

The Völund Stones present:

Weland the Smith

Retold by Hannah Kate Sackett

Consultant: Howard Williams

Overview

This project draws on a collection of early medieval artefacts and carvings in order to re-tell the story of Weland (or Völundr) the smith.

This retelling emphasises the complexity of the smith's identity including his cyborgian character as a transformer of things and a transformer of self. The project also draws attention to the monstrous, material and artefactual components inherited with Weland's identity as his story was adapted and distributed in the early medieval world.

This is achieved in comic-strip format, representing an original style of re-telling the story which aims to be widely comprehensible and engaging. The original idea, artwork and design is the work of archaeologist and artist Hannah Kate Sackett. Archaeologist Howard Williams provided suggestions and guidance on the re-telling's literary and material dimensions, relating to his on-going research on the *Past in its Place* project funding by the European Research Council.

Art of Weland

The Weland legend has been apprehended in art and artefacts. Most famously, on the early eighth-century whalebone Franks Casket, Weland is depicted in his smithy seducing the king's daughter who receives his gift of mead, juxtaposed and contrasted with the magi bringing gifts to the Christ-child. This is a scene all about gift-giving and models of kingship: good and bad.

The aeronautic 'cyborgian' character of Weland is emphasised in the lithic and metallic arts. A Viking Age mount from Uppåkra (Sweden) depicts Weland as a bird-man, bleeding from his wing by an arrow during his escape from his island. The Gotlandic picture-stones Ardre VIII and Alskog also appear to represent the tale of the smith's capture, killing of the king's sons revenge and aerial escape with a woman. Finally, the tenth-century cross-shafts from Leeds and Sherburn seem to articulate the Weland story in the context of commemorating secular patrons, in one instance (Leeds 1) it seems the cross might commemorate a female patron, Weland's aerial ascent juxtaposed against a portrait of a Bible-bearing *en-face* aristocratic lady. A recumbent (hogback) tomb from Bedale (Yorkshire) represent the bird-man motif and possibly other scenes relating to the Weland legend including the court of the king where he receives the gifts of Weland: his son's bodies re-made into treasures. In this context, Weland's story might pertain to the tomb as a perceptible dwelling for the dead.

The Problem

Archaeology has been slow to adopt alternative ways of visualising the historical and legendary/mythological dimensions of early medieval sites and material cultures (Williams 2009). The specific challenge of the Weland story comes from the historiographical tradition of reducing the narrative to a singular identity of Weland as a 'smith'. Instead, understanding the story requires a consideration of Weland's many

ambivalent, monstrous, violent and cyborgian dimensions. Upsetting bad kingship and wreaking havoc upon the social hierarchy through violence and rape, Weland is more than an artisan. Yet the specific challenge came from attempting to represent scenes and artefacts from the time period to avoid a sense of anachronism, while giving a sense of the different temporal and imaginary realms in which Weland inhabits, including Weland himself imagining the future receptions of his story within different artefacts and monuments.

Objectives

We hope this comic strip will offer a distinctive reading of the story of Weland that both foregrounds the landscapes and material cultures of the story itself but also the many different material and monumental arenas in which the Weland story was represented in the early medieval world.

Inspirations

The images for the comic strip draw upon and adapt representations of human figures and buildings from the Franks Casket and other features like trees and waves are inspired by early medieval rune-stones and picture-stones. Others have no direct early medieval parallel and are Sackett's original inventions, including the representation of Weland's swan-wife and King Niðhad.

Audience

We hope that the comic strip will be of use to those encountering the Weland story at all ages, from those in school to higher education students and academics, as well as the general public. We make no claim for this reading to be definitive but only distinctive and prompting reflection on the story's themes and material dimensions. It is also hoped that the re-telling complements Williams's research as well as being a stand-alone piece.

Future

We hope that this comic-strip will be widely utilised for the public, for students and teachers interested in the Middle Ages worldwide. We intend to publish it on our own blogs and discuss its wider significance in our public talks and academic research.

Bibliography

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