

**The Nordic Otherworld:
Interpreting the Tängvide and Ardre Stones
by Timothy J. Stephany**
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Abstract:

The Tängvide and Ardre memorial stones give us a pictorial glimpse of the Nordic Otherworld during the Scandinavian's Viking Age. Often incorrectly interpreted in the past the stones show similar scenes of a fallen leader astride an eight-legged horse that may be either Odin's horse or the horse of death. Also depicted are human sacrifices made at his funeral feast. Horse, mound, and sacrificed figures are being led by a winged spirit (possibly the leader's *fylgia*). On the Ardre stone the area before the mound is taken up by a procession of his relatives, leading his horse to his new home, while the winged spirit is bringing along a suttee victim as well. The Tängvide stone depicts a popular image of the Otherworld: a woman greeting the fallen warrior with a full drinking horn.

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Introduction

The Otherworld of the Nordic people has been described here and there within the literature, but it has also been seen on standing memorial stones from Viking Age Scandinavia. Two of the most widely recognized stones are the Tängvide Stone and the Ardre Stone, which are often interpreted within works on Northern European mythology. The interpretations, however, have been inaccurate even among scholars and false interpretations persist across the internet. It therefore is worth the time to examine these two particular stones to clearly convey what they portray. First, it would be of an advantage to understand something more of the Nordic view of the Otherworld as found in the literature.

Nordic Otherworld

It was believed that any items or people included in the mound burial or bier burning would travel with him into the next life. This could include his wife or a woman who would become his wife in the next world, a practice called suttee. Such a scene is available in the famous account of Ibn Fadlan, an eye-witness to the funeral ceremonies of a Rus chieftain in the 10th century AD.

So when this man died they said to his slave women: ‘Which of you wants to die with him?’ One of them answered, ‘I do.’ From that moment she was put in the constant care of two other women servants who took care of her to the extent of washing her feet with their own hands. They began to get things ready for the

dead man, to cut his costume and so on, while every day the doomed woman drank and sang as though in anticipation of a joyous event. (Brondsted 1965: 301-302)

When Brynhild died, eight of her slaves killed and five serving maids were put to death to accompany her to Hel. She speaks thus of the funeral for herself and Sigurd (southern man):

‘Cover the pyre with shields and hangings,
skillfully patterned foreign weaving, and many foreign slaves;
burn the southern man beside me.

(Larrington 1999: 191)

After Brynhild’s death two pyres were made, the other one was for Sigurd, and that was kindled first, and Brynhild was burnt on the second one, and she was in a wagon draped with costly woven tapestries. It is said that Brynhild drove the wagon along the road to hell and went past a settlement, where a certain giantess lived. (Larrington 1999: 192)

Brynhild is referred to in Hel as coming from the southern land, because it was believed that Hel was situated to the north, as was Niflheim. This journey was known as ‘Hel-ride’, “the dead ride” or “drive to the underworld” and the wagon there was sometimes thought to be Ursa Major known as *himelwagen*, *herrenwagen*, and *hellewagen* (Hel wagon) (Grimm 2004: 802). In Britain, according to Grimm, they said “up in the air you hear the *creaking wheels of a waggon overloaded with souls*” (Grimm 2004: 833). Such a wagon appears in the fairy tale from Vestermanland “Tibble Castle and Klinta Spring”:

The prince and his love were laid upon a golden wagon and conveyed to a beautiful green meadow on an eminence near Gryta and there interred. Even the wagon and sword were buried in the mound, which every

spring is surrounded by a hedge of white, blooming bird cherry, but both wagon and sword shall, in time, be dug up, when he who is first to see the latter shall receive his mortal wound therefrom. (Booss 1984: 302)

As it was more common in life for men to travel on horses and women in wagons, this might have influenced how they viewed the means of transport.

‘It is time for me to ride along the blood-red roads,
to set the pale horse to tread the path of the sky;¹
I must cross the bridge in the sky-vault,
before Salgofnir awakens the victorious people.’
(Larrington 1999: 140)

When Brynhild wishes to see Sigurd after his death she speaks to him:

‘Bridle, Sigurd, the dark-colored, shining horse,
the swift-footed charger—let it gallop here.’
(Larrington 1999: 237)

Those who were unable to travel with a horse or wagon needed shoes called Hel-skor (Hel-shoe) to make the difficult passage to Hel (MacCulloch 1964: 305). There were three predominant means by which a person entered the other world, either over a bridge, on a boat or across a bog. Thus the dead would be provided with a toll to cross the bridge, money for passage on the boat,

¹ If this path of the sky or bridge in the sky-vault was real it would seem to be the Milky Way, that would lead down into Hel. The constellation of Pegasus (right above the Milky Way) might have been the original Hel Wagon due to its position above this path. Later then Ursa Major was said to be the Hel Wagon as well as Odin’s Wain.

and special shoes with which to traverse the bog (Grimm 2004: 835). The Gioll-bridge or a bridge no broader than a thread might also need to be crossed.²

A Viking Age belief placed the Otherworld of warriors killed in battle in a heavenly hall called Valhall. Grimm records that “King Ring had king Harald buried in a great barrow, his horse killed that he had ridden in Bråvalla fight, and his *saddle* buried with him, so that he could ride to Walhalla.” (Grimm 2004: 836)

Odin was sometimes the ferryman who carried the departed to the other world. Grimm writes: “A Swedish folk-tale speaks of a *golden ship* lying sunk near the schlüsselberg at Runemad; in that ship Odin is said to have carried *the slain* from Bråvalla to *Valhall*.”³ (Grimm 2004: 831) Other phrases for death were “faring to Odin”, “being guest with Odin”, and “visiting Odin” (Grimm 2004: 145). Valhall itself seems originally to have been located in the underworld. This is reflected in Saxo:

While Hading was staying there as a guest, a remarkable portent occurred. As he was dining, a woman beside a brazier, bearing stalks of hemlock, was seen to raise her head from the ground and, extending the lap of her garment, seemed to be asking in what part of the world such fresh plants might have sprung up during the winter season. The king was eager to find out the answer and after she had muffled him in her cloak she vanished away with him beneath the earth. It was, I believe, by the design of the underworld gods that she took a living man to those parts which he must visit when he died. First they penetrated a smoky veil of darkness, then walked along a path worn away by long ages of travellers, and glimpsed persons in rich robes and nobles dressed in purple; passing these by, they eventually came upon a sunny region which produced the vegetation the woman had brought away. Having advanced further, they stumbled on a river of blue-black water, swirling in headlong descent and spinning in its swift eddies weapons of various kinds. They

² According to Guerber a Hel-cake needed to be given to the hound of Hel, that was secured by having offered bread to the poor (Guerber 1992, p. 181).

³ Old sea-kings were supposed to be buried in a golden ship (Grimm 2004: 1549).

crossed it by a bridge and saw two strongly matched armies encountering one another. (Grammaticus 1979: vol. I 30-31)

Souls were also thought to pass into waterfalls, caves, barrows or holy hills. People believed they would “die into the hill” (MacCulloch 1964: 310) which was either a natural hillock or family barrow. Grimm records that the various beings who could receive a man’s soul were Wuotan (Odin), Frouwa (Freyia), Ran and Hel, also watersprites, angels, elves, and later the Devil (Grimm 2004: 1549). Eddic tradition states that Odin and Freyia share the slain: half to Valhall and half to Sessrumnir, and in *Egil’s Saga* a woman believes she will go to Freyia after death.

Stone Interpretation

These two memorial stones under consideration, the Tängvide Stone and the Ardre Stone, have been damaged since they were first erected (see *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*). A reconstruction has therefore been attempted to show what they would have looked like before destruction and damage took their toll (see *Figure 3*).

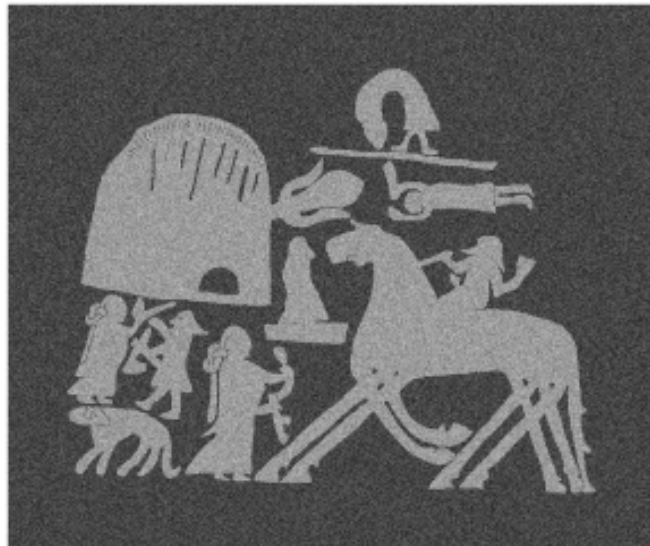
Figure 1.
The Tängvide Stone
(from “Picture and Runic stones from Gotland”
<http://home.no.net/ahruner/gotland.htm>)



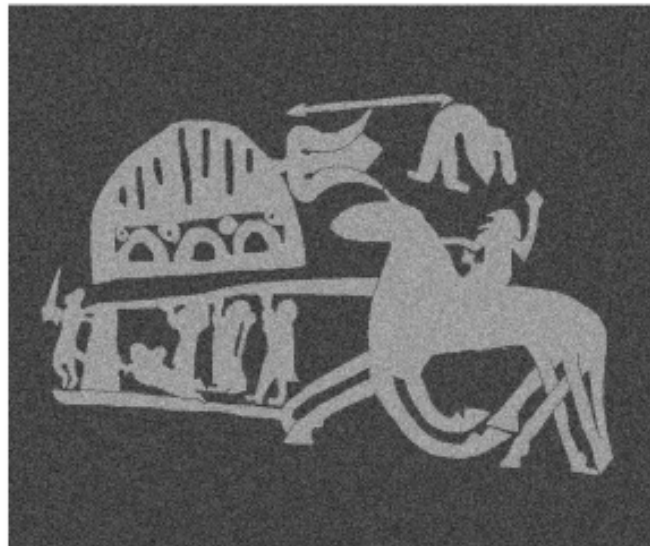
Figure 2.
The Ardre Stone
(from “Picture and Runic stones from Gotland”
<http://home.no.net/ahruner/gotland.htm>)



**Figure 3.
Reconstructed Memorial Stones**



The Tangvid Stone



The Ardre Stone

It must be remembered that these stones were erected as memorials to fallen leaders, so the interpretation must be based upon this purpose. Prior interpretations have often first fixed upon the figure riding an eight-legged horse, assuming that this was Odin. Then they have gone

further to believe that if this was Odin then the mound shape might be Valhall. Some of the other figures were said to be fighting warriors and Valkyries.

At the top these memorial stones show similar scenes of what the dead leader could expect upon his arrival in heaven. The area below shows an image of his ship and men indicating his status as a great chieftain⁴, whereas above is shown the waving leader with his sword astride an eight-legged horse. It might be said from this that at that time they saw the dead man as riding into heaven on Odin's horse or else that it was undertaken on such a horse of death. Although Odin's horse Sleipnir and an eight-legged horse of death may have at one time been distinct, it makes some sense that Odin would be riding the horse of death. Also depicted are the human sacrifices made at his funeral feast: one with his body being bent over backwards, like one with his back broken on an altar stone, while the other has a rope around his neck as if throttled to death. Both the horse and the sacrificed figures are being led by a winged spirit (possibly his *fylgia*), with the sacrifices being carried upon the spear, indicating they were sacrificed to Odin. On the Ardre stone the area before the mound is taken up by a procession of men and women, presumably his relatives (but perhaps the gods), led by a warrior with a sword, who are leading his horse to his new home. The winged spirit is also shown to be bringing the mound (with all its grave goods) along as well. On the Tångvide stone is shown a noble woman greeting him with a full drinking horn and behind her another man with an axe being handed a horn by another noble woman, who might be a companion of his who died at the same time. In the forefront is the leader's dog, now recognizing his master's arrival, and further back is another woman being brought along, likely a victim of suttee.

The woman presenting a full horn to the fallen warrior was a popular artistic depiction of the Otherworld, but it isn't clear that she is a Valkyrie in the strict sense. It would appear that

⁴ Some have interpreted this as representing a journey on a ship to the underworld.

different ideas were later conjoined, so it might perhaps be a forerunner of a Valkyrie or well understood as a battle maiden even then.

Conclusion

While the interpretations of the memorial stones of Scandinavia will continue, it is at least important to replace incorrect and differing interpretations that have become all too prevalent. In approaching the stones one must first be sure of the most general identifications of figures, whether it is a man or woman or animal, etc. Then one must be able to properly comprehend the relationships and meaning, which should not be approached by strictly going to the stones to look for depictions that easily match what we read of in Eddic mythology.

The Tångvide and Ardre stones give us a pictorial glimpse of the Nordic Otherworld. This can be built upon by a variety of literary references to understand the full scope of their beliefs, through the change of an underworld or mound image, continued in the mythology as Hel, through to the heavenly otherworld, continued as Valhall.

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