

**THE CLERMONT
RUNIC CASKET;
WITH FIVE PLATES**

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THE
CLERMONT RUNIC CASKET

BY

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WITH FIVE PLATES



UPPSALA 1900
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Among the treasures in the British Museum there is to be found the ancient carved casket known by the name of the Clermont Casket or Franks Casket. This runic casket, one of the oldest specimens of English language and art now in existence, was given to the museum by the archaeologist A. W. FRANKS some forty years ago. Franks had purchased it in Paris from a dealer in antiquities, who had obtained it from Clermont-Ferrand in Auvergne.

How and when the casket came from England to France is not known. Perhaps it was once upon a time brought as a gift from some English priest or layman to one of the French churches. The only certain thing we know about its earlier history is, that the casket, before being brought to Paris, was in the possession of a private family at Auzon, according to the following account, given by a certain professor MATHIEU in Clermont: »Le monument se trouvait dans une maison bourgeoise d'Auzon, chef-lieu d'un canton de l'arrondissement de Brioude, département de la Haute-Loire. Les dames s'en servaient comme d'une boîte à ouvrage, et y enfermaient leurs fils et leurs aiguilles. Il était monté en argent. Un des fils de la maison la démontra et en échangea les plaques contre une bague de celles qu'on nomme chevalières. S'il était permis de faire un rapprochement, on ajouterait que l'église d'Auzon remonte, par son porche à colonnettes et par les peintures d'une chapelle abandonnée, au neuvième ou du moins au dixième siècle. Cette église avait un chapitre de douze chanoines.»

In consequence of the removal of the mountings the casket fell into pieces and some parts got lost¹. Among other pieces

¹ Cf., about the history of the casket, STEPHENS: *The Old-Northern Runic Monuments* I, 470 et seq., HOFMANN in *Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-*

missing, when FRANKS bought it in Paris, was a whole side of the casket.

This missing side turned up, some years ago, in the Municipal Museum at Florence¹, and it is, as a matter of fact, one of the most interesting faces of the casket. Although some considerable time has passed since the discovery of this side of the casket, and photographs of it have been sent to a number of scholars familiar with old English language and antiquities, no description or interpretation of its carvings has been as yet published.

In this paper I propose to give an interpretation of this side, but, before doing so, I here discuss the carving on the faces that have already been subjected to treatment in literature, hoping to be able in several points to correct or supplement the interpretations hitherto accepted².

With regard to the general form and appearance of the remnants of the casket in the British Museum I quote the description given by Mr. FRANKS (in STEPHENS' *Old North. Run. Mon. I, 470*): »The casket is quadrangular, and has a top now detached. The measurements are as follows. Length 9 in.; width $7\frac{1}{8}$ in.; entire height $5\frac{1}{8}$ in. Of the lower part the following portions are wanting: — nearly half the bottom, one end, one corner and several smaller portions of the cover; three sides of the rim and about one third of the upper surface are deficient. The material of nearly all the casket is the bone of whale. The sides are formed of slabs of that material $\frac{3}{10}$ in. thick and with two tenons at each end; these are made to fit

philologischen und historischen Classe der k. b. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu München 1871 p. 665 et seq. and WÜLKER in his *Grundriss zur Geschichte der angelsächsischen Litteratur* p. 357 et seq.

¹ This side-piece, I have been informed, was bequeathed to the museum at Florence by the same man who sold the bigger part of the casket to Mr. FRANKS.

² I am under obligation to Mr. W. A. CRAIGIE for my first information about the side-piece re-found at Florence. Mr. CRAIGIE kindly lent me a photograph of it. Afterwards I got photographs of the different sides of the casket through the assistance of the Keeper of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography at the British Museum, for which I beg to tender that gentleman my sincere thanks.

into the corners, which are composed of quadrangular pieces of bone from which the angle towards the inside has been chamfered off. The position of the tenons is shewn by the plain portions at the angles through which a pin passed, and which appear to have been at some time covered with metal corner pieces.

The rim of the cover is $1\frac{1}{10}$ in. deep; it is plain, as is likewise one of the panels of the top. It is however possible that these portions, which differ somewhat from the rest in material, may have been derived from some ancient restoration of the object. The position of the central panel is determined by three pin holes irregularly placed, and corresponding with similar holes in the remaining portion of the rim. The lock is wanting and has been attached by metal pins. On the back of the casket are indications of hinges of metal fastened on with metal pins, but which cannot have been original, as they would have concealed part of the carving and inscription. I should add that to the circular object in the centre of the cover has been fixed by four pins a disk, probably of metal.*

I.

The Top of the Casket.

(v. plate L)

The only runes found on the piece of the top now left are *ægili*. But the top having originally been about $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. broader than this piece, it is possible that there once was a longer inscription here.

ægili is evidently the name of the man with the bow, standing underneath. As STEPHENS (in his *Old-Northern Runic Monuments* II, 903), BUGGE (in *Stephens' Run. Mon.* I, LXX) and HOFMANN (in *Sitzungsberichte der philos. philol. u. hist. Classe der k. b. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu München* 1871 p. 671) have pointed out, it is clear that this bowman *ægili* is identical with the famous archer Egil, known from the Edda and the *Didrik's Saga* (about the form *ægili* cf. below, section VI, 25). Egil was the brother of Weland Smith (the West Scandinavian *Völundr*, *Vølundr*, Old High German *Wielant*, French *Galans* etc.), that artificer so celebrated in lay and saga. A third brother, named *Slagfiðr*, is mentioned too (in the *Völundarkviða* of the Edda). As E. H. MEYER (in his *Germanische Mythologie* p. 27) among others suggests, these three brothers seem to be originally the same as the three *Ribhus* of the old Indian myth.

The *Völundarkviða* tells that Egil and his two brothers »*skriðu ok veiddo dýr*» (ran on skis and hunted wild beasts). They came to the »wolf-valleys» and built a house there. Their wives were *Valkyrias*; the name of Egil's wife was *Qlrún*. Once the brothers on coming home from hunting found their wives had disappeared. Egil and *Slagfiðr* set out to search for their wives,

but Vólundr stayed in the »wolf-valleys». — Then the Vólundarkuiða only tells about Vólundr and his captivity with the king Níðuðr. Egil is mentioned no more here.

In the Didrik's Saga, chapter 75, it is narrated, how Egil came to the court of the king Níðungr (= the Níðuðr of the Vólundarkuiða), because his brother Vólundr (here named Velent) had sent a message to him. Egil had, the Saga says, »one thing before all other men, he shoots better with the hand-bow than anyone else». In order to try his skill the king takes the son of Egil, puts an apple on his head and orders Egil to shoot at the apple. Egil hit the middle of the apple. Then the Saga tells that Egil hunted birds and made a feather-dress, by means of which his brother Velent flew up and fled from Níðungr. The king orders Egil to shoot at the flying Velent, and at last Egil consents to do so. But he only shot at a bag, filled with blood, that Velent had bound under his arm. The blood dropped from the bag on the ground and the king, believing Velent to be mortally wounded, was satisfied.

That is all that is related about Egil in old songs or sagas.

Now it is the opinion of prof. WÜLKER (in his *Geschichte der Englischen Litteratur*, explanation to the plate p. 19) that the carving on the top of our casket is just meant to represent Egil shooting at his brother. WÜLKER gives the following explanation: »Oben fliegt Wieland von Nithhad weg. Ägil, der zurückgeblieben ist, muss auf des Königs Befehl auf den Bruder schiessen . . . Ägil ist durch die Runen ÆGILI kenntlich, Nithhad sitzt rechts davon.» About the figures on the left side WÜLKER says: »Auf der . . . Darstellung ist links wohl noch ein Stück von der Eroberung Jerusalems durch Titus, die auf den anderen Seiten des Kästchens abgebildet ist.» — That the link figures should belong to the picture representing the conquest of Jerusalem seems to be quite impossible. In the first place, this picture is to be found only on the back of the casket, not »auf den anderen Seiten des Kästchens.» Secondly, the fight between Titus and the Jews is not represented on the half of the back immediately adjacent to the left side of the top, but on the remoter half of it. And lastly, the arrows on the left part of the top-side must have come from ægili, and from that cause alone

the two halves of the carving must belong to one another and form parts of the same representation.

HOFMANN, who also (in *Sitzungsber. d. Akad. zu München* 1871 p. 671 et seq.) believes that the scene in question is meant to represent Egil shooting at his brother, tries to explain it (p. 673) in the following way: »Ägili war in der Gewalt des Königs und sollte bei Todesandrohung auf seinen fliegenden Bruder schießen. Er hat sich zu diesem Zwecke eine Strecke weit entfernt, scheinbar seinen entflohenen Bruder verfolgend, dann kehrt er sich um, und schießt auf den König und seine Leute.» The left figures would thus represent the king and his men. This sounds a little more plausible, but still I do not believe it to be the right explanation.

Nor do I consider the following interpretation, given by WORSAAE (in *Stephens' Old-No. Run. Mon.* III, 203 et seq.), to be acceptable: »the figure behind Egil represents Odin the Old, sitting on his throne, with a sceptre or a sword in his hand. Under his feet lie his wolves Gere and Freke, and over his head the ravens Hugin and Munin are stretching out their beaks. Above the chair or throne, which bears triangular ornaments, is seen the holy mark of Odin, the Triskele, which also appears on the corner of the building itself. The presence of Odin indicates, as I suppose, either that Egil in his battle is supported by Odin, or that he already has been taken up into Odin's hall. In this latter case, we see this most excellent and famous bowman fighting alone with his bow in Walhall against the other Einheries.» — The sitting figure has, as HOFMANN (p. 671) too states, not a sceptre or sword in his hand, but an arrow, and what Worsaae explains as the wolves and ravens of Odin are only ornamental carved heads, which also occur in similar shape on the back of the casket (vid. plate IV).

In *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* 1883 p. 357 STEPHENS identifies ægili with the Indian mythic archer Asadrisa, who »was engaged in fights and battles just as we see it (represented) on the . . . casket». But STEPHENS was not able to point out any special episode in the life of Asadrisa, which would explain the scene on the carving, and therefore I