

NORSE SCULPTURED STONES FROM PAPIL, WEST BURRA ISLE, SHETLAND

by L. M. Angus-Butterworth

THE Viking age was intensely interesting and important. Navigators in the northern seas had previously kept to the shores, but between the eighth and tenth centuries the Scandinavians took their "long ships" across the open sea with increasing boldness, thus initiating a new period of navigation, with consequences of great significance.

"Viking" and "Norseman" may be regarded as interchangeable words. "Viking" was given especially to Norwegian pirates or freebooters but was also applied more loosely to their Danish counterparts. Mainly for geographical reasons the course followed by the Norwegian Vikings led them to Shetland, Orkney, the Hebrides, the western mainland of Scotland and so to Cumberland and the Isle of Man, while the route of the Danish Vikings took them to England, France and the Netherlands.

The word "Viking" seems originally to have been a verb,¹ and throughout Scandinavia "to go viking" meant quite simply to embark on an expedition of piracy and plunder. The earliest Norse literature tells of joy in battle resulting in a kind of fury (*berserksgangr* or "berserk's way"). There was great honour, too, if death took place in battle, for only in that way could a man enter Valhalla, the Hall of the Slain (i.e. the Heroes)², so prominent in northern mythology.

There seems to be some evidence that the Shetland islands were at least sparsely inhabited in pre-Viking days, for some incised inscriptions would appear to vouch for a community using a Pictish or Gaelic language before the time of the runic inscriptions of the Norse invaders.³ Some authorities, however, hold a different

¹ From the Icelandic *vikingr*, probably cognate with the Latin *vincere*, to conquer.

² N. La Fay, *The Vikings* (1970).

³ A. T. Clunes, *The Shetland Book* (1967), p. 171.

view. Professor Brøgger claims that Norse settlers came into Shetland as an almost empty land, while place-names that Dr. Jakobsen called Celtic have proven in particular instances to be disguised Old-Norse or Norwegian words.⁴ Shetlands has always maintained a close contact with Norway, and this connection continues to the present day. Migration to and from both countries has been constant, and the Shetland dialect is rich in thousands of Norse words. By contrast there are no Celtic words apart from a limited vocabulary, exemplified by Dr. Henderson, of words common to both Gaelic and Norse.⁵

There is no reliable evidence about the date when the Norse settlers in this region embraced Christianity, but it was certainly much earlier than 995, the year of the official conversion of Earl Sigurd of Orkney by the Norwegian king, Olaf Tryggvason, who carried off the Earl's son as a hostage in case his father should waver in the faith.

In Shetland the Scandinavian blood and tradition are purer and stronger than anywhere else in Scotland. One striking manifestation of this is the festival of *Up-Helly-Aa*, held in Lerwick towards the end of January to celebrate the last day of Yule. This "ordered and splendid pageant", as Marian McNeill terms it⁶, centres upon a full-sized Norse galley. About seven hundred men in Viking dress march in a torch-light procession, and in a dramatic finale the torches are cast into the galley and create a magnificent blaze. Thus an innocent pagan observance keeps our racial memories green.

THE PAPIL STONES. Two remarkable sculptured and ornamented stones have been found on West Burra Isle, Shetland. They were discovered at Papil, three and a half miles south of the pleasant fishing village of Hamnavøe. The first stone was brought to light by Mr. Gilbert Goudie, F.S.A.Scot., in July, 1877, and is now in the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh, while the second and more impressive one was unearthed in April, 1943, and is in the County Museum at Lerwick.

Burra means "broch" isle, an island with a domestic defensive

⁴ J. Jakobsen, *The Place-Names of Shetland* (1936), pp. 175-207.

⁵ G. Henderson, *The Norse Influence on Celtic Scotland* (1910).

⁶ F. M. McNeill, *The Silver Bough*, vol. III (1961), pp. 130-39.

structure. Brochs, dating from the Early Iron Age, are found chiefly in Caithness, Sutherland, Orkney and Shetland, and to a lesser extent in the Western Isles. Pabil has two meanings in Shetland. Brøgger observes that where hill names are in question Pabil is derived from the Norwegian *pappe*, a breast. In the old Norse tongue, however, the word indicated a priest's dwelling, and on the islands of Burra, Fetlar, Unst and Yell the name is found close to the site of former churches⁷. The Pabil kirk, now completely destroyed, was described by the ministers of Burra⁸ in 1654 and again in 1794 as having a tower "five or six stories high", which is assumed to have been a round one like that of Egilsey in Orkney, and perhaps served as a lighthouse. The kirk was dedicated to St. Lawrence, whose feast is on 10th August, a suitable date for a visit here. It seems hardly likely that many pilgrims would have come to this remote island, so often storm-ridden in winter, if the patron saint had been like St. Nicholas, whose festival is on 6th December.

To estimate the age of the Pabil stones we may compare them with others in this part of the world. The twin archipelagoes of Orkney and Shetland lie on the northern confines of the ancient Pictish kingdom. Elsewhere in Pictavia sculptured stones on which Christian emblems predominate belong to the ninth century and it seems probable, therefore, that the Pabil stones are of this period and thus well over a thousand years old. To this period also belong the fine silver ornament of a Viking chieftain and the bronze brooch of a Viking woman, both found in Shetland and now in the museum at Lerwick.

The ornamentation on the stones is on one face only. An important feature is that the pieces are sculptured partly with incised lines and partly in relief. The former is the more primitive art form, so that the presence of both would appear to indicate a transition between incised decoration and sculpture in relief.

I. *The Pilgrim Stone*. This is now in the County Museum at Lerwick, Shetland. The material is close-grained sandstone, of a kind not found in Burra but which is readily available on the

⁷ A. W. Brøgger, *Ancient Emigrants: A History of the Norse Settlements of Scotland* (1929).

⁸ J. Gordon (Editor), *The New Statistical Account of Scotland* (1845).



PLATE I. The Pilgrim Stone from Papi, Barra Isle, Shetland (Lerwick County Museum)

Shetland mainland a few miles away.⁹ For sandstone this sculptured stone is in a remarkably good state of preservation, perhaps because of its having been buried, so that the carving has suffered very little in the course of the centuries. The stone is rectangular. It is 3 ft. 4 ins. wide at the top tapering to 3 ft. 2 ins. at the bottom, and is 1 ft. 10½ ins. high. Its thickness varies from 2 to 2½ ins. and its weight is about 1¼ cwt. The front of the stone has been dressed smooth, but the back only roughly so. The top edge has been carefully rounded, and the ends have been chipped away to leave two projecting shoulders or tenons¹⁰ to fit into the sockets of supporting pillars. The tenons are about 13 ins. long and have a thickness of a little less than an inch. To give a better fit they have been tapered at both back and front to form a blunt wedge. Of this type of slab, intended to stand upright and with the carving in a horizontal panel, only three other Scottish examples are known, all in Perthshire. Two of these have the carving in relief on a recessed panel in the upper half of the stone, as at Papil, but there is no resemblance in subject or style of treatment. As regards the socket feature there is no parallel anywhere. We have noticed that these Papil sculptures need supporting on either side by upright socketed stones and five such supports have been found on the site. None of these, however, seem likely to have been associated with the sculptured stones. One may accordingly hope that other treasures may lie buried here awaiting discovery.

The sculpture depicts five pilgrims on their way to the shrine of St. Lawrence at Papil, symbolically represented by a cross. Four of the pilgrims carry the simplest form of handled walking-stick, practically a necessity in hilly districts and for covering rough country on foot. One writer refers to "crooked croziers". He overlooked the fact that the men walking have these sticks but not the man riding, as he would have had if they had been a religious feature. There is naturally no significance in the number of figures shown. The artist could only include a small selection, but these were doubtless intended to indicate a continuous flow of the faithful. One would expect, however, that the ratio of

⁹ J. Stewart and O. P. Moar, "Sculptured Stones from Papil, Shetland", *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. 78 (1944), p. 92.

¹⁰ A tenon is the projecting end of a piece of timber or stone fitted for insertion into a slot or groove.

walkers to riders would be maintained, with only someone aged or infirm using a horse. The horse on which the old pilgrim is riding looks an obvious thoroughbred. It appears to be of the same excellent breed as that depicted on stones at Aberlemno in Angus and Meigle in Perthshire.¹¹ It is thus of a type belonging to the Scottish mainland and quite unlike the Shetland pony of today. Figures with the same kind of peaked hoods appear, as we shall see, on the other Pupil stone now in Edinburgh, on a sculptured stone at Bressay, on another at Maughold in the Isle of Man,¹² and on a fragment at St. Vigean's¹³. There is no need to assume that the hooded coat is monastic: it has always been a common form of attire and remains so, as witness the anoraks worn by young people today. The *anoraks* of the Greenlanders and Eskimos, and the *parkas* of the Aleutian islands of Alaska and Siberia, show that this kind of dress is associated with cold climates and regions where bad weather is common.

The attraction of this ancient monument is due in part to the fact that, like any serious work of art, it has well-marked characteristics not found elsewhere. Thus John Stewart remarks that "in general design the stone stands out on its own. The long-shafted Latin cross, with its flared arms and almost square base, is unique"¹⁴. The various elements of the design too, although highly individual, together form a very satisfying artistic unity. A feature that helps a great deal in this respect is the line of volutes which, although outstandingly bold, is unifying in effect by bringing the figures of the pilgrims into relationship with one another. This running spiral design, which forms a line of base for the figures, is most attractive. It can surely be associated with the curled tips of the crests of the waves, the movement of the waters on a windy day being well conveyed. We have to bear in mind that Shetland is a maritime land where no place is more than three miles from the shore-line, and where it is natural and inevitable that the sea should have influenced culture and pursuits in every age. The wave motif goes back a long way here. We

¹¹ L. M. Angus-Butterworth, "Ancient Pictish Monuments in Angus and Perthshire", *A.M.S. Transactions*, New Series, vol. 14 (1966-67), plates 1 and 4.

¹² P. M. C. Kermodé, *Manx Crosses, 5th to 13th Centuries* (1907), plate 67.

¹³ J. Romilly Allen, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (1903), p. 240.

¹⁴ J. Stewart and P. Moar, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

find it, for example, on an incised sandstone disc in the Shetland County Museum which came from Jarlshof and dates from about the third century A.D. The Papil wave pattern may also be compared with one on a monument at Rossie Island in Angus.¹⁵ On the Pilgrim Stone the spiral has nine volutes or curls, three of which are rudimentary. The number being uneven enables the volutes at each end to be in opposite directions to each other, giving a perfectly balanced composition. Lack of machine-like regularity gives that delightful variation upon which the stone's artistic merit and success depends. Waves, moreover, are not static things, so that the change of form is true to nature.

The bulk of the design is in double relief, which gives a lively three-dimensional effect. This applies, for example, to the hands of the pilgrims, the leg of the one riding, and to their cloaks. Again, the space between the central boss of the cross and the surrounding ornament is recessed. The background generally has been ground away to an average depth of one-eighth of an inch. The incised details of the decoration are less pleasing features. Parts treated in this way are the eyes and fingers, the sachel and straps, the reins and bridle. Taken together, however, the different methods of ornamentation show considerable sophistication of technique.

II. *The Bird-men Stone.* The stone now preserved in the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh is a rectangular slab of red sandstone, with a top that was nearly semi-circular but which has now been partly broken away. The stone is 6ft. 10 ins. high by 1 ft. 7½ ins. wide at the top, tapering to 1 ft. 5½ ins. at the bottom. The thickness varies from 1½ to 2½ ins.

A feature of both the Papil stones is the sense of repose which they convey. A necessary qualification, however, is that this feature does not apply to the whole of the stone at Edinburgh, the lower part being inferior and quite out of keeping with the rest. Regarding this part Stewart writes: "A hypothesis may be put forward on artistic grounds. It is that the two bird-headed figures with axes, in the bottom section, are not contemporary with the rest of the sculpture, but have been added and by an

¹⁵ L. M. Angus-Butterworth, *op. cit.*, plate 2.



PLATE 2. The Bird-Men Stone from Pabil, Burra Isle, Shetland (National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh)

inferior artist".¹⁶ It is interesting to seek an explanation for the two contrasting parts of the monument. We know that in a turbulent age there was for long a violent interchange between paganism and Christianity, with first one and then the other becoming dominant for a time. We may therefore consider that this stone was originally set up by an early Christian missionary and ornamented appropriately. Then perhaps a generation later pagan Norse raiders appeared, tore the stone from its socket, added their own idle carving, and cast the stone away so that it remained neglected until recent times. If this supposition is true it becomes clear why the main part is Christian and of such high merit in both artistic conception and execution, while the added part has no religious element and is generally poorer. This view is confirmed when we consider that the lower part of the monument, the great shaft, was of course purely functional and would be hidden in masonry. There could accordingly be no question originally of decorating this part. The two grotesque figures carved on it must therefore have been added later, and it is evident that they have no relationship to the carving above them. Instead of restfulness and dignity these later figures are in the nature of crude caricatures done by an unskilled hand. In contrast to the life-like figures of the pilgrims, these fanciful creatures are shown with long beaks. There was probably no serious intention about this feature, but it is perhaps just worth bearing in mind the bird-like deities of the ancient Egyptians, especially the heron-like sacred Ibis, the *Ibis religiosa*. The two figures are armed with very effective-looking battle-axes, carried on opposite shoulders for the sake of pictorial representation, so that both the weapons shall be fully visible to the observer. Among the Viking period objects preserved in the Shetland County Museum is a war axe of the late ninth century from a grave in Whiteness¹⁷. This axe may give some indication of the date of the carving of the caricatures, which may therefore not be much later than the main carving. Between the beaks of the bird-monsters is what J. Romilly Allen terms a miniature human skull. He surmises that there may once have been a full-length figure of a man between the two bird-headed ones as the face of the slab is scaled away beneath the skull.

¹⁶ J. Stewart, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-96.

¹⁷ *Shetland County Museum Catalogue* (1968).

The cross at the head of the stone is completely formalized, the head of it consisting simply of a circle in which are four evenly spaced ellipses decorated with an inter-linked chain pattern. The upper part of the shaft of the cross is left plain, but the lower part is ornamented with a neat arrangement of whorls. The nearly square base, about as substantial as in the other Pabil stone, encloses a lion-monster on a scale about twice that of the human beings. These four pilgrim figures, two on each side of the shaft, are slim because only a cramped space was available for them. The rather tame-looking lion-monster is reminiscent of the Assyrian tradition, in which as early as the fifth century B.C. the naturalistic prototype had become an abstract composition of rounded forms and lines.¹⁸ In the Pabil version the leg muscles and the tip of the tail echo closely the scroll curves which elsewhere on both stones are used purely for ornament. It is astonishing how the effect of powerful paws is obtained by the simple use of five short vertical



PLATE 3. The Jarlshof 3rd Century Incised Sandstone Disc (Shetland County Museum)

lines for each of them. While a general view of the creature suggests an Assyrian ancestry, some of the details may be based on

¹⁸ E. Porada, *Ancient Iran, The Art of Pre-Islamic Times* (1962).

local animals. For example, there are resemblances in the jaws, tongue and ears to native hunting hounds, in the hind legs to horses, and in the thighs to cattle. Two other very interesting comparisons have been made by J. Romilly Allen. He noticed in the first place that the spiral curves on the body of the beast above the fore and hind legs are exactly like those on the lion of St. Mark as shown in early illuminated manuscripts. Mr. Allen also observed that spirals used in the same conventional manner are found upon the so-called elephant symbol, besides being characteristic of dragonesque beasts on those monuments in Scandinavia that have inscriptions in later runes.¹⁹

The Edinburgh stone or cross is almost certainly later than the Lerwick one. It is more sophisticated but much less vigorous as a composition. Compare, for example, the strong-featured faces of the Lerwick cross with the faint echo of them on the other, or the bold base of whorls at Lerwick with the merely token entry this feature makes in the Edinburgh design. In both cases, however, the basic idea appears to be the same, namely that of a shrine marked by a cross which has become a place of pilgrimage.

¹⁹ J. Romilly Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 13.