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SIGURÐR FÁFNISBANI: AN EDDIC HERO ON CHURCH PORTALS

The Norwegian stave churches, whose construction began in earnest in the late eleventh century, are witness to the spiritual and artistic aspirations of the far north.[1] Patterned on a foreign Romanesque style and housing a new religion conceived in distant Mediterranean lands, these wooden structures were adorned with dragons and heroes from Norse myth and legend. Only three of the surviving portals with carvings of human figures depict scenes from the Bible. All the remaining carvings of this kind represent some aspect of the pre-Christian Norse legend of Sigurðr, the slayer of the monster Fáfnir.[2] This preconversion Norse hero is best known from the Eddic poems and from other texts, such as the Völsunga saga, based on the poems.

It is generally accepted that some magico-religious intent to guard against evil lay behind the use of the legend as ornamentation on sacred buildings.[3] In this paper I speculate on the symbolism of the carvings in light of the essential harmony between the Norse and Judeo-Christian conceptions of the cosmos and its microcosm, the local sanctuary. Both religious traditions present a clear-sighted awareness of the threat posed by forces of chaos. In the fluid world of Norse and Christian ideas which persisted for a time after the conversion in the early eleventh century, Sigurðr the Völsung and his deed underwent a symbolic reinterpretation. He became a transition

figure who crossed, intact, the line between pagan hero and Christian protector. The question before us, then, is this: Why did Sigurðr and his story become suitable for church ornamentation?

Certainly Sigurðr's presence as a symbolic protector at the church threshold carries his role as hero far beyond that of Siegfried the Nibelung, Sigurðr's German counterpart. As I point out in this paper, the explanation for the reinterpretation of Sigurðr is twofold. It arises, on the one hand, from the inherent symbolism of his monsterslaying, an act that is culturally transmutable; on the other hand, the explanation has its basis in the political realities faced by Norway during much of the period when the stave churches were being built. These realities were different from those existing in the Danish lands and in Germany during the same medieval period. In these regions, not surprisingly, the primary monsterslayer portrayed on church portals and tympana was the archangel Michael.

Michael's cult was early developed in Germany, where he became guardian Angel to Ottonian rulers of the Holy Roman Empire,[4] and he had a devoted following among Baltic Germans. During the crusades of the twelfth century, Michael's cult probably reached the height of its popularity within the western church. In Scandinavia, during and after the conversion, Michael enjoyed widespread popularity. His name is mentioned in several early runic inscriptions from Viking Age Sweden and Denmark,[5] and Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta[6], from Iceland, calls Michael a powerful protector. In Denmark this warrior saint is found carved on churches, including dragon-slaying portals at Øster Starup and Tulstrup.[7] In Norway, however, no Michael representations have been preserved from the period before 1200.[8] Further, there is no mention of Michael's ever being carved on

Norwegian stave-church portals. Probably Michael was not represented on Norwegian churches because he was seen in Norway as a symbol of aggressive Baltic powers, both lay and ecclesiastic.

In the Viking Period and afterward, Norway had to struggle to retain its independence from Danes and Germans. In Sigurðr, rather than Michael, the Norwegians found a dragon slayer who had useful political attributes. Sigurðr, through the marriage of his daughter Aslaug to the legendary ninth-century Viking hero Ragnarr Loðbrók, was a mythic ancestor of the later royal Norwegian house.[9] The royal court encouraged and, in some instances, patronized stave-church construction,[10] and it was clearly to its interest to see Sigurðr carved on church entranceways.

But why did Norwegian churchmen go along with this reinterpretation? It seems doubtful that they were compelled to adopt the Sigurðr figure. Yet, Sigurðr was apparently acceptable in the ecclesiastical setting. The church's use of this indigenous dragon slayer displays an acute understanding of popular pagan tradition and a willingness to recognize and reinterpret the similar ways in which the two religions conceived of the universe and its struggle for existence. In the process of redefinition, the Sigurðr story moved from its context within the old religious order and found a niche within the new one. As a successful and popular monster slayer in the service of the new order he was a symbolic threat to the old gods, themselves now viewed as monsters and demons.

In Norway, secular and church powers worked closely together well into the period of the building of stave churches. Beginning with the conversion in the first half of the eleventh century, high ecclesiastical officers resided permanently at the royal court. This

practice continued for almost a century and a half, until the creation, in 1152, of an independent metropolitan see at Niðaróss made the development of a more independent church possible. The decision to use Sigurðr as a symbol probably sprang from the close cooperation of church and king in the early period; it also made possible the application of a royal emblem in a manner that was acceptable both to native churchmen and to the independent-minded populace.

Politics aside, it is doubtful that the Sigurðr legend would have been used in church ornamentation unless it could be harmonized with the symbolic concepts of the contemporary period. Fortunately an extant document, "In dedicatione templi. sermo," sheds light on the symbolic way in which Norwegian clerics interpreted their wooden churches at the time they were being built. The "sermo" (preserved in the vellum manuscript AM 619 4°) has been edited for publication by Gustav Indrebø in Gamal norsk homiliebok.[11] Composed for the consecration of a stave church, it was probably written down in the Monkliv monastery in Bergen about 1200.

Descriptions of the building in the sermon show that the church structure itself was considered sacred and was understood to be the proper place for communion with the deity: "I kirkiu er setr satarfundr á milli guðs ok manna. ok verða þar allar bøner þægstar guði þær er vér biðium fyrir os....Þer eroð hæilact mystere guðs þes er byggvir i yðr."[12] The sermon also shows that not only the structure as a whole but its individual parts were recognized as symbolic entities having a significance far beyond their function: "Tveir kirkio-veggir merkia tvinnan lyð comen till einnar cristne. annan af gyðingum en annan af hæiðnum þioðum....Brost-þili er samtengir baða veggi i æinu husi merkir droten várn er samtengir tvinnan lyð i einni trv. ok er sialfr briost ok lif-scioldr cristni sinnar."[13]

Although the portal carvings are not mentioned in the sermon, the entryway is spoken of twice. The dyrr kirkiunnar, the doorway, is interpreted in light of its obvious role as the channel between the world of men and the sacred world: "Dyrr kirkiunnar merkia trv retta þa er os læiðir inn til almennilegrar cristni."[14] The hurð, the door itself, standing as it does at the point of discontinuity between the profane and sacred worlds, was understood to represent the spiritual defense of the interior. "Hurð fyrir durum merkir skynsama menn þa er raoustlega standa á mote villu-maonnum. ok byrgia þa fyr utan cristni guðs í kenningum sinum."[15] Unfortunately, none of these doors survives.

In medieval thought, most elements of everyday life pointed to a world beyond the visible; "the Middle Ages never forgot that all things would be absurd, if their meaning were exhausted in their function and their place in the phenomenal world."[16] Aware of the symbolic possibilities that each act or object possessed, the medieval religious man turned to qualitative resemblance as a means of acquiring deeper insight into divine truth.[17] In the similarity of qualities he saw a manifestation of the divine presence in all creation.

The essential feature of the Sigurðr legend was the dragon slaying. Because of his successful subduing of a greedy monster, Sigurðr became suitable, at least superficially, for reinterpretation within a Judeo-Christian context. The church was not compelled to adopt the Sigurðr material; clearly, it could reject whatever it found unsuitable in Norse tradition. Nevertheless, the carvings are testimony to the significance with which the Sigurðr legend came to be viewed. In the eleventh, twelfth, and even the thirteenth century,

religion in Norway was in transition. Tradition-bound and rural, the society was in the process of readjusting its religious and ethical allegiances within sight of the burial mounds of respected pagan ancestors.

Whatever its origin, the legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani had, by the eleventh century, become detached from an overt pagan religious connection. The mythic core of the story remained, involving as it does a treasure brought to man through the distress of the gods, the killing of a monster, the drinking of blood, and the acquisition of knowledge. These elements, however, were now part of a larger, more earthly tale about semihistoric events, especially the fall of the Burgundians in the fifth century. By late Viking times, Sigurðr had been transferred from myth into the realm of heroic legend. In the process, his tale lost any pagan ritual function that it may once have had, while retaining the abstract spiritual power inherent both in the act of slaying the dragon and in the person of the dragon slayer.

Born of an earthly mother, Sigurðr was set apart from other men but he was not a god. According to Völsunga saga, he was descended on the male side from a line of fabulous kings, deriving ultimately from Óðinn. The fertility of his family, the Völsungs, was the result of Óðinn's gift of a sacred apple to Sigurðr's ancestor Rerir. Although Sigurðr is understood as a historical personage in his role as brother-in-law to Gunnar, king of the Burgundians, nevertheless, even in the thirteenth-century Völsunga saga, he still participates in a more detached, mythic world, especially in the events surrounding the killing of Fáfnir. Sigurðr "lived in a world where the opposition of visible and invisible was not relevant, the mythical past. In this world dragons, dwarves, talking birds, and werewolves were part of

everyday experience."[18] Armed with a sacred sword, the hero Sigurðr displays a potency that comes from his ability to take strength from both the visible and the invisible worlds. The power that is Sigurðr's is apparent in the potential for destruction possessed by his opponent, the monster Fáfnir. The poem "Reginsmál" (prose following 14) says that Fáfnir "had a helm of terror which all kvikvendi [living things] feared."[19]

Sigurðr's killing of the dragon or serpent (ormr) was an act that transcended cultural differences. It paralleled the Judeo-Christian understanding of the devil-monster menace, and as such it was a culturally mutable symbol, one that was not repugnant to the early Norwegian church. In the two mythologies that directly influenced medieval Scandinavia, the Norse and the Judeo-Christian, the concept of necessary defense against monsters is fundamental. Symbolizing chaos in an archetypal sense, the monster is the antithesis of divinely inspired order. In Judeo-Christian tradition the dragon and the serpent represent Satan and the Devil,[20] themselves symbolic images of chaos. Cast from heaven, Satan is depicted in medieval art as the devouring monster who angrily destroys his victims.[21] The mouth of hell was typically represented in Romanesque art as the maw of a monstrous beast, and the evil power, appearing as a serpent, was the tempter of Adam and Eve.

Michael's renown as a dragon slayer was founded on scriptural authority. In the Book of Revelation (ch. 12), the archangel's intervention makes possible the regeneration of the cosmos. A dragon waits before the Virgin, ready to devour her child at its birth, thereby destroying the divine incarnation. All order hangs on Michael's defense of the divine child and his ability to beat back the

dragon. Cast onto the earth, the monster continues to fight, making the struggle against evil a constant reality for medieval man. Arising out of this biblical scenario, Michael appears in Christian mythology as God's champion, who casts the rebel angel Lucifer from heaven, and also as the herald of the Last Judgment. Prominent as Michael was in vanquishing a dragon, this type of victory was also attributed to a number of other saints, including Saint Margaret, Saint Martha, Saint George of Cappadocia, Saint Sylvester, and the Apostle Philip. Their cults represent a wide range of cultural diversity, and, in some instances the monster-slaying element may be traced to preconversion origins.

Similarly, in Norse mythology the preservation of the universe lay in the strength of the gods' defense against chaotic forces. The destiny of both the gods and man was bound to the conception of the eschatological battle, Ragnarökr. Óðinn and the gods were doomed to a heroic defeat by the monsters--one of whom, the Miðgarðsormr, was a monstrous serpent--and by the unleashed fury of nature. But this ultimate struggle lay in an indefinite future. Until the final battle, when all enemies would turn on them, the gods ably defended themselves and man. Again and again Þórr journeyed to Útgarðr to test his strength in opposing the giants. The second part of Snorri's Edda, "Skáldskaparmál,"[22] deals largely with the gods' ceaseless struggle against the giants. The stories of Þjazi (Skáldskaparmál 1), Hrungnir Skáldskaparmál 3), and Geirröðr (Skáldskaparmál 4) all end successfully for the gods. Yet the giants were not conceived of as being devoid of all higher qualities. As competitors of the gods within the invisible spiritual world, the giants were worthy opponents. Gerðr's beauty inspired Freyr ("For Skírnis");

Vafþruðnir's wisdom was almost a match for Óðinn ("Vafþrúðnismál); and Útgarða-Loki was clever enough to survive the anger of Þórr (Gylfaginning 44-47). Whatever the qualities that made the giants a match for the gods, the threat they represented was ever present. In the Eddic poem "Þrymskviða" (18) Loki reminds Þórr that without the magic hammer to use against the giants, there is no hope for Ásgarðr. In "Fafnismál" (29, 38), Sigurðr's opponents, the dragon and his brother the smith Reginn, are also called giants or jötnar; in defeating them, Sigurðr, too, is overcoming Norse representations of chaos.

For the rural population the stave church was the local symbol of the sacred. From the outside it was a reminder that divine order existed within the daily world of man. Inside, it was considered to be part of the divine order itself: "Sumr cristin lyðr er á himni með guði. en sumr er her i hæimi. en af þvi merkir sumt þat er i kirkiunni ér himin-rikis dyrð en sumt iarðlega cristni."[23] Since some of the congregants existed in heaven and were not seen as a separate but as an integral part of the spiritual universe, the church had a vital function as axis mundi.

The stave church, the axis mundi of a rural area, remained symbolically threatened even as Christian observance grew firmer. The old gods, the Æsir, the Vanir, and fertility spirits, were not eliminated but were sometimes negatively transformed into malevolent agents. They joined the ranks of the traditional Judeo-Christian demons, and as such, they were readily understood and in some instances worshiped.[24] In the face of powerful adversaries the Christian sanctuary required protection. The potential for misuse of the power that lay in the building's interior was impressive. Loss of

the center would destroy the source from which the new religion spread into the community. It would also break the link between the heavenly and earthly congregations.

In conclusion I return to the sermon, "In dedicatione templi," where the dyrr and the hurð are described as possessing a symbolic significance beyond their overt function in the visible world. The entrance was seen not only as the divinely appointed passageway leading to the sacred presence but also as the vulnerable spot where the spiritual defense of the sacred interior was positioned. The symbolism of the church doorway appears in the medieval Scandinavian custom regarding baptism, which was performed throughout Scandinavia at the threshold of the church. In this way an unclean spirit was not permitted to enter and endanger the area of the sacred. And it is precisely here, at the entranceway, that Sigurðr was carved as a symbolic protector of the church.

The use of Sigurðr on church portals displays a shrewd understanding by Norwegian leaders of how to employ cultural traditions. This hero's presence on church portals as symbolic guardian testifies to a willingness among the populace to recognize the similar ways in which the old and the new religions conceived of the universe and its struggle for existence. Not quite a saint, Sigurðr, by his act of dragon slaying, nevertheless served a wide variety of religious and secular needs in medieval Norway.

Notes

1. The building of stave churches in Norway ended with the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century. Of the perhaps 800 or more stave churches that were built, only thirty-two remain

standing.

2. For a listing of stave-church portals and other representations of the Sigurðr legend, see Martin Blindheim, Sigurds saga i middelalderens billedkunst, catalogue of an exhibition at the Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo, 1972-1973 (Oslo, 1972). Other relevant works are Henrik Schück, "Sigurdsristningar," in his Studier i nordisk litteratur- och religionshistoria, vol. 1 (Stockholm: Hugo Geber Förlag, 1904); Hilda R. Ellis (now Davidson), "Sigurd in the Art of the Viking Age," Antiquity 16 (1942): 216-236; Per Gjaerder, Norske pryd-dører fra middelalderen (Bergen: A. S. John Griegs Boktrykkeri, 1952), pp. 58-76; Emil Ploss, Siegfried-Sigurd, der Drachenkämpfer: Untersuchungen zur germanisch-deutschen Heldensage (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1966), pp. 79-121; and Sue Margeson, "The Völsung Legend in Medieval Art," in Medieval Iconography and Narrative: A Symposium, ed. Flemming G. Andersen, et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1980), pp. 183-211. The stave-church portals representing the Sigurðr legend are from Hylestad, Vegusdal, and Austad in Aust-Agder, Lardal in Vestfold, and Mael in Upper Telemark.

3. See for example, the brief discussion in Per Gjaerder, Norske pryd-dører fra middelalderen, pp. 247-248.

4. Aron Andersson, "St. Mikael i Haverö: ett rhenländskt arbete," Antikvariska studier, 5 (1953):81

5. Tue Gad, "Mikael," Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder, Vol. 11 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1966), col. 618.

6. Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en Mesta, 2 vols., ed. Óláfur

Halldórson, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ Ser. A 1-2 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1958-1961), p. 152ff. A somewhat similar passage is found in Njáls saga.

7. Neils Saxtorph, "Mikael: Danmark," Kulturhistorisk leksikon, Vol. 11, col. 624.

8. Bernt Lange, "Mikael: Norge," Kulturkistorisk leksikon, Vol. 11, col. 625.

9. Emil Ploss, Siegfried-Sigurd: Der Drachenkämpfer, p. 21

10. Peter Anker, The Art of Scandinavia (London and New York: P. Hamlyn, 1970), p. 389.

11. Gustav Indrebø, Gamal norsk homiliebok (Oslo: Jacob Dybwab, 1931), pp. 95-101.

12. Ibid., pp. 95-96.

13. Ibid., p. 96.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Johan Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), p. 201.

17. George Ferguson, Signs and Symbols in Christian Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 7-9.

18. Einar Haugen, "The Mythical Structure of the Ancient Scandinavians: Some Thoughts on Reading Dumézil," in To Honor Roman Jakobson: Essays on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday, 11 October 1966 (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), Vol. 2, p. 864.

19. This and all subsequent citations of the eddic poems are by stanza number as these appear in Gustav Neckel, ed., Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius, 4th ed. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter,

1962). I agree with Einar Haugen, "Mythical Structures," p. 865, that "men and animals, gods and giants are all included in the term."

20. Ferguson, Signs and Symbols, p. 16.

21. Ibid.

22. This and all subsequent citations of the prose edda of Snorri Sturluson are from Anne Holtsmark and Jón Helgason, eds., Snorri Sturluson Edda: Gylfaginning og Prosafortellingene av Skáldskaparmál (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 1968); chapter numbers are given as they appear in this edition.

23. Indrebø, Gamal norsk homiliebok, p. 96.

24. For example, "The riding host of the Æsir" lived on into modern times. In this popular belief, the old gods became a dangerous procession of ghosts who visited the earth at Christmastide.