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A Comparison of Carved Panels Found in Flatatunga and Bjarnastaðahlíð

In his saga, Þórðr hreða was described as the handiest of men. After killing Ormr, one of his sister's arrogant suitors, he drifted around Northern Iceland (slide 2). A farmer by the name of Þórgrímr, who dwelled at Flatatunga in the upper part of the valley above Skagafjörðr, asked Þórðr to build him a hall. After commencing the work that summer, a ship arrived at Gásar in Eyjafjörðr with a load of lumber. Þórðr announced that he would ride down and buy the needed timber to finish the job. Þórgrímr sent three housecarls with him. On the way back, Þórðr was ambushed by twelve men led by Össur Arngrímsson seeking revenge for the killing of Ormr. In true saga heroic style, Þórðr hreða lived up to his coined name "terror," "dreaded" or as a colleague has suggested "big balls." He slew many of the opponents who outnumbered him before the others retreated. I pity those loyal housecarls who steadfastly stood by him and ended up being buried in mounds. In any case, Þórðr returned to his work and completed the hall at Flatatunga. ["Var þat furðu sterkt hús. Stóð sá skáli allt til þess, er Egill byskup var at Hólum."]

Scholars are skeptical about the overall historical value of the saga; nevertheless, there is little doubt that Þórðr and this hall existed. In a paper presented at the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Hans Kuhn noted that house building and carving are not central to saga heroic narrative, so Þórðr's story was possibly embellished by feud and conflicts typical of the classical family sagas. It is more likely that Þórðr *fit the type of a skillful builder and shipwright*, and because of *those* works his fame lived on in the northwest fjords of Iceland. *Given* the house building part of the described events are accurate and took place sometime during the reign of Haraldr Gráfeldr, that would mean the famous hall in Flatatunga was built sometime in the 960's, and, according to the saga, the sturdy hall lasted until the 1300's.

Jumping ahead a few hundred years, oral folk tradition attributes carved panels found in subsequent buildings in the valley extending up from Skagafjörður to the craftsmanship of Þórðr. There is nothing in the saga that directly verifies that Þórðr was a wood carver. However, in an article about the panels, Kristján Eldjárn notes that his fame and the epithet of ‘smiðr’ implies that he was an unsurpassed master craftsman, and he surmises what made him superior to other builders were his wood carving skills. Kristján describes Þórðr as an “Icelandic Waylund,” and he states it is no wonder that the carved panels at Flatatunga have “always without question been attributed to him.”

The scarcity of wood in Iceland led to the salvage and reuse of available materials. By the late 1800’s numerous carved panels dating from the medieval period became rearranged and recycled as roof timbers in various buildings on two farms in the valley, in Bjarnastaðahlíð as well as Flatatunga (slide 3). Thirteen remaining panels from Bjarnastaðahlíð were acquired by the Icelandic National Museum in 1924. Four surviving fragments from the nearby farm at Flatatunga were taken to the museum when an out-building that housed them was torn down in 1952. Scholars disagree about the origins of the artifacts. In this paper I present some of their findings and my observations as I consider the relationship between the panels salvaged from the two farms in the valley above Skagafjörður. Although the two partial sets of panels show some considerable differences in style and construction that distinguish them from each other, legendary craftsmen, the scope of the work and type of engraving link them to a quite specialized local Northern Iceland district tradition.

(slide 4) Selma Jónsdóttir started a debate with breakthrough research that led to her book published in 1959 titled *An 11th Century Byzantine Last Judgement in Iceland*. She has shown convincingly that the remaining panels from Bjarnastaðahlíð form pieces of what was once a larger depiction of a Last Judgment scene (slide 5). The best intact example of such iconography

is a mosaic in a church in Torcello, Italy dating from the 1200's (slide 6). As she describes it, these scenes are typically composed of four horizontal fields divided down the center. Christ is shown sitting within a mandorla in the upper field in the center, with Mary on his right and St. John the baptist on his left. The twelve apostles, six on each side, flank Christ, and there are angels behind them. A stream of fire descends from where Christ is sitting and engulfs the damned to his left. Among the damned are those dead in the sea, whose body parts are being given up by animals of the sea (slide 7). Also among the damned are skulls and severed heads, along with naked figures (slide 8). One of the damned reaches out his arms in the direction of what Selma determines must be the ugly face of Satan. Among the blessed on Christ's right are a group of figures in which surviving panels depict their heads and hands (slide 9). Selma identifies St. Mary wearing a headdress and her hands turned out in prayer. It is beyond the scope of this paper to summarize all the extensive details provided by Selma, and how all the boards fit into the puzzle, but these examples are sufficient to demonstrate her claim regarding the depiction, and other scholars concur with her findings regarding the iconography. They do *differ*, however, with her conclusions regarding the origins of the panels. Before comparing arguments of origin, I will present the panels from Flatatunga, and compare them with those from the Last Judgment panels from Bjarnastaðahlíð.

The Flatatunga panels are thought to be the remains of a depiction of Christ and his apostles (slide 10). While in the Bjarnastaðahlíð panels there is no ornamentation, the Flatatunga remnants contain a rich Ringerike style abstract design. Another obvious difference is that they are carved so the planks are hung vertically. Other stylistic differences are subtler. In harmony with the vegetative Ringerike ornamentation with its tendrils, the figures are stylized, whereas the Bjarnastaðahlíð panels are more naturalistic (slide 11). The faces depicted on the Flatatunga panels are looking forward with almond shaped eyes and noses in profile. The Bjarnastaðahlíð

heads are in semi-profile, providing a more natural appearance. The Flatatunga hands are strikingly different: the thumbs are arched forming a point, and the fingers are stubbed. The hands carved on the Bjarnastaðahlíð panels are remarkably realistic.

(slide 12) Kristján clearly makes a case, and I also suggest, that the two sets have so many differences that they were not likely to have been made by the same craftsman or be considered part of the same production. In particular, the Ringerike style ornamentation separates them in terms of the date of their creation. The Ringerike style was popular in Scandinavia and the North Atlantic Islands throughout the ten hundreds and had often been blended with Christian iconography, primarily in Anglo Saxon or Anglo Scandinavian contexts. Kristján provides examples of the style, such as the Norwegian Heggen weathervane, which bears similarity to the Flatatunga ornamentation. (slide 13) He notes that no other woodcarvings have been preserved from this period.

Technical aspects further distinguish the two sets of panels. Both are made of fir, but upon close examination, the Flatatunga panels are selected from a superior quality of wood. (slide 14) The grain is more vertical, less prone to warping, and there are fewer knots and blemishes. The joinery of the boards also differs. The Flatatunga panels meet each other with a rounded groove intended to take a tongue, whereas the Bjarnastaðahlíð panels have wedged shaped upper edges with v-shaped grooves in the lower edges. The Flatatunga panels were fastened presumably to boards also running vertically behind them with square wooden nails, and the Bjarnastaðahlíð panels were fastened running horizontally with round wooden nails. With so many differences indicative of style and technique, it is safe to claim that the two sets of panels were made at two different times and most likely by different artists. What the panels have in common, however, is the basic V-groove style carving technique. This type of carving is quite rare among the albeit few remnants of Scandinavian woodcarving stretching from the

Oseberg finds dating from the 800's forward through medieval times, from which there are more examples after the 1200's. Although there is no evidence a V-groove tool existed during the time period in question, such a parting tool may have been available and used in the production. (slide 15) In any case, this type of engraving in wood sets the carvings found in Skagafjörður apart from most other finds. (Pass around carved replicas.) Predominantly, the remnant medieval woodcarving from Scandinavia is in relief, such as the carved portal of the Hylestad church in Norway, creating an almost three-dimensional plasticity in the ornament (slide 16). The early Christian Icelandic examples are an exception to relief carving, indicating a particular type of local production in Skagafjörður. That a V-groove technique was used in rendering both the Flatatunga and Bjarnastaðahlíð panels suggests that the former was a source of inspiration for the carver of the latter set. Now I will return to the question of motivation and origin of these murals (slide 17).

It was Selma's contention that the descriptions of panels seen by informants at Flatatunga in the 19th century and those later found in Barnastaðahlíð fit together to form a single picture depicting the Byzantine Last Judgment scene. She believed that those panels in Bjarnastaðahlíð were originally together with the other panels in the famous Flatatunga hall built by Þórðr hreða. She suggests they were made based on some sort of picture or rendering of a Byzantine Last Judgment that was brought to Iceland by three Basilian monks who, according to Ári fróði, arrived in Iceland in the late eleventh century. However, Kristján was the first to observe that the Last Judgment mural, due to its reconstructed width of 9 meters, would hardly be able to fit in a skáli built by Þórðr. Excited by Selma's work, the artist and scholar Hörður Ágústsson conducted an historical architectural study and demonstrated that the only building of a size that could possibly fit the reconstructed scene would have been the cathedral in Hólar constructed shortly after the bishopric was established there in 1106 (slide 18). This is a persuasive argument

because the newly ordained bishop, Jón Ögmundsson, had recently been to Rome. He met with Pope Pascal II in order to receive his blessing for consecration. While Jón was there he surely would have been exposed to, and impressed by, works of medieval religious art including Last Judgment scenes. It is not inconceivable that Bishop Jón was not only inspired to bring back to Iceland religious culture, but also, as Selma conceived with the Armenian monks, he may have brought back with him some sort of illustration of a Last Judgment Day scene, fully intending to decorate his new cathedral in his new bishopric with impressive Biblical iconography.

This notion is validated by his choice of builders. Jón spared nothing in the building of the cathedral, and he hired the most prominent craftsman of the era, Þóroddr Gamlason. The redactor states in *Jóns saga helga* (slide 19), and a literal translation is not very elegant: [Þat er sagt frá þessum manni, at hann hafði svá hvasst næmi, at þá er hann var at smíð sinni ok hann heyrði, at klerkum var kennd grammatika, en þat er latínulist, loddi honum þat svá í eryrum, at hann varð inn mesti íþróttarmaðr í sagðri list. Which may be translated as:] It is said of this man, that he had such sharp learning (keenness), that when he was at his smithing (or woodwork) and he heard, that priests were being taught grammatica, and that Latin art (or rhetoric), stuck in his ears, that he became the most masterful in the aforementioned, (or) spoken art. Recall Kristján's claim that a 'smiðr' – one that is proclaimed an exceptional craftsman – is a reputation likely based on more than mundane building skills. Perhaps this passage implies that the master builder Þóroddr was also skillful at rendering, i.e. carving, those tales that he heard. Þóroddr had *the skill*, and it is clear from the saga passage that he had *the inspiration* to combine his wood carved imagery with his masterful knowledge of the Bible. It is conceivable that Þóroddr is another generation, and provides a documented instance from *the template*, of 'mythical' master carvers following in Þórðr hreða's footsteps. It is likely such an individual, with his particular skills in hand, would create original pieces of art based on his exposure to circulating iconography.

(slide 20) Although the Ringerike stylistic influence could have arrived late to Iceland, both Kristján and Hörður agree that the Flatatunga panels predate the ones from Barnastaðahlið. The question is: how much time separates the two? In opposition to Selma, who envisioned all of the panels mounted on the wall in the famous hall made by Þórðr hreða in the late ten hundreds, Kristján and Hörður contend that both sets of panels were mounted on the walls of the Hólar cathedral in the early eleven hundreds, with the so-called Flatatunga panels only slightly pre-dating the ones found in Barnastaðahlið. I would like to make an alternative proposal. It seems reasonable to conclude that the two sets of panels could have been installed in two separate locations. For example, there is no conclusive evidence that the panels found in Flatatunga would not fit in the hall built by Þórðr hreða. However, Þórðr supposedly lived in the late nine hundreds, and the dating of the Ringerike style along with the Christian iconography indicates that the carvings would have been executed sometime in the ten hundreds. Therefore, the later dating of the Ringerike style suggests that Þórðr was not the woodcarver who produced the extant Flatatunga carvings. Nevertheless, his sturdy hall could have housed carvings representing Christian iconography produced at a later date. There was a tradition in Iceland of exemplary halls with wood carved ornament dating from the pre-Christian era. Oral tradition has it that in the Flatatunga hall Þórðr hreða carved scenes depicting his violent feuds. Heads and body parts adorned the scenes (slide 21). These were more likely to have been the damned in the Last Judgment mural recognized by Selma, but amidst the confused memories and legends some truth must be present. Although animals appear in the Last Judgment scenes, it is not obvious that, for example, horses described by 19th century informants or other features would fit the Christian iconography that has been identified. Nor have battle scenes described by locals been convincingly dismissed as misrecognition. It is tempting to heed some of that oral tradition. It may be true that Þórðr carved scenes from his exploits and some of those carvings also survived

until the 1800's. In spite of the pursuits of his enemies, in his saga Þórðr hreða died of old age. As typical of the sagas of Icelanders, his tale ends with a list of his offspring. Perhaps one of his descendents, or some other talented Icelander inspired by him, has carried on the work *fitting of the archetype* of his *mythic presence*, and *the material culture he inscribed* not only *in wood*, but also *in the memory of his people*. After the conversion in Iceland in the year 1000, this craftsman, well travelled or informed regarding stylistic trends, added the Christian infused Ringerike style iconography to the hall or smaller church at Flatatunga prior to the establishment of the bishopric in Hólar (slide 22). These carvings would have inspired the technique used by Þóroddr Gamlason in his rendering of a sketch or illumination brought by Bishop Jón from his pilgrimage to Rome back to Hólar. The particular tradition that had developed in Skagafjörður stylistically changed into the more naturalistic renderings of the Byzantine Last Judgment identified by Selma, which were housed in the cathedral in Hólar (slide 23).

There is no evidence that the two quite different remnant sets of Christian iconography were ever displayed in the same building. Indeed, they appear to be from different periods and stylistically they seem to clash (slide 24). Yet seen through the V-groove carving renditions and their relative proximity in Skagafjörður they are inextricably linked to a peculiar local Icelandic artistic tradition. In spite of their mysterious origins, these artifacts that have survived hundreds of years provide tangible testimony for what is only peripherally hinted in the sagas passed down through Icelandic literary heritage. The common technique used in execution of the carvings and the oral tradition surrounding their origins lays claim to a local cultural identity in the district surrounding Skagafjörður, and an admiration of exceptional craftsmen exemplified by Þórðr and Þóroddr.