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Christian or Pagan?

Some Reflections on the Iconography of U 448

Abstract

The iconography of the rune-stone U 448, a peacock and a rider, forms the basis of this paper. The inscription is a normal memorial one and has no explicitly Christian element. The ornamentation does not include a cross. However, I will argue that the peacock and probably also the rider may be interpreted as images loaded with Christian meaning. The peacock, originally a sun symbol in India, was taken up by early Christianity in the Mediterranean area as a symbol of immortality. At the same time the fondness for representations of domestic fowl may show continuity with Old Norse mythology and Viking-Age burials, where unburnt skeletons of domestic fowl are found in cremation graves. The rider may be regarded as an image of a holy rider and is compared with riders on Pictish symbol stones. My conclusion is that many of the images on rune-stones may be interpreted as a kind of syncretism, in fact Christian but understood as having a background in Old Norse religion.

Keywords: Rune-stone, iconography, Christianity, Old Norse mythology, peacock, fowl, rider, Viking-Age burial customs.

It is generally accepted that the late Viking-Age rune-stones should be understood in connection with the advance of the Christian mission; the distribution pattern of the rune-stones is often seen as an illustration of the spread of Christianity from the southwest to the northeast. In many ways, this could be true and it has been pointed out that the iconography of the rune-stones has clear Christian traits. Primarily this is of course relevant for the images of crosses. However, in the case of other images, could there be a more complex meaning behind them? In this brief article I will study the images of birds and of horses with riders and argue that they may show a syncretic background.

Birds

My starting point is the rune-stone U 448 from Harg, Odensala parish, in Uppland (Fig. 1). The inscription reads 'Ígull and Björn had the stone raised in memory of Þorsteinn, their father' and thus says nothing about the religious belief of either the dead person or the raisers. Instead, what is extraordinary about this stone is the pictorial representation. On the central upper

Fig. 1. Rune-stone U 448, Harg, Odensala parish, showing a peacock and a rider.
Photo: Runverket.

part of the front surface where a cross is normally located, there is a large bird with a crest on the skull, wings and long tail, in all probability a peacock.

In ancient India, the peacock was regarded as a sunbird, a symbol of love and long life. It was also connected to the cult of trees. The symbolism was later adopted in early Christianity through mediation from Hellenistic and Roman cultures, a kind of *Interpretatio Christiana*. In Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity, the peacock was kept as a temple bird for the worship of Hera and Juno. Later on, the peacock became a popular domestic animal in late republican and early imperial Roman Italy. Terentius Varro, a Roman scholar and author during the first century B.C., describes how peacocks were kept and bred in large flocks, both for pleasure and for profit. When sold, they fetched remarkably high prices (Toynbee 1973: 250).

As the flesh of the peacock was believed never to decay, it became a symbol of immortality. It was also seen as a symbol of resurrection as it lost its feathers and then grew new ones (Stander 1991: 11). In early Christian art on the continent there are frequent representations of peacocks. Two peacocks facing each other and sometimes drinking from a well or a vessel is a cherished motif, symbolising drinking from the Well of Life in Paradise – whoever drinks from it will get eternal life. St. Augustine compares the feathers of the peacock with their eye-motif with flowers in a meadow, alluding to the splendour of Paradise (Stander 1991: 16).

How did these ideas spread from the Mediterranean world to the North? An intermediate link has been recovered in Ireland. During the excavation of a very early church and churchyard in Caherlehillan, Kerry, SW Ireland, from the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century, the Irish archaeologist John Sheehan discovered two originally-erect stones and fragments of two more stones, decorated with carved crosses (Sheehan 2009: 200ff.). The stones were found in connection with a special grave, probably that of the founder of the church. One of the preserved stones and one of the fragments had representations of a bird carved on top of a cross (Fig. 2). The bird had long legs and a broad tail and has been interpreted as a simplified representation of a peacock. On the other stone there is something – a disc surmounting a handle – that might be a flabellum, the liturgical fan of the early Eastern Church, used to keep insects away during mass. Peacocks had a particular and strong association with the flabellum, in that peacocks' tail-feathers were sometimes used to make the fan. Owing to the presence at the site of eastern Mediterranean B-ware pottery, Sheehan suggests that some of the links between the eastern Mediterranean area and Ireland were direct and could be discerned on the earliest stratum of Irish Christian sites,

Fig. 2. Two standing stones with engraved symbols, the right one with a bird (peacock) on top of a cross, the left one with a probable flabellum. From the excavation of an early church at Caherlehillan, Kerry, Ireland, from the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century. After Sheehan 2009.

contrary to what has been argued before, i.e. that all the influence in Ireland was indirect, coming through Gaul (Sheehan 2009: 202).

The ecclesiastical connection between peacocks and the flabellum is still evident at the procession on Saint Liborius' day (July 23) in Paderborn, Germany. Saint Liborius (d. 397) is the patron saint of the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Paderborn. Legend tells that he was a bishop in Le Mans in Gaul and then moved to Paderborn. A peacock followed him all the way from Le Mans to Paderborn, where it fell down dead on the spot where the cathedral was later built. Saint Liborius is celebrated every year on the 23rd of July when his shrine is carried in a procession through Paderborn. At the head of the procession, a priest carries a large flabellum made of peacocks' tail-feathers.¹

An example of ecclesiastical peacocks from Ireland, closer in time to the Swedish rune-stones than the carved stones from Caherlehillan, is found with two magnificent peacocks facing each other on the upper part of St. Patrick's bell shrine, made of bronze with gilt silver panels and decorated in Urnes style (Fig. 3). An inscription dates the shrine to the decade around A.D. 1100 (Ó Floinn 1983: 167f.).

The Norwegian Gokstad ship-burial, dendrochronologically dated to c. A.D. 900, contained the bones and feathers of one or two peacocks (Nicolay-sen 1882: 69, Sjøvold 1985: 53), which demonstrates that this kind of bird was known in Scandinavia at that time. However, there are no clearly identifiable pictures of peacocks in Scandinavian art until the late Viking Age, when peacock-shaped as well as dove-shaped brooches appeared. In both cases there are clear connections to Christianity; the motifs are probably inspired and influenced by the Christian world of pictures and symbols (Pedersen 2001: 49ff., Vang Petersen 2010: 142f.).

However, in the Scandinavian Middle Ages peacocks were instead regarded as symbols of arrogance and pride. Owing to their beauty, they were kept in parks and gardens at castles and manors, and they also appear on some early aristocratic seals. Here, they served as a symbol of high status (Svanberg 2014). So far, I have found no example of ecclesiastical or folkloristic symbolism from the Middle Ages or later in Sweden, with one exception. In an excavated 18th-century grave in a burial vault under Sura Church in Västmanland, a child around two years of age was interred with peacock feathers on the chest, and a tuft of peacock feathers was attached to the top of a bonnet on the child's head (Jonsson 2009: 137 and Fig. 33). However, the meaning of this is unclear.

¹ Thanks to Christiane Ruhmann, Erzbischöfliches Diözesanmuseum, Paderborn, for this information.

Fig. 3. St. Patrick's bell shrine, back of crest, detail with two peacocks. Circa AD 1100, Ireland. After Henry 1970.

Let us now go back to rune-stones with possible peacock representations; some of them are in my opinion clearly peacocks, while others are perhaps more dubious.

The bird on the stone U 257, Fresta Church, is unfortunately only partly preserved, but is highly reminiscent of the bird on U 448. As the tail is missing it is impossible to tell whether it is similar to a peacock, but the pictorial idiom of these two stones has been used to argue that U 448 might have been carved by Fot as U 257 probably was. The latter fragmentary carving is signed, but the only preserved rune of the name is the final *r*. Elias Wessén proposed that the two stones be attributed to Fot (UR 2: 246), as well as the then-lost U 874 from Hagby Church, based on the pictorial idiom of the bird image as it is documented in Bautil (UR 3: 546f.).

However, in October 2016, in connection with an archaeological excava-

Fig. 4. The recovered rune-stone U 874, painted and now raised close to Hagby Church. Photo: Magnus Källström, Riksantikvarieämbetet.

tion of the demolished porch of the old church, U 874 was recovered. This was a real sensation: I was there when the stone was lifted out, extremely curious to see the full image of the bird – and obviously it is a peacock, with a crest divided into three. After cleaning and painting of the runes the stone has now been raised just outside the church (Fig. 4). Magnus

Fig. 5. Fifth-century sarcophagus with two peacocks facing a cross, used in A.D. 693 as a coffin for Archbishop Teodorus. After Bustacchini.

Källström gives many more arguments for the attribution to Fot (Källström 2020: 82ff.).

There are some more probable examples of fowl among the bird representations on rune stones, as well as a probable eagle and some other probable birds of prey. It is not impossible that some of the fowl were meant to depict peacocks, as several of them have rather long tails, sometimes with tail-feathers fanned. It should moreover be noted that fifth-century sarcophagi from Ravenna depict pairs of peacocks facing each other on each side of a cross (Fig. 5) or a vessel with water. These have a crest on their heads but they do not have particularly long tails (Bustacchini n. d.: 153). In connection with this, it is very interesting that the bird on U 633, Broby, Kalmar parish, seems to have a crest divided into three, similar to that of U 874. Crests also appear on the bird pictures on the upper part of the front surface of U 171 from Söderby, Östra Ryd parish, and on U 753 from Litslena Vicarage, where the bird is placed in the spot where a cross is normally located. In addition to the just-mentioned U 171, U 633 and U 753, possible fowl that were perhaps intended to represent peacocks may be seen on a further three stones: U 31, Väntholmen, Hilleshög parish; U 629, Grynsta backe, Håbo-Tibble par-

ish; U 746 Hårby, Husby-Sjutolft parish. U 31 is now severely damaged so only the forepart of the bird's body is preserved, but judging by a drawing made in the mid-nineteenth century by Richard Dybeck and published in his journal *Runa* (UR 1: 1 Fig. 24), the bird showed distinctive peacock features, i.e. broad wings and a very long tail. Wessén proposed, with no further explanation, that the bird on U 629 should be seen as an eagle (UR 3: 66), probably owing to its large claws. This bird, however, has a long and broad tail, similar to the bird on U 746, so it may equally well be a peacock.

An interesting counterpart to this problem of species determination can be taken from numismatics. Early Viking-Age coins, i.e. the pictorial "Hedeby coins" from the beginning of the ninth century, include a small group of three coins where the obverse picture consists of two cocks facing each other (Malmer 1966: 60). Malmer points out that although the birds cannot be proven to be cocks, they do show similarities with them in the crest, tail-feathers and claws, and therefore she considers the designation "cock" justified. Sune Lindqvist describes bird pictures, possibly doves and peacocks, on the picture stones from Gotland, sometimes just ornamental, but sometimes symbolic, and borrowed from continental Christian art. He compares them to pictures on grave cists in the area of Trier and is of the opinion that these might have served as models for some of the picture stones (Lindqvist 1941: 93).

Pictures of birds on rune-stones, in all probability not meant as representations of fowl or peacocks, may be seen on U 692, Värpeby, Arnö parish and U 855, Böksta Hill, Balingsta parish. The forward-facing bird on U 692 certainly has a long, broad tail and broad wings, but it is depicted in the manner typical of an eagle. Clearly, the birds on U 855 are part of a hunting scene; they are probably falcons or hawks and this should be regarded as an example of hunting iconography, as is found on the Norwegian Alstad stone (where a bird similar to the one on U 692 is interpreted as a bird of prey). Such iconography stems from Roman and Byzantine art traditions and appears on Langobardian and Carolingian monuments (Fuglesang 1986: 186f.).

Other bird pictures with no link either to hunting or to peacock symbolism appear on two famous carvings from Södermanland: the Ramsund carving Sö 101, Ramsund, Jäder parish, and the Gök stone Sö 327, Näsbyholm, Härad parish. Both carvings depict scenes from the Sigurd legend, where small birds play a special role.

However, from the province of Södermanland there are some nice representations of cocks on rune-stones; they are placed centrally on the carved surface, on top of crosses. The cock may be regarded as a familiar domestic

Fig. 6. Rune-stone Sö 270, Tyringe, Österhaninge parish, showing a cock on top of a cross. After Södermanlands runinskrifter.

animal that could replace the peacock. The complete stone Sö 270, Tyringe, Österhaninge parish (Fig. 6), and the fragments Sö 245 Tungalsta, Västerhaninge parish, and Sö 247 Ålsta, Västerhaninge parish, all originate from the eastern part of the province, on the peninsula of Södertörn in an area called Haninge, a name with its origin in the Germanic/Old Norse word *hane*, 'cock'. There is documentary evidence from the Middle Ages that a large forest-area here, constituting the border zone between two hundreds, was called *Hanveden* (Nyström 1990: 3f.), 'the forest of the cocks'. In this connection it probably refers to forest birds, i.e. black grouse and capercaillie. It has been argued that there are some further fragmentary bird pictures on rune-stones at Södertörn, but these are very uncertain. None of these Södertörn stones has any indication of Christianity in the inscription but all three are decorated by crosses.

The cock was an important bird in ancient mythologies, regarded as a symbol of the sun that could subjugate the power of darkness through its crowing at dawn and therefore as a protection against evil beings (Waida 2005: 551f.). In Old Norse mythology, cocks sit in the World Tree and crow to wake up the dead before Ragnarök, as described in *Völuspa* (Nordberg 2003: 260ff.). In Viking-Age graves in Scandinavia, the bones of cocks, hens or chickens are sometimes found. Like eggs, they are interpreted as symbols of rebirth and resurrection (Gräslund 1980: 54, 2008: 72f.). Cremation graves where unburnt fowl skeletons are found on top of the cremated bones of the deceased are important for the understanding of burial customs.

In Christianity the cock is seen as a symbol of the New Light, i.e. Christ resurrected. It has also been regarded as a symbol of watchfulness, and that is the reason why we still have church weathercocks. The earliest evidence of a church weathercock is a report that Bishop Rambertus of Lombardy in A.D. 820 had a cock cast for his church tower (Gerlach 1970: 209).

As both the cocks and the probable peacocks on the rune-stones are placed on the spot where the central cross is usually found, it seems reasonable in my opinion to give them a Christian interpretation, particularly as some of them are in direct contact with the cross. Analogous perhaps is the pictorial composition of U 629, where a cross emerges from the back of the bird instead, as well as a ninth-century dove-shaped gilt silver brooch with the same image, retrieved from a grave under the Cathedral of Osnabrück (Schnackenburg 1995). Direct contact with the cross indicates an important symbolic connection between it and these birds.

Riders

The representation of a rider on the Odensala stone corresponds to other Upplandic rune-stones which have simplified pictures of riders on horses. In some cases, the riders are depicted without arms, as on U 448, and on U Fv1973;194 (used as a base for a pillar in the chancel of Uppsala Cathedral, built in the 13th century). In this case, the inscription comprises the words *hvítaváðum* (white clothes), interpreted as baptismal clothes (cf. Williams 2012 and Gräslund 2015: 237). A similar picture of a rider without arms is found on a small fragment from Frötuna in Rasbo parish. However, there is a drawing of this stone from 1769-1770 by Peter Boling showing the stone almost complete, with only the top part broken off (Källström 2008: 233ff.). Thus, Källström has been able to read the whole inscription – the stone was raised by a son and a wife in memory of a man who died in Holmgård (Novgorod). The text ends with the prayer ‘May God help Guðelfr’s son’s spirit’. The design consists of two rune-animals in eight-shaped vertical loops and a large central cross; there are in addition two human beings, one at the bottom and one at the top, the latter missing its head due to the damage. Some lines appear to the left of the top person. Could these possibly be a misinterpreted bird, corresponding to the picture of the rider to the right of the man? Interestingly enough, on the stone U 375, Vidbo Church, there are some remains of a bird’s tail on top of the rider, who this time has arms. The same design is found on the stone U 599 Hanunda (cf. discussion above on the place-name Haninge), Hökhuvud parish, where the whole bird is preserved. Perhaps, as in Odensala, the bird was seen as a Christian symbol and therefore could sometimes replace the cross on the spot where this was normally located.²

Riders occur in Christian iconography, often with weapons. They might be interpreted as *Militia Christi*, holy riders, representatives of the army of Christ (Merzbacher 1970: 267f.). There is on the stone U 691, Söderby, Arnö parish, a rider with a sword in his right hand and a processional cross in his left (Fig. 7). The stone was raised by a father in memory of his treacherously-slain son. The inscription ends with the prayer ‘May Christ help his spirit’. In this case it seems relevant to speak of a holy rider. Another iconographical

² An additional possible carving of a rider is suggested by Sigmund Oehrl (2006: 30 and Fig. 72) on Sö 239, Häringe, Västerhaninge. The top of the stone is broken off and what remains of the picture is the lower part of a horse with four legs. Between the fore- and hind-legs are the leg and foot of a rider. Another rune-stone rider is seen on U 678, Skokloster Church. Stylistically, this picture seems to be much older, from the eighth or beginning of the ninth century. There has been much discussion over whether the picture is older than the inscription or merely old-fashioned; I will not consider it here.

Fig. 7. Rune-stone U 691, Söderby, Arnö parish, showing a rider with a sword in his right hand and a processional cross in his left. After Upplands runinskrifter.

interpretation could be that the rider represents Christ himself defeating the evil powers.

It is sometimes claimed that all pictures of riders represent hunting scenes, and the pictorial European tradition of hunting iconography has been identified as a token of royal or aristocratic power (Fuglesang 1986: 187). This may certainly be true of a scene such as the one on the above-mentioned U 855 depicting a rider with a spear on his horse followed by hunting dogs and falcons attacking a deer. However, for the rune-stones in question, I find more attractive another hypothesis put forward by the Scottish archaeologist Martin Goldberg in his work on Pictish symbol stones. From the eighth century onwards, the Pictish symbol stones seem to have a mixture of pagan and Christian motifs, in the same way as pre-Christian and Christian representations are mixed on our picture stones and rune-stones. It is easy to believe that, in a transition phase, motifs with pagan as well as Christian meaning were popular. There are many examples from various times and areas, during the Conversion Period, of customs from the old religion being accepted or tolerated, or given a new interpretation that fitted with the new religion, for example the so-called *Interpretatio Scandinavica*. Riders occur on some Pictish stones in what are traditionally interpreted as hunting scenes. Goldberg suggests that in this apparent motif there might be a hidden meaning – the picture is an allusion to the so-called *Adventus* motif, the entry of Christ into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday when he is welcomed as Messiah (Goldberg 2012: 160ff.). In my view this interpretation is supported by Maria Elena Ruggerini, who in an article on the Anglo-Saxon Easter liturgy (including Palm Sunday) makes a comprehensive investigation of sources. She points out that the ninth-century hymn *Gloria laus et honor*, which praises Christ as the pious and righteous King, Redeemer of Mankind, and was composed by Theodulph, Bishop of Orléans and based on Psalm 24, exists in a *Canterbury Benedictional* version with additional verses. One of these asks: *Quis rex hic equitat, cui Gloria redditur ista?* ‘Who is this King who comes riding here, to whom glory is due?’ (Ruggerini 2011: 213ff.).

Already in early Christian times, Easter was doubtless the most important feast of the Christian year. It may be that the riders on the rune-stones in question, as well as the peacocks and other fowl, were familiar motifs with an important meaning for Scandinavians as they were traditionally charged with symbolism in Old Norse mythology. This might have been a good way for the new converts to use these old symbols to show their knowledge of the Easter message. We could compare with the pictures on the Norwegian Dynna stone demonstrating knowledge of the Christmas Gospel, but there

these form more of a pictorial narrative; in that case the stable according to the *Interpretatio Scandinavica* looks rather like a domestic Scandinavian long-house.

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