

Franks Casket. The right side

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The starting point will be the careful examination of Franks Casket by Alfred Becker ¹. I have some comments on the basis of my own studies of Germanic religion, especially the divine twins ².



Becker realized, that the right side consists in three settings. In the first one we see a warrior, probably the same kind of person who the casket was made for. He is standing in front of a goddess, who is sitting on a hill. The goddess has birdwings like a valkyrie and seems to tell the warrior about his death. In her hands she holds a living branch with leaves, symbolising her power over life. My supplement is an explanation of the snake. The snake winds around the nose of the goddess and reaches out and points with its tongue to the spearhead. This snake is here used as a symbol of invisible spiritual power, which is common in Germanic symbolism. The goddess here seems to say that the warrior will have a heroic death from the spear.

In the second setting we see a floating horse. Becker correctly says that this horse has the same function as the horse seen on tombstones on Gotland from the eighth century, that is to bring the dead soul to the world of the dead. On top of the horse we see the runic inscription *RISKI*, probably meaning "the swift one". Odin's deathhorse on the Gotlandstones had a similar name *Sleipnir*, meaning "the slippery one". Between the legs of the horse we see two triple knots, similar to knots seen on the Gotlandstones. The knot is probably a symbol for a free flying spirit. Beside the horse

flies a bird, and similar birds are seen on Gotlandstones. The bird is a valkyrie, who shows the soul the way to fly.

There are two trees with roots below the horse, that is on the right side of the horse, and two trees above the horse, that is on the left side of the horse. The horse is floating in a wood. At the bottom of the setting is a runic inscription: WUDU, meaning wood. Here I will point out, that Freya had a residence called Fensalir, meaning "moor-hall" and Folkvangr, meaning "warriors field". The dead warriors were kept in the fen and after some time they might be born again. Freya is the nordic goddess of birth and death, and she is also the mistress of the nine valkyrie.

The horse is welcomed by person with long hair and necklase, probably the goddess of the world of death. She is offering the arriving soul a drink of life from a chalice. A similar situation is seen on Gotlandstones, where a female person offers the visitor a drink from a horn. The goddess on the casket has a stick in her hand and with the stick she points to the runic inscription: BITA. I don't follow Beckers interpretation of this word. The meaning is "bite, mouthfull", because the same word might be used for eating as well as for drinking.

Under the horses head we see a burial mound. In the earth lies a body, wrapped up without visible arms and legs. This is probably the body of the deceived warrior. In front of the burial mound is seen many quadrangles. I will interpret them as tomb-stones in a graveyard.

The third setting shows three hooded persons. Two of them are holding the cowl of the third one, and leading him on the way. The person in the middle has no mouth in contrast to the other two. Becker correctly says, that the person in the middle is the soul of the deceased warrior. The two guiding persons however have not been explained. They are the divine twins, and I have to comment on them.

The divine twins are the most important gods in the pagan germanic culture next to the Great Goddess, Mother Earth. The documentation for this statement are the archaeological finds with pictures. Unfortunately the germanic tribes had tradition for cutting in wood and not in stone. Therefore most of the pictures and runic inscriptions are lost. Nevertheless the remaining objects of wood and particular of metal shows, that most of the picturesymbols are the divine twins.²

The rich shipgrave in Sutton Hoe have examples of the divine twins. King Redwald died 628 and had a pagan funeral here. On his purse we see a man flanked by two mythical dogs, who whisper in his ears. This means that the divine twins are guiding the king. On his helmet is a picture of two warriors dancing with their weapons and twin-snakes on their head. This shows a ritual dance in honour of the divine twins.

In the Sutton Hoe grav are also found remains of a pair of drinking horns. The pair of drinking horns are found in almost every germanic chief grave. This is because the divine twins were called in, and adored with a drinking ritual. The golden horns from Gallehus in South Jyland from ca. 400 AD are an example of such ritual horns. Their decorations show the divine twins in many different forms: dolphins, dogs, warriors or horned humans. The longer horn shows how the divine twins in the shape of a double snake guides a human being in many situations of his life. The horn has a crypted inscription, where the double snake says: "I am immortal, I guide you"³

Some of the names of the Germanic divine twins can be found. Tacitus about AD 100 reports that they are called Alchi, and this word means "protectors". Tacitus also indirectly tells that their names were Ing and Hermund. Ing means "breeder" or "young". A tribe, the Angles, took their name after Ing, and the tribr name gave name to their new land, England. Hermund means "high protector". Another tribe, the Hermundures took their name after him. The names of the two twins reflect their characters. Ing guides the generation and growth of all living creatures, even the sun. He dies in the night and regenerates in the morning. Hermund protects the end of life of all living creatures. He cares for the harvest of plants, fishing and hunting and help human beings through the underworld. He is a healer. In the Nordic mythology the names of the divine twins were Frey and Njord. The name Frey means "vigorous" and has approximately the same meaning as Ing. The name Njord means "gracious" not far from the meaning of Hermund.

Many Germanic tribes regarded twins to be their ancestors. They believed that the divine twins had taken abode in a pair of human beings. This is the case for the mythical twins, Hengest and Horsa, supposed to be the first Anglo-Saxons that arrived in England AD 440. In Christian times the divine twins take the shape of saints or angels. One of the most popular saint twins in the Catholic Church was Cosmas and Damian, regarded as physicians. In pictures from the eighth century you sometimes see Christ flanked by two angels or by two birds. Here I will only mention one more example of the importance of the divine twins. Many Vikings had a dragonhead in both sterns. Since the divine twins are reported for helping men at sea, there should be no doubt, that these dragons are symbols of the divine twins.

Now I will come to the runic inscription. The inscription on the right side differs from the other inscriptions on the casket in that respect, that all the vowels are replaced by meaningless symbols. Becker correctly explains that this is due to the magical purpose of the pictures and inscriptions. The front of the casket has the theme to gain wealth: The story of smith Weyland and the story of three magicians. The top has the theme protection of the wealth. The left side shows the myth of Romulus and Remus and other divine twins. The theme is here protection of man away from home. The back side shows how Titus conquered the Jews. This story will bring the owner of the casket inspiration for victory, good luck and fame. The theme of the right is death and afterlife. The owner should have a glorious death and an afterlife in a world of light. However these wishes should only be effective in time of death. They are hidden in order not to harm the living beings.

When the vowels are determined from the context, the inscription is:

Hörhos sitath on Har**m**bærga
Agl? drigith swa hiri Ærtæ gisgraf
Sarden Sorga and Sæfa torna

The letters with alliterations are here underlined. They are always in accented syllables. The poem has two accentuations in the first line, two in the second line and three in the third line. This metre is known as ljodahattr in Norse poetry. The three lines clearly relate to the three settings. The accentuated rune in each line has a magical meaning.

In the first line we have the rune H, which means "strike or fight", and relates to the glorious and violent death of the warrior. The word Har**m**bærga means "harmful hill" and we see the valkyrie sitting on that hill. Very often a battle took place on a hill, and this particular hill is harmful to the

warrior, because he is killed here. The last part of the word Hörhos is "os". Original os or as was the name of the gods Odin, Thor and their company, but later it just meant "god". Oswy was king of Northumbria 642-670. His name means "dedicated to God". A village in Northumberland is called Osmotherley, which means "Godsmothers houses".

Concerning the name of the valkyrie-goddess, Hörh, I have some ideas. Pictures of a bird-goddess transporting a human face is found on king Redwalds shield in Sutton Hoe. Similar pictures from the seventh century are found i North Jytland and in Skåne.² The goddess Hör is mentioned in nordic mythology. In North Jytland we have place names like Hörsted, Hörstum and Hörningh. In Skåne we have Höör, Hörby and Herrljunga. Near Sutton Hoe we have Harwich. From Saxo we know, that Ivar Vidfadme, son of the king of Skåne, went home from Northumbria around 670 AD. He and his company was probably mercenaries. They tavelled with ships with sails and sailed through Limfjorden in North Jytland. The word Hör means "high", and Hörh seems to be the high flying aspect of the great goddess, Mother Earth. Hör is the old crane, who fetches the dead soul. The first line can be transated: "the High Goddess sits on the harmful hill"

In the second line the accented rune is the open vocal A, which means "invisible spirit" or "speech". This line relates to the travelling of the dead spirit in the second setting. The first word, Agl? is mysterious because a rune is missing, and my interpretation is different from Beckers. The word is probably related to agile, and this meaning fits wery well to the other names mentioned before of the mythical floating horse. This horse is female. The name Ærtaæ is related to gothic airtha, meaning "soil" or "earth". Ærtaæ is a name of Mother Earth. The second line can be translated: "The swift one draws so as her(the swift one) Earthmother did prescribe".

In the third line the accented rune is S, which means "sunlight", "warmth" or "energy". Becker has explained that the first word Sarden means "wounding" coming from a swedish verb "særan". In danish we have a similar verb "såre". Concerning the last two accentuated words, my theory is different from Beckers. The two words must be names of the divine twins. Sorga means "mourn", but it allso means "take care of" or "look after", and this corresponds to the energetic twin. Sæfa means "to save", and this corresponds to the accepting twin, "the saviour". The third line can be translated: "Wounding, the caretaker and the saviour will turn (remowe)."

Finally I will try to identify the last symbols in the third setting. Two snakes seems to have a firm bite in the cowl of the deceised. Snakes are very common in pictures of the underworld, and the two snakes are well known companions of Hermes, who allso guides in the underworld. The deceised seem to have a perl or a juwel on his breast. This is a common symbol of the immortal soul. Behind one of the twins we see a flowercross. This symbol means the heavenly light, and it is used in pagan as well as christian iconography. Here it means that the twins will bring the deceised out of the darkness of the underworld and into a new life in daylight. The symbol behind the other twin is very hard to identify, but it would fit very well to the context if it was some kind of medical instrument like a sickle for operation.

¹ Becker, A.: *Franks Casket. Zu den Bildern und Inschriften des Runenkästchens von Auzon*. Regensburg 1973.

² Rasmussen, F.: *Germanerne og vikingerne – myter og magt*. ISBN 8798626817. Denmark 2004

³ Rasmussen, F.: *Guldhornenes tydning*. ISBN 8788742539. Denmark 1990