

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE BOAR AT ST. NICHOLAS' CHURCH, IPSWICH

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In the course of research it sometimes happens that embryonic ideas are rejected out of hand on the assumption that they are too unlikely to merit pursuit. Such a situation occurred when work was in progress on my article on 'Early Sculpture from St. Nicholas' Church, Ipswich', which appeared in Volume XXXI, pp. 172 ff. of these *Proceedings*. And, as fate would have it, it was on this one point that those who read and commented on the article focused when they asked 'but why is there a boar on the tympanum?'. Not surprisingly, it was a question which had also exercised me and to which I believed myself to have no answer. I knew then and know now of no contemporary or even near contemporary representations of boars which could be used to shed light on the factors which determined the choice of this animal, in preference to more popular and comprehensible subjects like the Agnus Dei or Christ in Majesty, to decorate a doorway. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that the boar at Ipswich has little if anything to do with the popular Romanesque subject of the boar hunt which, if we are to believe the *Hortus Deliciarum*, signifies the conversion of rich sinners. Nor is the Bible helpful since pigs and boars are both viewed in negative terms which are completely at variance with the prominence of place given to the Ipswich representation.

What I did know was that boars appeared on early Anglo-Saxon objects such as the Benty Grange helmet and the clasps from the Sutton Hoo Treasure and that they had some special power, a fact well known to specialists in early Anglo-Saxon archaeology. In fact, Bruce-Mitford had already compared the boar of the Ipswich tympanum with those of the Sutton Hoo clasps.¹ But the apparent pagan associations of the boar and the period of roughly five centuries which lay between these objects and the sculpture at Ipswich seemed to render any connection between these works quite implausible. It would now seem that this view was mistaken. Indeed, all available information tends to support the thesis that the

¹ R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial: A Handbook* (London 1968), p. 65.

boar was used at Ipswich because of its protective powers. For this reason it was eminently suitable for use on a church portal.

It is quite clear that the boar has been used as a symbol or emblem by many peoples. Given its striking appearance in Sassanian stucco sculpture as well as in wall paintings and textiles, it has been suggested that it may be intended there as a symbol for the Iranian god of victory, Verathranga.² The story of Vishnu's appearance in the form of a boar in his third incarnation³ not only offers some suggestive parallels to Genesis but also provides a clear example of the identification of this animal with the protection of creation. That Vishnu is creator, maintainer and destroyer of the world only underlines the parallelism with the Christian Godhead. The pre-Roman Celts are also known to have made use of the boar image while Tacitus tells us that the Germanic tribe of Aestii wore figures of wild boars as an emblem of their worship of a mother-goddess.⁴ Tacitus drew attention to the protective power of the boar and no doubt the Celts used it for a similar reason. This association of the boar with protective powers must be very ancient indeed given its wide diffusion. After all the boar was also prominent in Egypt, Greece and Ireland in association with, among others, Set, Apollo and Finn MacCool. More important from the point of view of this discussion is the association of the boar with the warrior Ares who disguised himself as a wild boar in order to kill Adonis. One of the Roman legions in Britain, the Twentieth Valeria Victrix, had a boar as its emblem.⁵ Can the identification of the boar with this warrior god be the ultimate inspiration for this banding together of soldiers under the boar sign?

Before briefly reviewing the relevant points about boar imagery in England,⁶ it is useful to recall that the boar also makes an appearance in Scandinavian mythology where it is a symbol of both Freyr and his twin sister Freyja,⁷ a fact which gains in interest and possible significance given the strength of Scandinavian settlement

² B. Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India* (Harmondsworth 1970), p. 197.

³ H. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation*, J. Campbell ed., Bollingen Series VI (Princeton 1946), pp. 77 f.

⁴ *Germania*, XLV, 3.

⁵ J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Britain under the Romans* (Oxford 1966), p. 149, pl. xxxix b.

⁶ I am generally indebted to the following works which deal with the boar emblem: R. Cramp, 'Beowulf and Archaeology', *Med. Arch.*, 1 (1957), pp. 57 ff.; H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth 1964), pp. 98-99; D. Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society* (Penguin Revised ed., Harmondsworth 1968), p. 21; R. Mellinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1970), pp. 37 ff.; W. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester 1970), pp. 124 ff.

⁷ Succinct descriptions of their characters are given in Ellis Davidson, *op. cit.*, pp. 96 ff., esp. 98-9, 101, and J. Brønsted, *The Vikings* (Harmondsworth 1960), pp. 260-61.

in East Anglia. Both twins are associated with fertility, Freyr being the chief god of fertility in Norway and Sweden. That the boar on the tympanum from St. Nicholas' church, Ipswich, is prominently phallic reinforces the possibility that there may be some connection between it and this aspect of the Scandinavian deities. Because of our general lack of early sources concerning common beliefs, superstitions and the like it is most unlikely that we shall ever know whether this is so or not. But we can at least observe that such an idea is not so improbable as might appear at first sight. As is well known, subjects of an even more frankly sexual nature, amongst which the famous sheela-na-gigs are to be found, occur widely in the external decoration of Romanesque churches where they are generally discreetly relegated to corbel tables. Given the predominance of fearful grimacing faces in the enrichment of corbel tables it has long been suspected that these subjects too have a protective purpose. It is true that female figures are the more common but Andersen has drawn attention to the occurrence of representations of phallic men in England citing as examples the man on the wall of Abson church (Glos.) and the figure which he takes to be an animal but which appears to be at least semi-human which occurs in a scene over a window in the tower of Whittlesford church (Cambs.).⁸ The Whittlesford example is particularly interesting not only because it lies on the periphery of East Anglia but also because it shares with Ipswich the use of flat two-dimensional relief, sharp-edged contours and incised lines in lieu of modelling. This should not be taken to mean that there is any clear close relation between the reliefs at Whittlesford and Ipswich but rather that there may well be a loose family resemblance. In the most general way it is just possible that both examples express the prophylactic properties of fertility, the one considerably more blatantly than the other. And certainly, in the face of the available evidence, it is a possibility which can neither be ignored nor conclusively denied. But any connection with Freyr could well be much more straightforward since along with being a god of peace and plenty he was a warrior and defender. In short we again seem to have to do with the unequivocal association of the boar with protection.

That the boar held a special position in early Anglo-Saxon times because of its protective powers is well known not only from archaeological but also from literary evidence. Although the surviving examples of boar images are too few in number to allow of any special conclusions about the geographical distribution of the symbol there is certainly something of a concentration in East

⁸ J. Andersen, 'Temptation in Kilkea; Erotic subjects in medieval Irish art', off-print from *Särtryck ur Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, pp. 90, 93, figs. 5, 6.

Anglia if the Sutton Hoo examples (on the clasps and the helmet) and the sword from the River Lark can be so described.⁹ Moreover, unlike the helmet which is imported, the clasps from Sutton Hoo with their intertwined boars seem to have been made in an East Anglian workshop. Although we can only indulge in conjecture it does seem quite likely that the boar image was fully appreciated for its protective powers in East Anglia at this early date. The certainty that it would be impossible to claim that the opposite was true provides a little security for such a supposition.

Equally well known is the fact that the boar image survived into Christian times. *Beowulf* provides well nigh irrefutable proof in its description of Beowulf's own helmet as being set with boar images so that swords used in battle could not cut it.¹⁰ Moreover, *Beowulf* holds further interest for us: the fact that the objects described in the poem have proved to have an uncanny similarity to the finds at Sutton Hoo has led scholars to form the suspicion that *Beowulf* may have been composed in East Anglia.¹¹ But although the evidence is not yet sufficient for proof the theory remains more than a pure supposition.

One of the most curious aspects of the tympanum at Ipswich is that it is carved on both sides, bearing the boar on the front and a cross¹² on the reverse face. In my initial state of ignorance it did not occur to me that they might have any connection. Two further examples of the association of boar and cross have, however, come to my attention and although the evidence is again both slender and circumstantial they suggest that there is some reason for revising this view as well. The first example is provided by the ornament of the 7th-century helmet from Benty Grange (Derbys.) now in Sheffield Museum.¹³ The helmet has a boar crest and on the nose guard is an inlaid silver cross. There is no need to stress the fact that the cross, too, is a powerful protective device. The second example, which comes from the late 8th century at the earliest, is still more interesting since it occurs in an unquestionably Christian context. As Professor Rosemary Cramp pointed out some time ago the Anglian *Cynewulf* in *Elene* makes mention of the boar image.

⁹ For the Sutton Hoo objects see D. M. Wilson, *The Anglo-Saxons* (Revised Pelican Book ed., Harmondsworth 1971), fig. 3, pls. 1 and 8; for the sword, H. R. Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford 1962), pp. 49-50.

¹⁰ J. R. Clark Hall, *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment*, revised by C. L. Wrenn (London 1950), p. 94, ll. 1451-5 and p. 35, ll. 303-6.

¹¹ See, e.g., Bruce-Mitford's comments in R. Girvan, *Beowulf and the Seventh Century* (Methuen University Paperbacks ed., London 1971), p. 98.

¹² Brønsted, *op. cit.*, pl. 16A. which illustrates a runic stone from Hogby, Sweden, provides a further example of a cross with interlaced arms of the type found at Ipswich.

¹³ Wilson, *op. cit.*, pls. 28 and 29.

He tells us that Constantine had been sleeping 'overshadowed or covered by the boar sign', when he had his vision of the Cross.¹⁴ He went on to win a battle protected by the sign of the cross and subsequently became a Christian. From this conversion, of course, spring his mother Helen's efforts to find the True Cross which subject forms the main body of the poem. Yet more interesting is the description of the warriors Helen took with her to Jerusalem for they bore the boar sign.¹⁵ The poem does not explicitly say that they were Christian warriors, but it seems a reasonable assumption. But be that as it may it is quite clear that the boar sign was quite acceptable in so indisputably a Christian context as the finding of the true Cross in Cynewulf's time. Given that the number of survivals of the boar image as a protective device in early England is small, the fact that two of them show a close relationship with the cross lends weight to the thesis that the pairing of these signs on the tympanum at Ipswich is far from fortuitous.

In all the literature with which I am acquainted it is assumed that the old pagan symbols like the boar could not have survived long after the advent of Christianity, the theory being that the new Christian symbols of protection would supplant the old ones. The evidence from *Elene* suggests that the boar could easily have been absorbed by Christianity. The concurrence of both boar and cross at Ipswich tends to confirm that this is indeed what did happen. Admittedly since the arguments outlined here approach dangerously near the grounds of circular reasoning further buttressing would not come amiss at this point. There is little to offer beyond the following observations. If we choose to adopt as an explanation for the striking affinities between the style of the Ipswich boar and the Viking art of one hundred years earlier the reasonable theory that it is simply a copy of some earlier work of art perhaps in metal, the thesis of the survival of the boar image is unaffected at least so far as the first half of the 11th century is concerned. Moreover, we are left with the fact that in the early 12th century at Ipswich the images of cross and boar were again used in a position which implies that the boar was still understood to be a protective device. The only other alternative, that the tympanum is a carbon copy of an earlier tympanum or lintel executed without understanding, is unacceptable not just because such a high level of antiquarianism would be surprising at this date but also because a tympanum or

¹⁴ Cramp, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

¹⁵ L. H. Holt, *The Elene of Cynewulf*, Yale Studies in English, xxi (1904), II. 255-60. See also Chaney, *op. cit.*, p. 126 where a pagan origin is proposed for this association of boars and warriors. Mr. David Sherlock has expressed the opinion to me that the connexion of the boar with Constantine, Helen and her soldiers may have a Roman origin. We may wonder, however, whether both traditions may not be active.

even a carved lintel would be astonishing in the first half of the 11th century; and one carved on both sides is unthinkable.

The major remaining problem is to guess how the knowledge of the boar as a protective device might have stayed alive into the 12th century. There is little difficulty in imagining that the idea was firmly established in East Anglia at an early date. That it could have survived from Cynewulf's time, whatever his place of origin or work might have been, up to the Viking invasions does not offend against credibility. The pagan Vikings having their own identification of the boar with Freyr very likely contributed to keeping the old idea alive.¹⁶ And it must be remembered that East Anglia shows connections with Scandinavian art well into the 12th century. Other less localised evidence for the possibility of survival is provided by the dates of our only extant manuscripts of *Beowulf* and *Elene* which are placed in the late 10th to 11th centuries. The very existence of these manuscripts demonstrates a continued interest in the older literature. From our point of view the *Beowulf* manuscript, which is dated to *c.* 1000, is the more significant partly because its author goes to the trouble of explaining the meaning of the boar symbol and partly because it seems reasonably certain that it was written down in a monastic milieu. Since the church maintained its disapproval of the old pagan tales one can only conclude that the delights of a good story overcame the scruples of the monastic conscience. And, as Wilson has observed, '... despite ecclesiastical opposition, there can be no doubt that many of the old heroes were remembered throughout the Old English period'.¹⁷ Some, of course, are known to have survived for a very considerable time after the Conquest. Indeed so long as there was an interest in the old literature, the boar had a chance; that the boar sign seems to have survived longest in East Anglia is apparently explicable in terms of the special social and historical circumstances enjoyed by this part of England.

If Ipswich were unique its isolation would give rise to serious doubts. However, J. Romilly Allen long ago proposed an analogous origin for the iconography of a group of monuments mainly to be found in the Old Danelaw which deal with the theme of St. Michael and the Dragon.¹⁸ He believed their genesis should be sought in a combination of Scandinavian heroic myth with the story of St.

¹⁶ Cf. Mellinkoff, *op. cit.*, p. 55 citing C. L. White, *Aelfric, a New Study of his Life and Writings* (Boston, New York and London 1898), p. 85.

¹⁷ R. M. Wilson, *The Lost Literature of Medieval England* (Methuen University Paperback ed., London 1972), p. 2, where we also learn that in the 10th century not only monks but possibly also St. Dunstan himself knew songs 'of ancestral heathendom'.

¹⁸ J. Romilly Allen, 'The Norman Doorways of Yorkshire Riccall', *Reliquary*, N.S. 88 (1888), pp. 105-6.

Michael and intimated that only in this way could both the popularity of this and kindred subjects and the iconographic peculiarities encountered in a number of instances be accounted for. Although incapable of cast iron proof, it is impossible to find fault with his hypothesis. Can it be pure coincidence that the boar tympanum at Ipswich formed part of a scheme of decoration which included just such a representation of St. Michael fighting the Dragon? It does not seem likely given that both subjects are concerned with the idea of protection from evil. To conclude, all the circumstantial evidence indicates that not only the style but also the content of these sculptures at Ipswich hark back to the pre-Conquest period. In fact it would be fair to say that the boar tympanum is most probably best explained as a belated example of the same kind of concern to reconcile Pagan and Christian religious ideas as is exhibited by the carvings of the Gosforth Cross.¹⁹

¹⁹ See K. Berg, 'The Gosforth Cross', *Jour. Warburg & Courtauld Institutes*, xxi (1958), pp. 27 ff.

Collectors of curiosities may be interested to learn that England is not alone in this effort at reconciliation. Early Christian Egypt has produced one example of a statuette of a pig-boar which has a *chi-rho* on its base. It has been interpreted as the cult object of a gnostic sect by L. Keimer, 'Le Chrisme sur une Statuette de Porc', *Bull. Soc. d'Archéol. Copte*, ix (1949), pp. 93 ff., p. 11. I-II.