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The pictures on the greater Jelling stone

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The greater Jelling stone, with an informative runic inscription mentioning King Harald Blåtand and the conversion of the Danes, is at the core of a large and important archaeological site of the late tenth century situated in the centre of the Danish peninsula. The stone is thought to have been positioned immediately to the south of some sort of church, and between the two mounds ever since that period. The great boulder has three main surfaces, all closely covered by carving. The first face has most of the inscription, which, unusually for runes, is arranged in parallel lines as for a Latin text. The second face shows an animal entwined with a snake, and the third face has the earliest image in Scandinavia of Christ – these two 'pictures' can be compared to a diptych since they share a similar border and are connected by a 'hinge'. Identifying a diptych implies that the two faces must have compatible not antagonistic subjects. It is suggested that the design and carving was controlled by a missionary party from Ottonian Germany, and that in choosing the motifs they used various sources, mostly in the writings of Pope Gregory the Great. Following these early sources, the animal and snake can be interpreted as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. It is likely that Christ is shown ascending to heaven in triumph, so that the two pictures show the Trinity united in celebration of the redemption of mankind.

Keywords: Jelling; conversion; Gregory the Great; Trinity; Ascension; interlace; lion; snake

Historical context

The greater Jelling stone, thought to have been erected by King Harald Blåtand *c.* 965, is a national icon for Denmark, and has a correspondingly impressive literature (http://www.velkommenihistorien.dk/Sider/litteratur1.html). In its prime, the stone probably stood alone in front of some kind of church, close to where it is now, a massive boulder which is taller than any man (Figure 1). The lesser rune-stone of Harald's father King Gorm was reset near it *c*. 1630, but came from an unknown position, perhaps as remote as the prow of the stone ship (Holst *et al.* 2013: Figure 3).

A recent publication on King Harald's runestone giving an overview of current opinion is that by Else Roesdahl; it is an update of an earlier paper (Roesdahl *et al.* 1999, Roesdahl 2013). Excavations of the surrounding landscape from 2006 onwards have greatly enlarged our knowledge of the contemporary physical context (Holst *et al.* 2013). The Jelling stone has never been better photographed than by Erik Moltke in 1973 after he had painstakingly examined all three sides and given the background a wash of lamp-black in water; he had the advantage of free access to the stone and also mellow sunlight (Moltke 1974, Figures 3, 6, 7 and 8; Roesdahl 2013, Figures 3, 4). In the following 40 years, the stone deteriorated as individual crystals separated themselves from the block under the influence of acid rain and frost, and the carvings were also daubed with paint, so that it was decided to erect the present shelter. Moltke's photographs have, in a way, become the Jelling Stone for modern times, a venerable relic we can hold in our hands, contemplate and attempt to understand.

Signe Horn Fuglesang insists that 'the Jelling crucifixion must be seen against [a] European background … which has its beginning in Late Antiquity and continues throughout the Middle Ages' (Fuglesang 1981, pp. 87–89, 1986, p. 207). Else Roesdahl describes the well-known images on Faces A, B and C as being three pictures, laid out in the manner of three pages of an illuminated manuscript (Roesdahl 2013, pp. 867–870). Egon Wamers has examined the style of the carvings, linking it to Ottonian manuscripts (Wamers 2001). In making these comparisons, these authors are turning our attention away from the immediate Nordic surroundings and local precursors, and towards the wider European context, to the circumstances of the conversion of the Danes by the Christian church as established in Ottonian Germany (Wamers 2001, pp. 132–4, 156–8; Gelting 2007, pp. 80–81). The present paper follows that lead, believing that the three pictures can only be understood if they are considered as sourced in the new religion.

The inscription on the stone tells us that it was set up to commemorate the parents of King Harald and that this Harald 'made the Danes Christian'. It seems to be accepted that the whole inscription was planned and carved at the same time, not in two stages (Moltke 1974, pp. 187–93; Roesdahl 2013, pp. 866–7). The stone thus

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Figure 1. The three sides of the greater Jelling Stone. Face A (left) contains the main part of the rune text which begins: 'Harald king commanded to be made monuments/memorials these after Gorm father his and after Thyre mother his that Harald who for himself won Denmark'. Face B (centre) contains a large animal entwined with a snake, and the text continues 'all and Norway'. Face C (right) shows a haloed Christ with his arms spread, and the text ends with 'and the Danes made Christian'. Literal translation from Roesdahl 2013, p. 866. (Photo: National Museum of Denmark, R. Fortuna).

also commemorates the conversion of the Danes, that is, it records a radical change of Danish society from one condition to another. How long the conversion took and when it might have been considered complete are not questions of concern here: the inscription tells us that there was an identifiable moment of change when 'the Danes' turned from heathens into believers. The inscription implies that the king and his closest followers, and their followers in turn, would accept a new god, and that a Christian hierarchy would replace the officiants of the various pagan cults (Sanmark 2002, pp. 81–2).

In modern discussions of the stone and its pictures, the missionary partner has often been overlooked for the sake of tracing Nordic parallels, yet the new culture is literally at the very core of the majestic site at Jelling; the proto-church found by excavation (Holst *et al.* 2013, 480ff. and Figure 6) and the inscription on the runestone itself represent something radically new. The surrounding mounds, ship setting, long houses and palisade are works of the established local culture, some coeval with the great runestone. Together, these remains form the climax of a short-lived royal ritual site that, by chance or intention, never grew into a town. Available archaeological data reveal 'no certain structural traces earlier than the 10th century AD… [this was] an area dominated by heather' (Holst *et al.* 2013, p. 486); when King Harald died *c*. 987, Adam of Bremen says he was buried in Roskilde.

The carvings themselves combine two cultures, as has been remarked before. The inscription shows this most clearly, since it comprises Nordic runes written in parallel horizontal lines as for Latin script. The imagery likewise has not been traced to one universally agreed source, but is given a variety of stylistic derivations according to the expertise of each commentator. Our difficulty in giving labels is a mark of the success of the makers of the carvings. The melding of styles is characteristic of the carvings, and the fusion is deliberate and skilful: perhaps it is a mark of a peaceful conversion that the carvings have both freedom and unity.

Working on an unshaped boulder was a traditional skill, but this particular design was mapped out with intense forethought to pack the stone to its limit, as if there was some purpose for every detail or perhaps the artist had dense manuscript ornament in mind: later engraved stones allowed randomly placed motifs or blank spaces, as on Ramsundsberget, Sö 101 (Sweden) or subsequent Christian memorials in Denmark (Fuglesang 2005, Bertelsen *et al.* 2006). Egon Wamers has illustrated the influence of Ottonian manuscript styles in the interlacing stems and leaves which appear on all three sides of the stone; he believes that a native, Nordic, artist combined those foreign styles with his own local style (Wamers 2001, pp. 135–8). Similarly, the animal and snake on the Jelling stone could be seen as imported Christian symbols given Nordic dress; the Christ figure is treated in a manner without close parallel in Christian art.

The man whose specialism was to carve stone in the Nordic manner was an artist in whom a fusion of the two cultures seems already in being. Given both the general and detailed mixture of styles on all three faces, and his success in fusing them, it is possible that the workman was a convert and had been a believer for some time. Christianity was already known in Denmark, for example, over a century before, King Harald Klak had been baptised while an exile in Mainz; the diocese of Hamburg had had an interest in the conversion of the Nordic countries since the ninth century; Christian burials of the ninth century have been found at Ribe (Søvsø 2010); seaborne trade and the land boundary with the Empire could have

contributed to an easy interchange in times of peace and would have allowed men to become familiar with the new religion; the contemporary chronicler Widukind of Corvey (died after 973) suggested that some Danes already worshipped Christ at the time of king Harald Bluetooth's baptism.

The motifs will be interpreted below as entirely Christian and from a clerical source; indeed this is suggested immediately by the stone having the first appearance of a Christ figure in Scandinavian art, as well as the three 'pages' that resemble a manuscript. King Harald no doubt supplied the wording of the inscription; the organisers took care to choose motifs accessible to the local, Danish, converts, not only through their artistic style, but also in their choice of basic forms (Moltke 1974, p. 187); animals and snakes appear in the art of both cultures. This care to engage the sympathetic interest of the Danes also appears in the decision to spread the imagery over an unshaped granite boulder and in the use of runes for the inscription: elsewhere in Christian Europe, squared stone and Latin text would have been obligatory – perhaps the superfluous lines below the runes might suggest a plinth. As for the two main pictures, they contrast with the court or monastic art of the Empire, which is predominantly elaborate, Christ-centred and figural (Mayr-Harting 1999, I, pp. 57–118): on the stone there are very few components, and these include symbolic animals. These examples show that it was clearly appreciated that sculpture for the pagan Danes needed 'user-friendly' imagery, so we may assume that the pictures themselves likely have a simple focussed message similarly attuned to the needs of converts.

These sensitive organisational decisions were almost certainly made by clerics of the Ottonian church. It cannot be known for certain if the organiser or designer was also the sculptor, but considering the range of skills required, it seems very likely that they would have been different individuals. The designer, the man who chose the message and the motifs to represent it, is key, but his work is of the kind which leaves little obvious trace. Lise Bertelsen found rare proof that more than a patron and a sculptor were needed to produce similar medieval works when she noted that a Christian runestone at Vaksala church, Sweden, was 'jointly signed by Igulfast, who gave advice, and Öpir, who carved' (Bertelsen *et al.* 2006, caption to Figure 1; see also Källström 2007, pp. 184ff).

A focussed message

The selected boulder had three sides, and the triquetra is 'the stone's favourite motif' according to Moltke (1974, p. 193). Teresa Paroli appreciated Moltke's 'acute flashes of intuition', for example, his noticing the importance of the triquetras; she remarked on the frequency of threes and expanded on the cosmic and numerological references to the Trinity that might be found in the ornamentation throughout the stone – though it is not certain that all the corner ornaments form triquetras as she asserted (Paroli 1987, pp. 402, 403). Yet despite such insights, the fact remains that, in this and other explorations of the meaning of the pictures, the most obvious three-some, the three-ness of the three characters in the two pictures, is not mentioned. Instead, the animal and snake are seen as opposed to Christ, a supposition which frequently gives rise to a narrative of final struggle and paganism vanquished. At first sight, this idea seems relevant to the contemporary situation, but it can be taken too far. Paroli (1987, p. 403), for example, went on to suggest that the animal 'is suffocated by the evil which it itself exudes': if this were true, it would surely raise questions as to what sort of Christianity the Danes were supposed to be adopting!

A suggestion has been made by Fuglesang that the animal and snake represent the earthly power of Harald Gormsson as expressed in that part of the runic text which is on Face B, just as Christ represents the spiritual victory described in the text on Face C (Fuglesang 1986, p. 189). She hypothesises that the animal and snake are a reference to Widukind's account of the victory of the Saxons over the Thuringians in 531 and that they thus make Harald a victor in the line of such great heroes (Fuglesang 1986, pp. 190, 207). Widukind says that the (then still pagan) Saxons went into battle carrying standards of *leonis atque draconis et desuper aquilae volantis insignatum effigie*. There is a long tradition of the Christian church being pictured as an army led by Christ, for example, a sixth century hymn for Passiontide begins *vexilla regis prodeunt*…, that is, it mentions the banners of the king, or Christ, advancing. After this, there are scattered references to banners and other items being used by the Church in liturgical processions, among which is one reference linked to a significant centre of reform in the tenth century, Gorze Abbey (Mayr-Harting 1999, I, pp. 83, 86). It is known that Gorze-related customs included the monks processing with a candlestick in the shape of a serpent or dragon (Klukas 1983, p. 169), and this practice may reasonably have been familiar to the contemporary Widukind. The widely used but later Sarum customs mention Rogation and Ascension processions carrying, for example, *prius leo, deinde minora uexilla per ordinem; ultimo loco draco* – the order of the three items varies according to the occasion (Frere 1969, pp. I, 173–5). It is now suggested that, when Widukind wrote his account more than 400 years after the battle, he gave these items to the Saxon army so that, by prolepsis, the Saxons might represent the power of the Christian god, and perhaps a Roman army, overcoming pagans. On the Jelling stone, the animal and snake could be powerful Christian symbols such as were carried in contemporary liturgical processions, these uses stemming from a common iconography.

It is Face B of the Jelling stone that gives rise to the greatest amount of interpretative speculation, but on what basis? Have the natures of the animal and the snake yet been correctly identified? The inscription ends on Face C, saying Harald 'made the Danes Christian', which must mean that he and they were baptised. The dramatic figure of Christ above those words is impressive, but more than 'christening' was involved: baptism was always given 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit', as commanded in the gospel (Matthew 28:19). Further, however much the instruction of baptism candidates had been reduced since the days of Augustine of Hippo, the converts must, in some way, have publicly assented to a summary of their new belief before receiving baptism. This summary was most likely in the form of the Apostles' Creed; in that creed there are statements about all three persons of the Trinity. It is known that, within some 20 years, King Harald built or founded a church in Roskilde in honour of the Holy Trinity (Paroli 1987, p. 411). The Danes were to believe not in three separate gods, but in a threefold Unity; it is suggested that this concept was physically put before them in the triquetras and in the three-sided stone itself. Knowledge of the Trinity was an essential doctrine that was unavoidable in the process of conversion; consequently, to show only Christ when commemorating this conversion or baptism would have been far from ideal, and it is hard to imagine the Ottonian church making such an error, however, Christ-centred its elite manuscripts were. In this instance, it would have been correct to picture the Three and One.

We have next to consider what sources might have supplied the missionaries with the imagery used for the stone, and there is one name of outstanding importance. Gregory the Great (monk, administrator, pope and saint; died 604) was influential throughout the Middle Ages, but it seems that he surpassed even Augustine of Hippo in his importance to the Ottonians. The best known medieval representation of Gregory the Great was painted *c*. 984 at Trier, Figure 2 (Mayr-Harting 1999, I, Figure 13; Beckwith 1969, ill. 83). The painting shows Gregory receiving words of inspiration from a dove (to be understood as the Holy Spirit); this is observed by his secretary who is waiting to take dictation. The elaborate semi-realist portrait was painted within some 20 years of the carving of the Jelling stone and demonstrates the depth of interest in the saint at that time. Henry Mayr-Harting describes Gregory's *Moralia in Job* as 'one of the most treasured texts in Ottonian culture' and says that it 'was treated in a manner approximating to the Bible itself' (Mayr-Harting 1999, I, 18; II, 209); moreover, within the empire, the diocese of Cologne seems to have had a particularly marked interest in Gregory's works (Mayr-Harting 1999, II, 118–9), which may be significant since King Harald is thought to have been baptised by Poppo, or Folkmar, who was probably in Denmark as an envoy on behalf of Bruno, archbishop of Cologne. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the designers and organisers of the Jelling stone project referred to the works of Gregory the Great when composing the pictures to accompany the king's inscription.

Gregory had discussed the Trinity in his most famous text, *Moralia in Job*. There he describes how David, Isaiah and Paul had all written in terms of the three-ness of God, but he pointed out that each writer had immediately added some words to show that God was One (*Moralia* xxix.70). Somewhat out of context, Gregory went on to reveal the literal fact that the Church 'preaches knowledge of the Trinity to infidels', whereas church members need to be taught about the four virtues (prudence, fortitude, temperance and justice; *Moralia* xxix.72). This passage has not been seized on by historians of the conversion period, perhaps because it is embedded in an abstruse allegorical interpretation of astronomical configurations, yet it has been mentioned a few times. Kahl (1978, p. 48, note 78) was interested in the relevance of the passage to those already in the Church and had no space to discuss the missionary aspect (he did, however, correctly identify the circumpolar constellation with seven stars, Ursa Major, the Great Bear, whereas Gregory's text has come down to us mentioning the single star Arcturus). Henrik von Achen picked out Gregory's emphasis on the ability of the Church to tune her teaching to her audience, that is, to use accessible imagery to get the message over (von Achen 1995); this attribute of the Jelling sculpture has already been mentioned. Markus (2001, pp. 33–4) was interested in Gregory's notion of *infideles* in a society nominally Christian. It is now suggested that the Ottonians, reading this passage in *Moralia*, would have taken it at face value: pagans must be taught about the Trinity.

The remainder of this article sets out evidence for an interpretation of the three characters on the two 'illuminated' pages as representing the three persons of the Trinity, and it will refer again to the *Moralia in Job*.

Christ

The famous wooden Gerokreuz in Cologne cathedral is thought to date from *c*. 975 and shows Christ dying on the Cross (Mayr-Harting 1999, I, 133–5, 137–8; Figure 82). At Jelling, there is no cross nor is the body distressed, so the carving must illustrate some other aspect of Christ than his earthly crucifixion. Christ wears a knee-length skirt and his arms are scored with the transverse folds characteristic of medieval sleeves; he is wearing a short tunic. There are numerous crucifixion illustrations, both earlier and Ottonian, in which Christ wears a long robe, but a better comparison for this short tunic is with the symbolic crucifixion in an Ottonian manuscript of *c*. 1020, Figure 3 (Beckwith 1969, p. 116; Mayr-Harting 1999, I, pl. XVIII;

Figure 2. Pope Gregory and his secretary. Frontispiece to a collection of the pope's letters. Source: Stadtbibliothek/Stadtarchiv Trier; Hs 171a Thronender Gregor; Photo, Anja Runkel.

Figure 3. The symbolic crucifixion. Christ wears items symbolic of his role and is flanked by personifications of Church and Synagogue. The *Uta Codex;* (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 13601), fol. 3v. Reproduced by permission.

Cohen 2000, pl. 4). Both that figure and the one on the stone are wearing clothing suitable for an active man such as a workman, traveller or soldier. In the illumination, Christ's robe is wine-red, he is at work treading grapes to make wine (Isaiah 63:1; John 17:4, 19:30), while the implication of the crown is that Christ is in command; the stole indicates his function as priest, that is, he intercedes with his Father for mankind. The Christ on the Jelling stone is not shown crucified in the literal sense. The figure's widely spread arms allude to the crucifixion, but a cross only occurs in the halo, where it is radiant. The figure is symbolic of some other state, after the Crucifixion.

The feet are not like those of a crucifix figure on near-contemporary metal pendants, in which the feet are of large size and turned sideways (Sanmark 2002, Figures 3 and 4); on the contrary, on the stone the feet are small in comparison with the hands. Further, the artist has used a natural ledge in the stone to show the feet projecting forwards in a normal standing position. One analytical drawing even marks transverse lines across the ankles, that is, Christ may have been shown wearing boots (Wamers 2001, Figure 1, after Moltke and Gabriel); a photograph (in Willemsen 2004, p. 53) additionally suggests gaiters, or bindings, worn on the legs. Unfortunately, because of the present state of the surface and restrictions on access, it cannot be known if such transverse incised lines ever existed or might remain to be studied. The relevance of these features of the clothing is discussed in the next paragraph.

Paroli defined the figure as Christ '*triumphans*' (1987, p. 406), and it is further suggested by Wamers that the carving shows Christ as if crucified on the Tree of Life but at the same time triumphant, anticipating the Resurrection and Ascension (Wamers 2001, p. 147). These are satisfactory interpretations in that they accord with the atmosphere of victory which the liveliness of the surroundings engender, but Christ is surrounded by at least four separate motifs, not one united tree-like structure. The lively surroundings, and the details of the clothing and posture, would all be appropriate if Face C depicted Christ ascending after his Resurrection. When, at the last supper, Christ had spoken to his disciples about leaving them, he described his departure, that is, his death and return to Heaven, as a journey (John 14:2–4); this metaphor would account for his wearing boots and gaiters, if such had existed, and the short tunic is suitable for a workman or a traveller. The posture with arms extended is certainly that of crucifixion, but Christ holds himself upright. There is nothing under his feet, while his fingertips on both sides overlap the cable border, adding to the perception of the figure floating freely, or rising, in space.

His hands show no certain sign of nail-holes now, but those might have been painted if not actually bored; tenth century Ascensions, on an Irish cross and in the Sacramentary of Warmundus, show Christ's hands raised to display the wounds as trophies of victory (Harbison 1992, Figures 915, 916); similarly, the posture of crucifixion held by an obviously living Christ would also indicate victory. The various separate motifs around him are composed of foliage, interlacing strands and triquetras; these are positive symbols and therefore cannot be confining or restraining him: it would be more appropriate to say that they garland him. He is ascending victorious, one metaphor certainly in the mind of Christian artists being that of a Roman triumph (2 Corinthians 2:14). The irregularities of spacing and shape of the various foliate shoots on the Jelling stone enliven the experience of looking at the sculpture and enhance the symbolism of irrepressible life which surrounds the figure: Christ is ascending as Lord and eternal life-giver (Ephesians 4:8).

The patterns accompanying Christ

The active patterns of the interlacing on Face C do not readily bring to mind any particular physical object, though they might suggest Christ has already risen into a spiritual or heavenly environment, above the clouds and well beyond the sight of the disciples on the Mount of Olives. Foliage in Christian art is a symbol of new life and had been so from the earliest times; for Gregory the Great, for example, 'green-ness' is a metaphor for everlasting life (*Moralia* xii. 5–8). All over the stone, interlace strands sprout with shoots or leaves at their free ends, and randomly elsewhere. This interlace does not just provide the stems necessary for foliage, it seems to be the dominant form, with leaves as spasmodic additions. In Ottonian manuscript art, the addition of ornament to interlacing is often regular, balanced and even symmetrical (Wamers 2001, Figures 4, 13, 14), but Nordic and Insular artists exercised even more freedom and had been far more creative in their uses of interlace.

The triquetra is a favourable sign, an interlace pattern which is an aniconic reference to the Trinity (Reuterswärd 1986, II, 58–60; Paroli 1987, pp. 402–6). Patrik Reuterswärd notes that triquetras, although primarily to be associated with the Trinity, can sometimes, like other cosmic symbols, represent stars 'when the purpose is to render intelligible a celestial realm imbued with God' (Reuterswärd 1986, III, 115), so perhaps they might also have something of the nature of stars here. Both the sculptor and the designer seem to have been familiar with Insular interlace, perhaps through Ottonian sources, perhaps directly. We barely understand the significance interlace patterns had for the artists who used them, but we can appreciate that the patterns were a powerful tool in their hands, most of all in the famous 'carpet pages' of the Book of Kells or the Lindisfarne Gospels. The eye is drawn into the page and tempted to follow the course of the strands; perhaps we try to trace the shape of one

animal between its head and even one of its feet – but eventually the chase has to be given up, the pattern has superior power, moves faster and more surely than the human eye. Perhaps it was this very chase, the weaving up and down, spinning round and round, that was the important quality of interlace – it enacted 'life' – in particular, it could have represented the energy of eternal life.

In Insular manuscripts, the triquetra was by no means always the perfectly regular, finite or closed, geometric unit that it became later. For example, there is a triquetra in the eighth century Book of Kells on the page with the Virgin and Child (fol. 7v), by her right shoulder (Figure 4). It is a loop attached to her chair; the strand from which it is made is continuous with other interlace behind the chair, and only this section of it is coloured bright yellow. In the sensitive pattern-making of this period, three loops close together were enough to suggest a triquetra. There are four, perhaps six, such units around Christ on the Jelling stone, and only one is a closed loop without additions, the others are contrived out of the trailing stems, and some are not immediately recognisable: look for groups of three spaces. In fol. 7v of the Book of Kells, the irregular triquetra might have suggested the hidden-ness of the three-fold god, or his presence in humble places, or the constant attendance of angelic spirits on the Christ-child; all these three, or more. Perhaps on the Jelling stone, the knots in the interlace are to suggest the excitement of creation at the implications of Christ's resurrection (Romans 8:19–21), or perhaps they represent the angels gathering, amazed to see Christ as a man, in his ascent (Isaiah 63:1).

The visual tricks with the triquetras and the random shoots of foliage make lively surroundings for the Christ-figure, in accord with the message of the upright figure itself. The pair of triquetras beside Christ's feet are closed loops; those at his head are closed but connected by the long strand that loops round his arms and across his body. In a standard Ascension, two or more angels lift a mandorla containing Christ; it is possible to imagine that the strand looping round the arms is supporting and lifting him – but it would, of course, be going too far to say that the two upper interlacements are the equivalent of those two conventional angels. Interlace is more subtle than that.

The least distinct (or most active?) of the triquetras are at either end of a transverse strand woven straight across the circle and behind his body. The circle at the centre could have had multiple functions – it may have suggested the eternity to which Christ returns, or perhaps it represented the sphere of the cosmos of which he is Lord, or indicated the One-ness of God to balance the triquetras with their insistence on the Trinity. In Ottonian art, Christ generally ascends not standing but enthroned: the Sacramentary of Warmundus, a manuscript of *c*.

Figure 4. Detail from The Book of Kells, (Dublin, Trinity College Library, 58), fol. 7v. Reproduced by permission of Durham University Library Special Collections, SC+10638.

969–1002, shows him seated on the rainbow (Harbison 1992, Figure 916); in an ivory panel from Magdeburg, of *c*. 962–963, Christ is seated on a circle which is a victor's laurel wreath, with his feet on the rainbow (Fillitz 2001, p. 31). Perhaps the circle and the strand passing through it hint at some such cosmic throne. Wamers (2001, p. 146) also relates the circle to examples in Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts.

Christ was a victor, he had won a battle over Death and had raided the city of Hell to release mankind. The Church taught that he did not ascend for himself alone, but gave mankind the chance to follow him to an after-life in heaven. One cannot help recalling counsel given to the pagan king Edwin of Northumbria in 627: 'if this new teaching has brought any more-certain knowledge [of what went before this life or of what comes after it], it seems only right that we should follow it' (Bede II.13 trans. 1955). The Ottonians would have been familiar with that quotation, as the Venerable Bede was another of their favourite authors. The Ascension was thus a most suitable subject to put before converts, and consequently Egon Wamers can say, 'the promise of salvation and Paradise was the central message of the Christian church for the pagan peoples' (Wamers 1993, p. 38). Christ's victorious Ascension gave the believer access to Paradise, it was the most attractive reward to present to converts; parallels might well have been made with the actions of a victorious Viking war-lord giving gold to his followers. Illustrating the Ascension on the Jelling stone accords with the statement of Gregory the Great on 'preaching the Trinity to infidels', because Christ is returning to heaven to be 'reunited' with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The animal and snake opposite Christ

This is 'the first occurrence in Scandinavia of this combination of animal and snake' (Fuglesang 1986, p. 188; Roesdahl 2013, p. 868), which might be a hint that they, like the Christ figure, are Christian symbols. It has often been assumed that the two animals are in conflict, either with each other or with Christ, but there is no need to see any battle at all. The boldness of the animal and the gyrations of the snake could express the vitality of the two creatures, while their intimate combination could demonstrate their fundamental association. Note that the foliage on this 'page' is not in isolated pieces as before, but it comes from the animals themselves; one piece only from the snake, but the animal has foliage emerging from head, mouth and tail. To continue with the earlier reasoning about these sprigs of foliage, the animal and the snake are shown as sources of life.

Faces B and C, Figure 5, have been likened to the opening of a book and have several times been illustrated as a pair (Moltke 1974, Figures 1 and 11; Roesdahl 2013, Figure 5 and 6); Fuglesang sees them equally as carriers of meaning (Fuglesang 1986, p. 189); the two faces have also been described as a 'kind of triptych' (Pedersen *et al.* 2006, p. 306). Indeed, a helpful comparison would perhaps be with a diptych, a small personal icon of rectangular shape; these have two leaves or 'pages' joined by one or two hinges. They were probably most often made of wood, though ivory ones have survived better. When closed, a diptych was easily carried in pocket or bag; when open to show its painted interior, it could stand without other support on prayer desk, niche or altar. It is the sort of item a travelling cleric would be likely to have

Figure 5. A view of Faces B and C together. (Photo: R. Wood).

with him, and the novelty of its painted images would attract attention when opened in the company of unbelievers. In 597, for example, the Roman missionary sent by Pope Gregory to convert England, Augustine, went to meet the pagan king of Kent with a procession of monks following a silver cross and carrying 'the likeness of our Lord and Saviour painted on a board' (Bede, I.25, trans. 1955). Small painted pictures on a diptych might have been useful in similar circumstances in Denmark in the late tenth century; they would have been more safely carried and passed round than an illuminated manuscript. It is not suggested that the subjects of the carvings are copied from an actual diptych, but that the form would have been very familiar to the designer, and perhaps to his audience.

A diptych model for Faces B and C is suggested by the treatment of the borders. Face A is the face most resembling a page of a manuscript; here the interlace borders the text, not the edge of the stone, and there was something vaguely like an initial clustered at the top. However, on Faces B and C, there are borders around the edges of the stone, and these borders are identical. The two faces are isolated from each other by a reflex angle, which is approximately 250° (Wimmer 1895, p. 18): with their matching frames they become unified and we are impelled to consider them together (Figure 6). On the ridge between the two faces are not two distinct lines of loose cable pattern as at their outer edges, but a tighter and generally symmetrical double cable pattern; additionally, a pair of transverse bindings at top and bottom of this pattern tie the two borders together (Figure 7). The feature is not intermittent as if imitating the stitching of a manuscript opening; it is compact like a hinge, as for a diptych. The distinction is suggestive, because, compared with the great majority of manuscript openings, the facing images of a diptych are certain to be positively related, largely because they are subjects selected for private prayer and contemplation; they are intended to generate worship or inner peace (Beckwith 1969, pp. 114–5, Figure 97; Nees 2002, ill. 83). It would be impossible to conceive of a diptych which, when shut, enclosed anything antagonistic with the victorious Lord, as would be the case if Face B of the Jelling stone depicted any kind of battle. The subjects on Faces B and C cannot be opposed (good against evil;

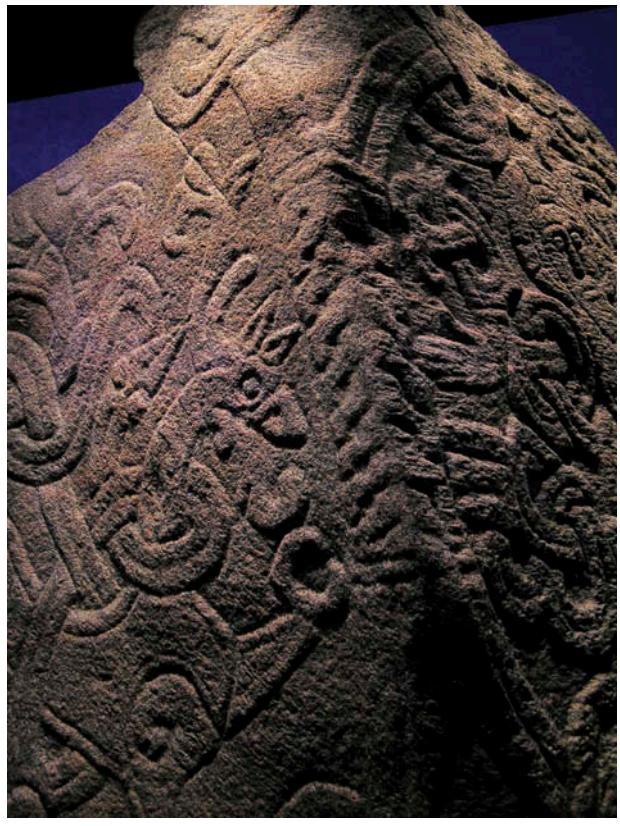

Figure 7. The ridge between Faces B and C showing the present state of the postulated hinge. (Photo: R. Wood).

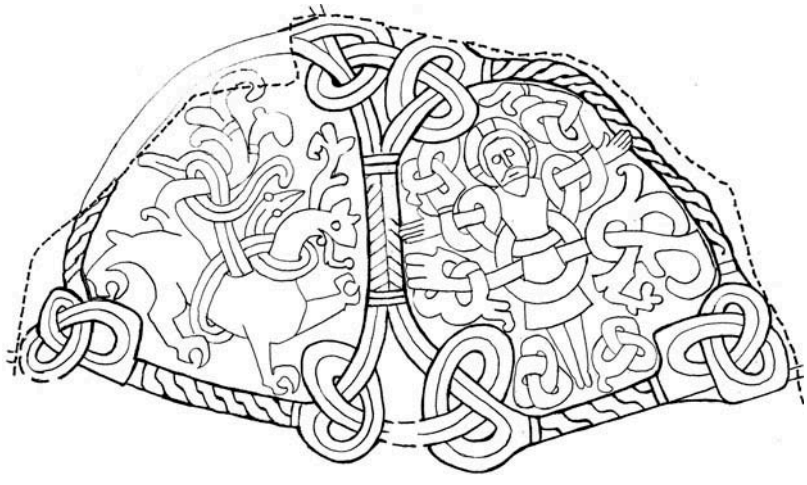

Figure 6. Diagram showing Faces B and C of the greater Jelling stone as a diptych.

Figure 8. The emperor Charles the Bald sees a vision of the worship of the Lamb of God in heaven. Codex Aureus of St Emmeram (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14000), fols. 5v and 6r. Reproduced by permission.

new religion against old) and, in an Ottonian scheme, they are unlikely to represent the earthly power of Harald on a par with the spiritual power of Christ. If Faces B and C form a diptych, their subjects must be compatible, of an equal intensity and status.

A few specialised manuscript openings survive, which work in a somewhat similar way to a diptych. One example is in a Carolingian manuscript made in 870 for the emperor Charles the Bald, Figure 8 (Mütherich and Gaehde 1997, pls. 37, 38, pp. 84, 85; Nees 2002, Figure 101). Folio 5v shows the emperor seated in state under a canopy. Opposite, on folio 6r, is a vision of the Lamb acclaimed by 'the four and twenty elders' as described in Revelation 4:10–11. As compositions, there is no visual correspondence in these two illuminations, but as pictures of royal courts, the comparison makes a point: the emperor must turn himself to look to the right, he must acknowledge the higher power and, metaphorically, remove his crown too. 'The last two lines of the verses under the Adoration miniature affirm that Charles views the revelation of the Lamb, praying to live with it in eternity' (Mütherich and Gaehde 1997, p. 108). As if to enact this prayer, shutting the book brings the head of the emperor against the single large star below the Lamb.

Another significant pairing of pages is in the *Uta Codex*. The mystic crucifixion already mentioned (Figure 3) faces a depiction of St Erhard at an altar (Beckwith 1969, pl. 97, 116–117; Mayr-Harting 1999, I, pl. XVIII and ill. 76; Cohen 2000, pls. 4, 5). Cohen says that 'the Erhard page (fol. 4r) shows the celebration of the Mass and the facing folio (fol. 3v) represents the historical grounding of that activity'. Being an Ottonian manuscript of the highest quality, there are further elaborate textual links within and between the two pages (Cohen 2000, pp. 78, 80, 81). The subjects on Faces B and C of the Jelling stone are relatively simple compared to those on the illuminations described, which involve complex interrelationships of a learned nature, for the sculpture on this monument was designed for converts, but once again we are driven to think Face B holds a positive Christian message. The animal and the snake must, in some way, be positively related to the crucified, risen and glorified Christ.

The animal as God the Father

The animal has been described cautiously by Moltke (1974) and others as 'the great beast' and by Wamers (2001) as a quadruped; Fuglesang (1986, pp. 188–9) says it has also been called a wolf and a griffin, but she concludes it is a lion. The animal can certainly safely be called a lion because it has powerful claws and there are the regular curls of a mane down its neck; it also has the

proud stance and strong chest which is appropriate for the king of beasts.

Gregory the Great says that a lion can represent – among other things – Christ (*Moralia* xxx.66), but as Christ is already pictured on Face C, the preferred reading is that the lion represents God the Father, the All-Mighty [*omnipotens*]. Isidore of Seville (died 636) records several prevalent notions about the lion: that for the Greeks and Romans, the lion was thought of as a king and that its strength shows in its chest, forehead and tail [*virtus eorem in pectore; firmitas in frons et cauda indicat*]. Isidore also records the story that the father-lion breathes on its cub to give it life three days after it is born (Lindsay 1957, vol. 2, XII.II.3; 4; 6); this fable was seen as a reference to Christ's Resurrection. The animal on Face B might be described as a strong lion with a tongue or breath made of foliage – life – and it can reasonably be interpreted following Isidore, as representing God the Father. The image could have been used to connect the resurrection of Christ to the promised raising of believers (1 Corinthians 6:14).

The snake as God the Holy Spirit

The snake, looping round the neck, body and tail of the lion, forms an open triquetra, the largest and boldest one on the stone; it is alert and active, even muscular, and its eyes could be understood to show its intelligence and wisdom; these qualities would be more obvious than any threat. Once the triquetra has been identified, this snake can easily be read as a 'good' character. Bertelsen sees the head and the tip of the snake as completing a cross (Bertelsen *et al.* 2006, pp. 38–9), but considering the frequency of triquetras on the stone, this was probably not intentional: first, because, if it represents the Holy Spirit it does not represent Christ, and second, it is suggested that the snake must have its head in this position, away from the three loops and near the right side of the 'page', because both it and the lion are looking towards Christ.

A snake with its head seen from above and showing both eyes was a form which had been very common in Britain and Ireland in earlier centuries in illuminated manuscripts and on Christian monuments; the patterns of multiple snakes found in such places are discussed in a note at the end of this article. The large snake on Face B of the Jelling stone has that ancient form with two eyes, but it is being suggested now that this one is distinctive and represents God the Holy Spirit.

At the last supper, Jesus had introduced the Holy Spirit to his disciples as one who would come to them when he had left them and gone on his 'journey'; the Spirit would remind them of what he had taught them (John 16:13–15). In *Moralia* v.50, Gregory the Great describes his personal experience of the coming of inspiration, those 'hidden' or silent words from God that elevate the mind and make it desire eternal things. Such inspiration, he says, is the utterance of the Holy Spirit, and this hidden voice is the Paraclete (the advocate or comforter) promised by Jesus (John 14:16,17). Short though it is, this passage would have been important to medieval readers, because it gave such intimate knowledge of the saint's own experience.

Gregory does not explicitly compare the Spirit to a snake but, when he tries to describe his experience of heavenly inspiration, his language includes terms that suggest he had a snake in mind. For example, the words of inspiration are heard as an almost inaudible whisper [*susurrus*] (*Moralia* v.51), so perhaps as faint as the hissing of a snake, or its rustling movement. Inspiration arrives through mere chinks [*rimas*] in the mind (*Moralia* v.51), so is perhaps like a snake slipping through fissures or cracks among rocks. 'In a moment and in secret' [*raptim et occulte*], the ear of the heart receives the divine whisper, that is, the words come and vanish as swiftly, as mysteriously and with as little sound, as a snake (*Moralia* v.51). The Spirit 'insinuates itself into the ears of the heart [*in aurem cordis insinuat*]… the mind cannot understand by what openings this invisible power flows into it, in what ways it comes to, or recedes from, it' (*Moralia* xxvii.41); this could describe his marvelling at the winding, rapid but limbless movements of a snake. Gregory found the words of the Spirit hard to catch and hard to pin down. But why did he not name the snake openly, when he names so many other creatures used in his metaphors and similes?

In the Roman empire, snakes had had a range of functions, from being kept as pets or put on exhibition as curiosities, to being believed to attend the spirits of the dead, and figuring in shrines in private houses and in the mystery cults (Toynbee 1973, pp. 223–236). In the late sixth century, there were still pagan practices and beliefs current in many regions under Gregory's oversight, and these were a constant problem for him (Markus 1997, pp. 80–82). In *c.* 601, Gregory wrote a letter to bishop Desiderius of Vienne in Gaul who 'had opened a school for his clergy in which the course of instruction was the usual one, which included the classics' (Conte and Solodow 1994, p. 718). Gregory was disturbed by this and wrote to Desiderius, saying that 'in one mouth praises of Christ do not harmonize with praises of Jupiter… how wicked it is for a bishop to recite poetry that is not even suitable for a religious layman… do not allow your heart to be defiled by the blasphemies of wicked writers…' (Martyn 2004, III, p. 777, letter 11.34). The preceding letter is to Gregory's notary in Sicily, who was having trouble with 'wizards and soothsayers'. In such an atmosphere, Gregory himself could not name the snake as his model.

The cited passages on inspiration are not the only places in Gregory's *Moralia* where he made lengthy circumlocutions to avoid naming a creature connected to

pagan Roman beliefs. There are at least two more instances where Gregory had in mind a creature from pagan myth because it provided a useful image for his exposition. The centaur, a licentious beast, can be detected under the name of 'the rider of the horseman' in *Moralia* xxx.42, where it symbolises Christ incarnate [*deus-homo*]. Again, Gregory seems to be thinking of the mermaid, the seducer of sailors, when he writes of a creature with 'two garments' (*Moralia* Preface ch.20; Bk.xxxv.25), she symbolises the Church [*Ecclesia*], or an individual female believer, in the afterlife (Wood 2010, pp. 31–37). The snake, understandably, was never popular as a symbol of the Holy Spirit; the dove is mentioned in the gospel (Matthew 3:16) and is much more often used. In portraits of Gregory the Great himself, it is a dove that whispers to him, approaching his ears or mouth (Figure 2; Zarnecki 1972, ill. 9); the dove is pictured even though a bird does not fit Gregory's own descriptions of the experience of receiving inspiration which have been quoted above.

On the Jelling stone, the Father and the Holy Spirit face the ascending Christ; they move towards him as if they are expecting his imminent arrival or are welcoming his return to heaven. Faces B and C together embodied the necessary doctrinal statements about the Trinity and also, in showing a moment of high triumph, they provided a suitably festive and attractive introductory image for converts. After that, it remained for the newly established Danish church to make provision for the new Christians to learn the four virtues and, hopefully, to progress through the three stages of a believer's life (Gregory the Great, *Moralia* xxiv. 25–31).

A final note: crowds of snakes

The pages of insular manuscripts were surely not laboured over for the sake of vain empty patterns. They are a context which is only suitable for 'good' creatures; the two-eyed snakes, and the animals and birds, which embroider such pages cannot all be evil or meaningless. Two-eyed snakes swarm in orderly patterns on Pictish Christian crosses, and on similar Anglo-Saxon monuments, many of which stood in graveyards and had a memorial function. Discussing the snakes on a late ninth to tenth century English monument, Jim Lang says 'it would hardly be complimentary iconography for the deceased' to think that the snakes' movement or proximity to the cross or the dead had any hellish or antagonist significance (Lang *et al.* 2002, p. 186; illus. 692). In a similar vein, Bertelsen, commenting on Late Viking Age picture-runestones describes the serpents on them as being 'humble and on friendly terms with the cross' (Bertelsen *et al.* 2006, p. 45). These observations suggest the existence of a positive interpretation for multiple snakes in medieval Christian art. However, it is a difficult problem, and Fuglesang (1986, p. 185, n.5) considered that snakes are so common in the Viking period as a purely ornamental motif [*rein ornamentales Motiv*] that it is questionable whether any iconological conclusions could be justified.

As has been said above, snakes were generally experienced as harmful and the snake was therefore not often used as a positive symbol. However, among all the many negative associations and meanings for snakes, the medieval bestiaries carried forward one further useful idea from pagan belief: the snake that shed its skin and emerged 'new' was an indication of an after-life (Toynbee 1973, pp. 234–5; Wheatcroft 1999, pp. 143–5). The many snakes on the graveyard monuments just mentioned, also those on picture-runestones which are also memorials to the dead (Fuglesang 1986, Figures. 15–19) could therefore represent those many who rejoice in eternal life because of the Cross. The same is possible with the snakes – and other animals – on the carpet-pages too. The activity of all these creatures certainly expresses an amazing vitality beyond what is known on earth. With regard to the Jelling stone, it is possible that what has been identified as the head of a snake in the broken interlace at the top of Face A (Moltke 1974, Figure 3) belonged to a snake representing one who had 'shed his skin' and was now in the foliage of Paradise: if so, the convert was being encouraged to think of his own future life.

That the snakes on later picture-runestones contain runes or letters is likely to be due to the opportunistic presence of the two parallel lines of the snake's body; with those lines available there was no need to write anywhere else. There was an artistic tradition of emphasising the integrity of a snake's body by some simple pattern – on the Jelling stone it is done by a medial line – and this would have encouraged the placing of the runes. The messages written in the snakes seem mostly to be between man and man (Bertelsen *et al.* 2006, Zilmer *et al.* 2006), like the inscription on the Jelling stone: serpent-like waving scrolls carry words in illuminated manuscripts but these are usually scriptural texts, that is, words from God. Two symbolic uses of the snake have been encountered in this article: as representing the Holy Spirit and as representing those living the new life in heaven. Later, the snake came to represent a carrier of messages from God to man, whispering at his ears in much the same way that the Holy Spirit spoke to St Gregory.

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