖLL

The picture-stones of Gotland are slabs of native limestone carved with scenes on a variety of subjects. Most of these scenes remain enigmatic and not firmly identified. Of the two examples shown here, the better-preserved is from Ardne, the more damaged from Tjäröside i Askog, parishies on the Baltic island of Gotland. Both stone carvings are now thought to date from the ninth century.

To the left of the rider in the top panel of these stones, we see the front elevation of a building with three arches. Such a structure is otherwise unattested in the Scandinavian homelands at so early a date.

Question 1: Could the carver have modelled this image on Roman-style buildings (perhaps those of the Carolingian Empire)?

A KEY TEXTUAL SOURCE

Grimnismál: The speaker in this early medieval poem is the god Öðinn.

Finnm hundrúð dura
ok um fórmen tagom,
svá hygg ek at Valhöll vera;
átta hundruð einheila
ganga sem dr min domur,
þá er þar fara at vitri at vega. (v. 23)

‘Five hundred and forty doors, that’s what I think there are at Valhöll. Eight hundred chosen warriors exit at once from just those doors when they go to fight the wolf.’

The ‘wolf’ mentioned here is Fenrir, who will fight against Öðinn and the chosen warriors at Ragnarök ‘the judgement of the gods’.

Mjökl er aukemand
þeim er til Öðins koma
sákynni at síði;
skotom er rann rept,
skegjóm er sain þakó,
brynjum un bekkí stráñ. (v. 9)

‘Very easily recognized it is, for those who come to Öðinn, to see his hall-comrades; the building has spoor-shafts as rafters, has shields as roof-tiles, and the cushions for the benches are mail-shirts.’

The Norwegian scholar Magnus Olsen interpreted the 540 doors as indicating that Valhöll had its model in the Colosseum at Rome! But the Colosseum in fact had just 80 entrances. The number 540 might have been determined by its magical (9×60) rather than architectural significance.

A SECOND KEY TEXTUAL SOURCE

Eiríksráð: ‘Commemoration of Eric [Blood-axe]’

‘Hvat es þa þat drama; sagt Öðinn, ‘es ek huggumk fyrdag sítu Vælprétyþ ympk, fyr vegrn folki?’
Vakóka ek einhejra,
bæ ek upp rísa,
bekkí at strå,
borðat at leyðina,
valkyrjóu vín bera,
sém vís komi. (v. 1)

‘What kind of dream is this,’ said Öðinn, ‘that a little before daybreak I thought I was preparing Valhöll for a slain army? I awakened the elite warriors, I bade them get up, cover the benches, and wash the drinking cups, and the valkyries to bring wine, as though a leader were about to arrive.’

Who is this ‘leader’? The Eiríksráð (anonymous) is a eulogy of King Eric Blood-axe (Eirik blóðs) commissioned by his widow Gunnhildr after his death in 954CE. Eric was at least nominally a Christian but the poem depicts him entering Valhöll in ‘heavenly’ style. Perhaps that was a matter of Gunnhildr’s personal beliefs.

Scholarly Reconstructions of Viking-Age Buildings

Reconstructions are based on:

1. Viking-Age depictions of halls and other buildings. Shown here are two examples of the so-called ‘dog-back’ tombs, found in apparently Scandinavian contexts in northern England. These tombs seem to imitate the convex (‘aerodynamic’) design of halls or long-houses. Also shown is the Cammín Casket, which emulates such additional features as animal-heads at the gable-ends of the roof.

2. Modern reconstructions of buildings known from archaeological investigations: Shown here is a reconstruction of one of the great halls at Lyley, Denmark, also exhibiting the ‘aerodynamic’ design suited for a windy environment. (NB the prevalence of wind turbines in modern Denmark.)

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Kaiívar Barilí at Ólafí. The Early Middle Ages from Lata Antiquity to AD1000 (Cologne: Taschen, 1997).

TENTATIVE CONCLUSION AND COMMENTS

Probably Valhöll was envisaged by Viking-Age people as a splendid hall in ‘southern’ style (Carolingian or perhaps Byzantine), featuring that key prestigious Roman feature, the arch. This would be in with the fact that the most prestigious swords, spears, and helmets used by warriors were manufactured in the ‘south’ (modern France) and brought to the North via plunder, gift-exchange, and trade. The ‘south’ was prestigious – so what finer residence in the Afterlife than a southern-style Valhöll?

But we can hardly reconcile this southern style with the depiction in Grimnismál, which includes a wolf on display at the western gable-end. Therefore at least two conceptions of Valhöll must have been current. This is probably one instance among many of the eclecticism and heterogeneity of early Scandinavian systems of belief.

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Shown here for comparison are:

1. The Triumphal Gate-way at Lorsch, Germany, probably marking the grave of a member of the Carolingian imperial dynasty.

2. A plan of Charlemagne’s palace at Ingelheim, Germany – three-fold arcade shown at left.

3. A Carolingian-era reception hall (now used as a church) at Oviedo, Spain

All three structures date from the ninth century and feature a triple arcade with upper storey.

Question 2: Is the three-arched structure on the picture-stones to be identified as Valhöll? A majority of scholars think so, interpreting the rider as Öðinn, the horse as his eight-legged horse Sleipnir, and the woman as a Valkyrie. The scene on the Tjäröside stone includes the wolf (Fenrir) that will fight against Öðinn’s forces at Ragnarök, along with a corpse. A minority of scholars prefer to identify the rider not as Öðinn but as the hero Sigurd and the Valkyrie-figure as the arch-female-warrior Brynhild; with the building to be identified as her hall (which according to the legend would be located in the region of modern Burgundy). But this interpretation leaves the other details in the scene difficult to account for.