

Gotland's Picture Stones

Bearers of an Enigmatic Legacy

GOTLAND'S PICTURE STONES have long evoked people's fascination, whether this has been prompted by an interest in life in Scandinavia in the first millennium or an appreciation of the beauty of the stones. The Gotlandic picture stones offer glimpses into an enigmatic world, plentifully endowed with imagery, but they also arouse our curiosity. What was the purpose and significance of the picture stones in the world of their creators, and what underlying messages nestle beneath their imagery and broader context? As a step towards elucidating some of the points at issue and gaining an insight into current research, the Runic Research Group at the Swedish National Heritage Board, in cooperation with Gotland Museum, arranged an international interdisciplinary symposium in 2011, the first symposium ever to focus exclusively on Gotland's picture stones. The articles presented in this publication are based on the lectures delivered at that symposium.

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 Gotlands
Museum



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MICHAELA HELMBRECHT

“A Man’s World”. The Imagery of the Group C and D Picture Stones

*Man made the cars to take us over the road
Man made the trains to carry the heavy load
Man made electric light to take us out of the dark
Man made the boat for the water,
like Noah made the ark*

*This is a man’s world, this is a man’s world
But it wouldn’t be nothing, nothing
without a woman or a girl*

Betty Jean Newsome

THE VIKING PERIOD PICTURE STONES of Sune Lindquist’s Group C and D feature an abundance of narrative, scenic images. Despite the large number of stones, their iconographical meanings have in most cases not been established with certainty. This is partly due to the poor state of conservation of many stones, partly due to difficulties in connecting the images to written sources. The texts were written down some centuries later in Christian environments, and in spatially and culturally distant areas. Thus, they must be used with caution when interpreting the imagery on the Gotlandic stones. Still, we can assume that most images on the Group C and D picture stones represent specific, at their times well-known narrations, for example the Wayland legend, or mythological topics like Thor fishing the Midgard Serpent.

As far as we can tell (given the high percentage of unreadable stones) all Group C and D picture stones originally featured narrative pictures. Obviously, the Viking Period monuments “needed” the pictures. They were essential if the monuments were to fulfil their purpose as powerful communication media.

In this contribution, I will explore Viking Period gender roles by comparing the imagery on the Viking Period stones of Group C and D with one specific medieval text, Snorri Sturluson’s *Skáldskaparmál*. Based on this, I will compare the Gotlandic stones with contemporary imagery from other parts of Scandinavia and argue that they were monumental links to the past and to the domain of death.

Skáldskaparmál

Skáldskaparmál was written in the first half of the 13th century by Snorri Sturluson as one part of a major work which today is known as the Prose Edda.¹ Snorri’s aim was to preserve ancient knowledge that up to his days had been transmitted orally from generation to generation, and that was about to fall into oblivion since Christianity had come to be the dominant religion. *Skáldskaparmál* was to teach young poets – the skalds – the traditional mythological background necessary for good poetry.² Skaldic poems refer to and allude to mythological topics, and the more skilfully the poet combined mythological references and metaphors, the higher the artistic value of a poem was esteemed.

Male activities and attributes on Gotlandic picture stones.

Left:

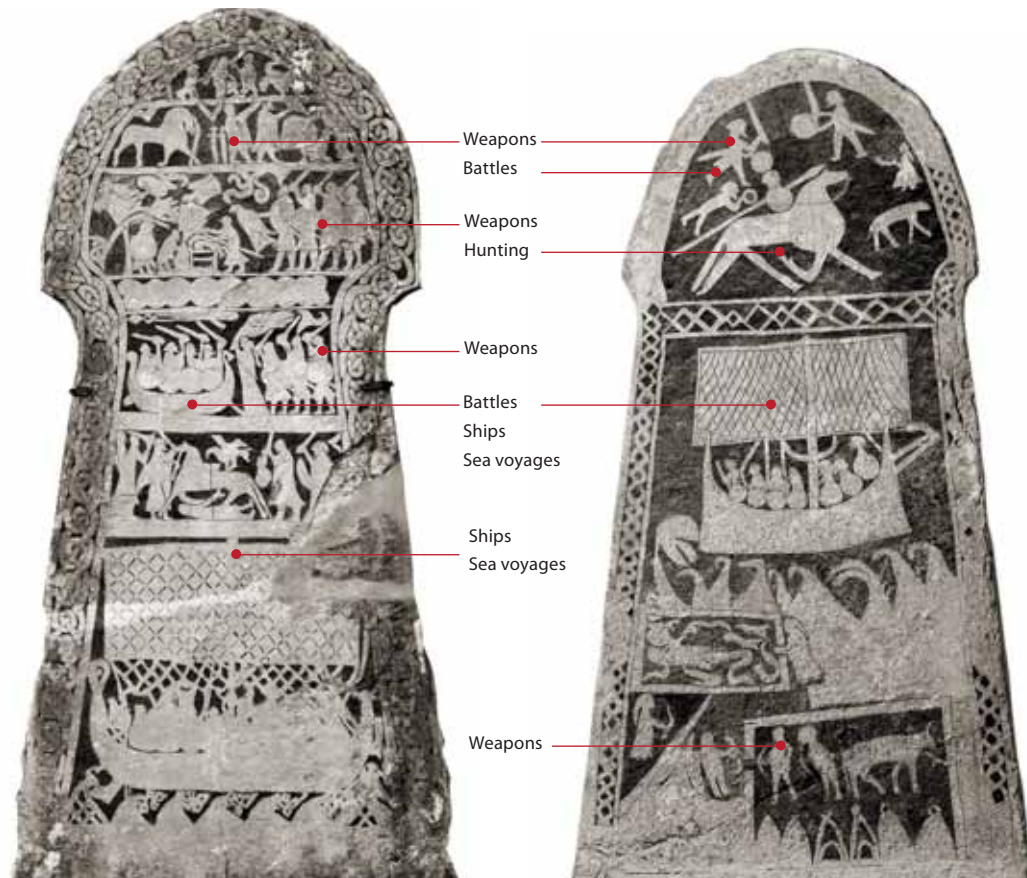
LÄRBRO STORA HAMMARS I.

Right:

KLINTE HUNNINGE I.

Photo by Raymond

Hejdström, GM. Layout-sketch by the author.



“A man’s world – but it wouldn’t be nothing without a woman”

In *Skáldskaparmál*’s chapter 31, where the poetic circumlocutions for men and women are listed, Snorri says: “How shall a man be referred to? He shall be referred to by his actions, what he gives or receives or does. He can also be referred to by his property, what he owns and also if he gives it away ... How shall he be referred to by these things? By calling him *achiever or performer of his expeditions or activities, of killings or voyages or huntings, or with weapons or ships* [my italics]. And because he is a trier of the weapons and doer of the killings, which is the same thing as achiever ... poets have ... made reference to killings or ships or wealth.”³

The actions and attributes mentioned by Snorri must have been regarded as typical, characteristic and even ideal

for men. A *kenning* like “tester of weapons” could only be understood as a synonym for a man if handling weapons was generally accepted as a typical activity for men.

Comparing this text to the imagery of Group C and D picture stones, we can see striking similarities. The male figures, often carrying weapons, are shown travelling, either by boat, or riding a horse, or fighting in battles or combats (see picture on previous page).

The comparison of *Skáldskaparmál* and the picture stones leads to similar results when it comes to the women: “A woman shall be referred to by all *female adornment, gold and jewels, ale or wine or other drink that she serves or gives, also by ale-vessels and by all those things that it is proper for her to do or provide. It is proper to refer to her by calling her dealer ... or consumer ... of what she hands out* [my italics]. And the reason a woman is referred to



Female activities and attributes on Gotlandic picture stones.
 Left: ARDRE KYRKA VIII. Photo by Bengt A Lundberg, SHM.
 Right: KLINTE HUNNINGE I. Photo by Raymond Hejdström, GM.
 Layout-sketch by the author.

by gemstones or beads is that in antiquity there was a female adornment that was called 'stone-chain' that they wore round their necks. Now it is made into a kenning, so that woman is now referred to in terms of stone and all words for stone. Woman is also referred to in terms of all Asyniur or valkyries or norns or *disir* [original italics]... It is also normal to refer to a woman by any of her activities or by her possession or descent."⁴

On the Group C and D picture stones, the female figures are shown standing or pacing slowly, well-clad (though no 'stone-chains' are visible), and sometimes carrying a drinking horn. Again, the imagery corresponds very well with Snorri's description of typical and ideal attributes and activities of women. These attributes and activities may even have been considered appropriate to distinguish between men and women, since they do not overlap.

When it comes to the gender identification of the figures on the Gotlandic picture stones, we obviously depend on the help of external sources such as archaeological finds and written sources. But it is also possible to investigate the gender representations and gender roles on the picture stones alone. In the 1990s, Eva-Marie Göransson analysed the imagery of a large number of Gotlandic picture stones.⁵ She came to the conclusion that men and women can generally be distinguished by a set of features, attributes and activities, which are mostly – though not always – exclusive for each gender. Male figures are generally bearded, carry weapons and sometimes helmets, whereas the women's body curvature is S-shaped, their hair is tied up in a bun and they wear a long, wide dress and sometimes carry a drinking horn. Not all figures can be attributed to one of these

two genders, though, which is partly due to their state of conservation and partly to seemingly contradictory features (see below).

According to Eva Marie Göransson, the female figures on the picture stones are generally shown as subordinate to the male figures. In total, more male than female figures occur, and they dominate the pictorial narrations. The women are almost always portrayed in some kind of connection with men, whereas male figures sometimes occur without the presence of women. Images with several women are extremely rare on the stones. It can be concluded that if women were depicted, they must have played an important role in the narration.

Although *Skáldskaparmál* and the picture stones imagery seem to correspond well with each other, we need to be cautious. As said above, the chronological, spatial and cultural distances between the Group C and D picture stones and *Skáldskaparmál* are enormous. Firstly, about 200 to 400 years passed between the erection of the stones and Snorri's life. Secondly, Iceland, where Snorri lived, and Gotland, where the picture stones are found, are located some 2,000 km from each other. Thirdly, the cultural changes that the conversion to Christianity in Scandinavia brought about must not be underestimated.

Taking these considerations into account, we can draw some conclusions. Both the Viking Period picture stones and *Skáldskaparmál* allude to mythological topics, but with different purposes, and thus in a different way. *Skáldskaparmál* can be regarded as a kind of medieval encyclopaedia. Snorri aimed at collecting as much mythological material as possible. Of course, we cannot be sure that Snorri did not deliberately exclude certain narrations – maybe because they did not fit his purposes or were considered not worth preserving. Many Viking Period narrations might have fallen into obscurity by the 13th century. The typical and ideal, gender-specific activities and attributes discussed above might already have been antiquated and obsolete at Snorri's time. But as has been said, the purpose of *Skáldskaparmál* was to prevent ancient know-

ledge from being consigned to oblivion – ancient knowledge that probably preceded the introduction of Christianity and that dates back to the Viking Period.

The old age of these conceptions is also indicated by the – much earlier – epic poem *Beowulf*.⁶ The poem is in Old English, but set in Scandinavia. It is preserved in one manuscript that was written down sometime between the 8th and the early 11th centuries AD. Its title is the name of the main hero, Beowulf. He comes to the help of Hroðgar, King of the Danes, whose mead hall has been under attack by a creature called Grendel. After Beowulf slays him, Grendel's mother attacks the hall and is then also defeated. Beowulf returns to Geatland in Sweden and becomes King of the Geats. Many years later, Beowulf defeats a dragon, but is fatally wounded in the battle. After his death, his followers bury him in a grave-mound.

In *Beowulf*, the men are also described as doers, as active, travelling and fighting. Their weapons are mentioned and described. The women in *Beowulf* are clad in beautiful, expensive garments, they wear adornments and gemstones and dispense alcoholic drinks.⁷

To sum up: The gender-specific, typical and ideal activities of men and women, as listed by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*, correspond very well to the imagery on the Viking Period picture stones. The male figures are shown in battle, travelling and horse-riding. The women, in turn, are well-clad, and they sometimes dispense drinks. Both the Gotlandic picture stones and *Skáldskaparmál* can teach us about common Viking Period gender roles. This seems to be confirmed by the Old English poem *Beowulf*.

This means that we cannot use attributes like drinking horns or weapons to identify the individuals on the picture stones: A drinking horn does not make a valkyrie, a spear does not make Odin – these attributes may just mark the figures as male or female. Drinking horns, weapons and ships may have been regarded as essential parts of the gender identity that also needed to be expressed in the image.

This does not mean, of course, that the pictures on stones can only be described in terms of generalized imagery with stereotyped gender roles. The Group C and D stones can fairly confidently be said to illustrate mythological or legendary narratives. We can conclude this by generalizing from the images that can be interpreted with great plausibility, e.g. the Wayland legend or Thor fishing the Midgard Serpent on the *ARDRE KYRKA VIII* stone.⁸ But we need additional indications to interpret the individual figures and link them to specific textual sources. Weapons, drinking horns and ships do not suffice.

The Picture Stones and Contemporaneous Imagery – A Comparison

The Gotlandic picture stones are quite different from other Scandinavian Viking Period image-bearers. Not only are their special shape and iconography limited to Gotland, but some pictorial motifs are also exclusive to the Gotlandic picture stones.

For example, the famous motif of a rider being welcomed by an (unarmed) woman with a drinking horn has only been found on the Gotlandic stones (see right and on previous pages). The motif has often been interpreted as a deceased warrior being welcomed to Valhalla by a valkyrie.⁹ In other parts of Scandinavia, the woman carries weapons, and sometimes even the rider is a woman. This is a well-known motif on pendants in Southern Scandinavia and the Viking settlements on the British Isles.¹⁰ How can we explain the differences? The armed figures on the pendants are plausibly interpreted as valkyries. Either valkyries were depicted unarmed on Gotland, or the Gotlandic women with drinking horns (or at least some) are not valkyries.

Ships and boats with travelling warriors are a very common pictorial motif on the Gotlandic stones (see right and on previous pages).¹¹ In other parts of Scandinavia, ships and boats appear mostly unmanned, and the depictions are of a later date than the Gotlandic stones.¹²



Above left: Pendant from Tissø, Denmark.
Photo by The National Museum, Copenhagen.

Above right: Pendant from Britain.
After Mills 2001, p. 56.

Bottom: The picture stone *GARDA BOTE*, Gotland.
Photo by the author.



The Tullstorp runestone, Scania.
Photo by Jacobsen, Moltke 1941, 253 No. 650.



The picture stone LÄRBRO TÄNGELGÅRDA IV from
Gotland. Photo by Raymond Hejdström, GM.

Some figures on the Gotlandic stones are ambiguous in terms of their gender (fig 6). They show traits of both men and women. Their body curvature is S-shaped and they wear long garments and carry drinking horns – features which would mark them as female. Yet, their hairstyles are male and many of them are bearded. Furthermore, their garments have characteristic long wide sleeves that are either typically male or female. So far these figures have only been identified on Gotlandic picture stones. Different suggestions have been put forward as to their identification. Are they priests? Or, in a Völsung perspective, Attila's Huns?¹³ Or do they represent a third gender?¹⁴ Sound arguments can be brought forward in favour of any of these interpretations. Which one is preferable depends – as regards any picture, for that matter – upon the reference material and interpretational perspective.¹⁵

The picture stone imagery is special and characteristic for Gotland, although there are formal similarities to contemporary images from Scandinavia and the British Isles. Many motifs on the Gotlandic stones only occur once or twice and have no close parallels, either on the Gotlandic stones, or on other contemporary image carriers. One example of such a singular motif is the row of women on the GARDA BOTE stone (see picture on previous page).

In the Vendel and Viking Period, the combination of pictorial motifs and the objects that bore them was not arbitrary. Most motifs were limited to specific object categories.¹⁶ This indicates that a given pictorial motif was considered to have specific functions for the object bearing the image and, in turn, that the image's function was closely linked to the object and its meaning. In the case of the picture stones, the images were connected to the stones' purpose as public monuments.

The Gotlandic Picture Stones as Monumental Links to the Past and the Domain of the Dead

In Viking Period Scandinavia, one important purpose of stone monuments was commemoration. The Gotlandic picture stones probably had some commemorative function, too. Although runic inscriptions are rare and often fragmentary, they follow the Swedish and Danish inscription patterns and commemorate deceased family members.¹⁷ Neither the Danish/Swedish stones nor the Gotlandic stones, however, were raised in juxtaposition with single burials. Most Swedish runestones were erected in proximity to cemeteries and roads.¹⁸ The places chosen for the picture stones seem to be slightly different. Karl Gustaf Mähl's analyses have shown that a large number of Group C and D picture stones were found close to burials or near Iron Age house remains that had already been abandoned in the Viking Period.¹⁹

As Anders Andrén²⁰ and Jörn Staecker²¹ have pointed out, some images on the Gotlandic picture stones depict objects that in other areas of Viking Period Scandinavia were used as grave-goods: ships, boats and carriages. On Gotland neither boat-graves nor wagon-burials are known. The pictures on the stones may thus be interpreted as different expressions of similar conceptions concerning death.

Some scholars think that the ships and horse-riders represent the dead warrior's journey to the after-life.²² The ship and the warrior can show deeds in the deceased's life while he was still alive, or they might equally be mythological.²³ Whether these interpretations are correct or not: ships and horses were exclusive means of transport and convey messages of honour and high status²⁴ – messages that were considered important in a commemorative context.

In 1970, Birgit Arrhenius suggested that the stones, due to their shape, could be understood as doors to other worlds.²⁵ In the 1980s Anders Andrén developed her thoughts further.²⁶ He argued that the stones were erected on the border of *inmark*, the cultivated or

otherwise used land belonging to the farm, and *utmark*, areas outside the *inmark* including wild nature. The stones not only marked the physical border, but also had symbolic meanings. In a pre-Christian concept of the world, the world was structured according to the idea that the human world and the settlements were a small-scale mirror-image of the dualistic structure of the cosmos: Midgard, where humans lived, and Utgard, where the giants dwelled. So *inmark* corresponded to Midgard, whereas *utmark* corresponded to Utgard. According to Andrén, the picture stones signified and visualized the border where the human world, the sphere of order and life, met wilderness, chaos, the forces of nature and giants, and death.

One basic problem with this interpretation is that the original placing of most stones is unknown. The majority were found in secondary contexts. Often they were used as building material, mostly in churches. But even these contexts may strengthen the argument that the stones were connected to the past, and to death. Some picture stones were re-used in burial constructions. They were probably not only considered as handy building material, but had, judging from their careful placement, symbolic value.²⁷

In 2007, Alexander Andreeff conducted excavations at the site of the picture stone FRÖJEL STENSTUGU – “Herrstenen” – in Fröjel Parish, one of the few stones that remain standing in their original location.²⁸ Close to the picture stone, numerous objects were unearthed that are typically associated with burials, for example beads, fibulae, arrowheads and burnt human bones. The finds are the remains of at least two individuals. The picture stone may have been erected on the graves, or the soil with the bones and grave goods may have been brought to the picture stone site from a cemetery. The distance to the nearest known cemetery is about 1.5 km. The raisers of the picture stone connected the stone physically and symbolically to the deceased and to the past.

The picture stones linked the past and the present, and the world of the living to the domain of the dead. Large and clearly visible, they structured the cultural landscape in a peculiar way. For this purpose, pictorial motifs from mythology or well-known heroic legends were chosen, events that were thought to have taken place in a distant past.

In some places charcoal, potsherds and animal bones were found near the picture stones.²⁹ It is under debate whether these features involved ritual meals, food offerings³⁰, or even cremations³¹. Whatever the case, a continuous communication between the living and the dead seems to have been maintained by frequenting the stones for ritual activities. The pictures on the stones helped the people gathering at the picture stone sites to recall and re-verbalise traditional heroic and mythological stories, that is, important knowledge that had to be retold from generation to generation in order not to be forgotten. In these ancient stories, men and women were ascribed specific gender roles. Men were expected to be active warriors, boat-travellers, horse-riders and fighters, whereas it was considered appropriate, typical and ideal for women to wear beautiful garments and jewellery, and to dispense drinks. Still, the women's role was not as passive as it may seem at first sight. The women fulfilled an equally important role in maintaining the balance of power in society³², for example by serving drinks at feasts and honouring the guests, or by instigating their male relatives to take revenge for insults. They have been called "weavers of peace" and "weavers of war".³³ So it might indeed have been *a man's world* - but *it wouldn't have been nothing without a woman or a girl* either, like in the famous song. Telling the traditional stories may even have served to instruct the younger generation in the appropriate behaviour as man or woman. The traditional gender roles were also used in skaldic poetry to distinguish between men and women, and they survived at least until the 11th century AD.

The use of pictures for mythological and heroic stories on stone monuments connected to the common past and to the domain of the dead, is unique and typical for Viking Period Gotland. The picture stones can thus be interpreted as surviving material expressions of the Gotlanders' cultural identity.

Notes

1. On Skáldskaparmál in general, see Faulkes 1998.
2. Faulkes 1998, pp. xxxvii–xxxix.
3. Faulkes (ed.) 1987, p. 94; for the original Old Norse text see Faulkes (ed.) 1998, p. 40.
4. Faulkes (ed.) 1987, p. 94; for the original Old Norse text see Faulkes (ed.) 1998, p. 40.
5. Göransson 1999.
6. Mitchell & Robinson (eds.) 1998.
7. Damico 1984; Enright 1996.
8. Buisson 1976; Böttger-Niedenzu 1982; Staecker 2006.
9. For a research overview and critical discussions, see Oehrl 2006, pp. 22–26, and Helmbrecht 2011, pp. 65–71.
10. Helmbrecht 2011, pp. 65–71.
11. For detailed illustrations see Nylén, Lamm 2003, pp. 106–135.
12. Ellmers 1986; Varenius 1992; Helmbrecht 2011, pp. 83–86.
13. Jörn Staecker, pers. comm.
14. Göransson 1999, pp. 40, 69; Andreeff 2001; Helmbrecht 2011, pp. 239–240.
15. cf Hallgárd Christensen 1997; Staecker 2004 pp. 39.
16. Helmbrecht 2011, pp. 244–355.
17. e. g. G 109, ALSKOG OLLAIFS: "in memory of Hróaldr, father ..."; G 110 (ALSKOG TJÄNGVIDE): ", ... raised the stone in memory of Hjörulfr/ Jörulfr, his brother ..." Wessén & Jansson 1962, p. 190 and 195 resp.
18. Klos 2009.
19. Máhl 1990a, pp. 21–23; Helmbrecht 2011 pp. 276–279.
20. Andrén 1991 pp. 24–30.
21. Staecker 2002 p. 17.
22. Nylén & Lamm 2003, pp. 68–70; Oehrl 2006, pp. 23–25.
23. Cf Böttger-Niedenzu 1982, pp. 16–18 for an overview of different interpretations.
24. Andreeff 2001; Fuglesang 2005.
25. Arrhenius 1970.
26. Andrén 1989.
27. Althin 1967; Burström 1996a; Andreeff 2001. Cf the contributions by Per Widerström and Martin Rundkvist in this volume.
28. Sandhammar 2007; Nilsson 2007.
29. Lindqvist 1942, pp. 83–86; Lindqvist 1964, pp. 52–53; Helmbrecht 2011 pp. 276–281.
30. Lindqvist 1964, pp. 49–53.
31. Thunmark-Nylén 2006, p. 507.
32. Enright 1996.
33. Eshleman 2000.

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