

Korta meddelanden

Gotland's largest picture stone rediscovered

In the course of the project “Ancient Images 2.0. A Digital Edition of the Gotlandic Picture Stones”, financed by the Swedish Research Council and conducted by researchers of the Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies at Stockholm University, the Swedish National Heritage Board, and Gotland's Museum, all known picture stones of Gotland will be digitised, and all available information about them will be collected. Among the monuments and fragments registered so far, much unpublished material can be found – such as the small fragment from St. Valle, Rute parish, with its unique depiction of a horned ship-guide, published for the first time in *Fornvännen* 111 (2016), pp. 53–55. Another extraordinary monument, which has not been published appropriately and is almost unknown, was found in Väskind Church in 1953 (RAÅ 120:1). Investigations in the archives in Stockholm and Visby, conducted as part of our project, have shown that the stone from Väskind is to be regarded as the largest Gotlandic picture stone.

Three parts of a tall type C picture stone are built into the floor and steps of the choir, which

was constructed after the middle of the thirteenth century (fig. 1). These fragments are mentioned only briefly by Lindqvist (1956, p. 30), as well as in Lamm and Nylén's handbook of picture stones (2003, p. 48). In the latter publication it is noted that the slab must have been more than 3.55 metres tall. Furthermore, the stone was the topic of several newspaper articles in 1953 and 1963. More information and pictures were recently published by Oehrl (2019, pp. 295–296, figs. 344c, 345a–c; cf. Oehrl 2017, p. 107, fig. 11).

During the restoration of the church in 1953, the wooden floor of the choir was removed and three fragments of a picture stone were uncovered in the medieval stone floor (fig. 2). They represent the two trapezoidal edge pieces and a roughly rectangular middle part of a tall type C stone, which was split lengthwise twice. The two edge pieces still indicate the monument's characteristic mushroom shape. They were lying foot to foot, the convex head parts turned towards the altar, the broken edge facing the nave, forming the last step leading up to the floor level of the altar. The third fragment, the picture stone's middle



Fig. 1. One of the edge pieces of the picture stone reused as last step to the altar room.

Photo: Sigmund Oehrl.

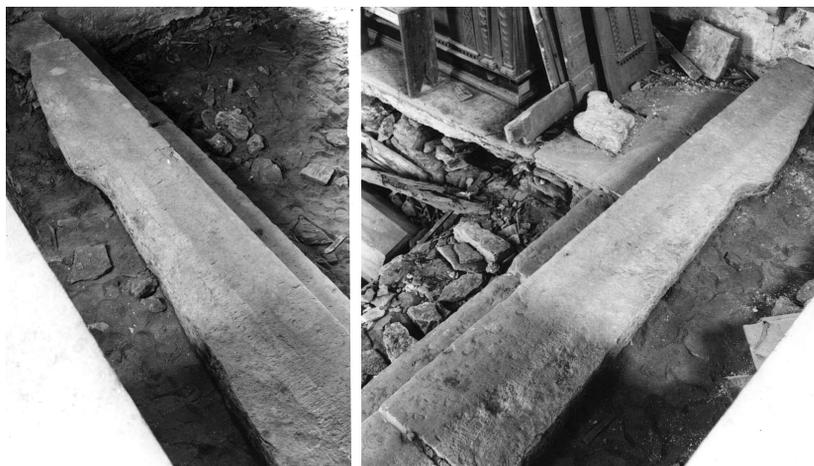


Fig. 2. Both edge pieces of the picture stone, which form the last step to the altar room. Photo: Harald Faith-Ell, just after the recovery in 1953 (Gotland's Museum).



Fig. 3. The middle part of the picture stone reused as first step to the altar room. Top stones lifted. Photo: Harald Faith-Ell, just after the recovery in 1953 (Gotland's Museum).

piece, is part of the first step up to the choir. Approximately half of it is covered by the picture stone pieces forming the last step. Only on this hidden part, remains of the figurative decoration of the stone as well as a runic inscription are preserved. In 1953, the upper steps were lifted, which allowed the decoration on the step stone beneath to be examined, traced with charcoal, and photographed (fig. 3).

The piece has an irregular broken edge at its right long side. It is only a narrow, vertical area along this edge, getting narrower to the top that is still ornamented. According to the photos made by Faith-Ell, a small part of an originally very large chequered ship sail is preserved at the bottom of the decorated area.

The surviving section of the picture field above the sail seems to be polished or damaged; only small parts of it were traced with colour. A runic inscription is placed at the bottom of this field,

just above the sail. According to Greta Arwidson's 1953 report kept in ATA, remains of 10–12 runes can be observed. However, the only clear runic character is a long-twig *h*-rune *h*. A transliteration suggested by Magnus Källström on basis of Harald Faith-Ell's photos is:

...**(u)-(f)-h**-----...

At the upper edge of this picture field, two angled oblong elements can be isolated, reminiscent of the rows of sword-swinging warriors on the picture stone Lärbro St. Hammars I (Lindqvist 1941/42 I, figs. 81–82; II pp. 86–87, figs. 434, 436–440). Considering this resemblance, it seems plausible that the picture field above shows the remains of a depiction similar to the possible human sacrifice motif on the head part of the St. Hammars I monument (fig. 4). The Väskinde slab seems to depict a human figure wearing a long garment at the right edge of the field, which stretches its arm to the left. The figure's hand

Fig. 4. Detail of the middle part of the picture stones, compared to depictions on Lärbro St. Hammars I. Photos: Harald Faith-Ell 1953 and Sören Hallgren 1965 [ATA].



appears to merge into an irregular and strange-looking object, which, compared to the depiction in a corresponding position on the Lärbro slab, could well be regarded as a bird (of prey) with its wings shown at the sides and close to the body. The three-pronged element above the possible bird is bent towards the human figure's head and could be compared to the apparently vegetal element which on the Lärbro stone extends into the picture field from above.

From here, the decorated section tapers, and the traced elements cannot be identified with any known motif or figure. In the picture field just above the presumed person with the bird, another angled, sword-like element is emphasised – possibly indicating further warrior figures wielding their weapons. Remains of at least one more picture field can be assumed.

In addition, on the outer edge of both side parts a carved contour line and some further unclear decorative elements can be observed, apparently the faint remains of an ornamented border, presumably an interlace pattern. The shape of the side pieces clearly indicates a type C stone. If the assumption is correct that the middle part of the stone preserves remains of a sacrifice scene similar to Lärbro St. Hammars I, the Väske stone belongs to Lindqvist's so-called Lär-

bro group, which he dated to around AD 700 or the early eighth century. According to Lori Eshleman (1983), the Lärbro group was strongly influenced by the art of the Carolingian Renaissance and thus instead should be dated to the period between AD 790 and 840. The inscription contains a clue for the stone's date as well; long-twig runes were used from the early eighth century onwards. Short-twig runes do not emerge before AD 800.

The interesting point about the monument is its size. The stone fragments forming the steps to the altar room indicate a stone slab that originally was c. 3.55 metres in height. All pieces are about 40cm wide and 20cm thick. However, the original width of the monument remains unclear, as the middle part is incomplete and even the width of the edge pieces could have been greater than today. In any case, the bottom part of this huge monument was cut off, which would have made it even taller than 3.55 metres. The remains of a chequered sail are clearly visible on the lower part of the decorated area. The sail and the ship must have been particularly large, but only a small section of the sail's upper part is preserved. Thus, a significant part of the monument's lower field is missing, as well as its root, which must have been extraordinarily large in order to give this giant

stone slab sufficient stability. The entire stone must have been at least (!) two meters taller than the three remaining fragments suggest (which was already concluded by Arwidsson in her unpublished report). As a result, this unique monument seems to have had a height of more than 5.55 metres, which would make it by far the largest Gotlandic picture stone currently known. This stone constitutes a dimension of Viking Age monumentality that has been unknown thus far. It is tempting to suggest that two trapezoid stone slabs of approximately 2 metres length each, which are built into the floor of the altar room, also belong to the missing lower part of the picture stone. They lie between the last step and the altar, next to the south and north walls. Even if this interpretation is correct, however, the main part of the root would probably still be missing.

According to the letters kept in the archives, the persons in charge in 1953 discussed the idea of moving the pieces into Gotland's Museum in 1953. The motivation to refrain from it was primarily a financial one: the estimated costs for the removal of the old stones and for the installation of new ones were regarded as too high and as a disproportionate effort. As a result, the monument still lies in the church floor where carvings remain invisible.

It remains to be seen whether more interesting picture stones and new information will come to light in the course of our ongoing project and

investigations. With view to the Väs kinde monument, one should maybe consider removing the pieces from the church in order to examine, document, and publish them adequately, and to reconstruct and possibly re-erect the picture stone in its original, impressive size. Even a digital reconstruction would be possible.

References

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