

Franks Casket

Origins and Background

- Precise place of origin is unknown. But, if it could be assigned to a particular context, it may shed light on the less discussed aspects of Bede's Northumbria.
- Assigned a date of around 650-750 CE by the language of the runic inscriptions.
- Bought in 1857 by Augustus Franks from a Paris dealer who had obtained it from a Professor Mathieu of Clermont. The latter had obtained it from a bourgeois family in the town of Auzon in the Auvergne. The casket, it seems, found its way to a nearby church, Saint Julian at Brioude, sometime in the early 9th-Century.
- Currently housed in the British Museum, London.

Description

- Artistically the Franks Casket is a sophisticated work, drawing on a wide range of decorative motifs, both Mediterranean and Germanic. Its decorative detail is comparable to that on Northumbrian manuscripts, which are unquestionably monastic products.
- Its artistic theme can be regarded as intertextual: that is, it makes great play on the relationship between word and image. Its inscriptions, in Old English and Latin, involve the use of two different types of runes as well as insular scripts.
- It is a complex work, both in terms of craftsmanship and thought. It is a self-consciously crafted piece, filled with many contexts and layers. It is said to be self-reflexive.
- With the sequence of pictures the rune master has developed a program by which he meant to have his protégé's fortune and fate guided, - guided from birth to death and beyond. This programme begins - from right to left, this way all around the box - on the Front (F-Panel) with the picture of the Magi and continues there with that of the mythical smith Wayland. The inscription on this front side, the Verses on the Whale, seemingly does not refer to the pictures, but in another way they do.
- **Brief description of the program (from Becker):** So the front plate, (*F-panel*), shows on its left side Wayland (Wayland), the captured elfish smith, who with the help of his valkyrian wife takes gruesome revenge in order to free himself. The adjoining picture on the right side, Christ's adoration by the Magi, does not seem to correspond with the drama of rape and revenge. They are not the Holy Kings yet: the runes emphasize "MÆGI" and that is what matters! The runic inscription running around both pictures narrates the mishap of a big Fish that supplied the material whalebone. The left plate (*R-panel*) presents a rather strange picture of the Roman twins, the Dioscuri Romulus and Remus. Instead of just the lupa (she-wolf) there are two wolves, and instead of just one shepherd, Faustulus, by the cavern near the river Tiber, we have four warriors here, kneeling as if praying. Different from the *F-panel* the text relates to the picture. The back plate (*T-panel*) shows - according to the text - the Roman general and later emperor Titus, here conquering Jerusalem in 70 CE, with the Jews fleeing that place (which is commented on in Latin language and letters). Then we have the general sitting in judgment over friend or enemy, and eventually a number of hostages being led away. Far less clear is the right plate (*H-panel*). The picture is composed of three sections. According to the inscription, it is about some herh-os, a goddess of the grove (herh), who causes harm. Mysterious, too, is the text, as it is ciphered, i.e. the vowels look like runes, but they are not. The lid (*Æ-panel*), finally, shows a battle scene, the defense of a fortified quarter. An archer, Aegil as the word above him says, facing great odds. Apart from his name, nothing is known of the event depicted here. Nevertheless he might be the famous archer Egil, who in later lore was turned into Wayland's brother.

Characteristics of Anglo-Saxon Culture: C.L. Wrenn's *A Study of Old English Literature*

1. The casket itself is an example of ordered ceremony, both religious and secular. Each panel expounds on this notion by portraying a concise, organized theme/story. There is the carved relief of people and animals, but also carved runes which surround (and sometimes work within) the main story.
 2. The Pagan tradition is maintained in all five panels. Christian tradition is most fully developed in the F, R, and T-Panels.
-

3. There are strong ethical concerns, both in terms of Pagan and Christian ideals. This is seen in the warrior code that persists throughout, a concept of a higher, or higher god(s) who controls fate, a sense of consequence for your actions taken in the form of an afterlife.
4. The inscriptions are in runic, Old English, and in Latin. The subject matter is Pagan, but in includes a strong Judeo-Christian element from those respected sources. There is a strong sense that the artist created this casket from a previous illuminated manuscript or collection of manuscripts and, through invention and deletion, altered it to suit his/her needs. The material is ivory, whalebone, and would have had to be hunted.
5. **F-Panel** has the Trinity depicted, themes of redemption, consequences of evil deeds, deliverance, exile, and issues of kingship. **R-Panel** has the Roman mother church, salvation in the mother, the exile. **T-Panel** has a tree of life, the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, Christ's passion, ascension and redemption, issues of kingship. **H-Panel** also has a less defined Trinity, concepts of mercy, punishment, bad deeds. **Æ-Panel** has Ragnarök or Armageddon, the Holy of Holies.
6. The casket may be seen as a didactic tool: read as a whole, it may instruct a warrior/thegn how to be a good warrior. The casket may have been a reliquary for saints, and so its organic qualities could serve as a meta-commentary on its contents.
7. The persona would be someone well acquainted with the Pagan belief system. The purpose of the casket may be a gift to a warrior, or a reliquary for a saint. The argument is that if you live a just and righteous life, you will benefit as such in the afterlife. The audience is mixed, both Pagan and Christian.

Selected Bibliography

- Ball, C.J.E. "The Franks Casket: Right Side." English Studies 47 (1966) 119-26.
- Becker, Alfred. Franks Casket: Zu den Bildern und Inschriften des Runenkästchens von Auzon. Regensburg, Verlag Hans Carl, 1973.
- D'Ardenne, S.R. Does the Right Side of the Franks Casket Represent the Burial of Sigurd?" Etudes Germiniques. 21 (1966) 235-42.
- Delorez, R. "Runes and Majic." American Notes and Queries 75 (1986): 50-65.
- Egil's Saga. Ed. and trans. E.R. Eddison. New York: Greenwood, 1968.
- Eska, Joseph F. "Towards and Integrated Interpretation of the Right Side of the Franks Casket." American Notes and Queries. 24 (1986) 7-8.
- Lang, James. "The Imagery of the Franks Casket: Another Approach." Northumbria's Golden Age. Ed. Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills. Phoenix Mill, Sutton, 1999. 247-55.
- Malone, Kemp. "the Franks Casket and the Date of Widsith." Nordica et Anglica: Studies in the Honor of Stefan Einarsson. Ed. Allan Orrick. Hague: Mouton, 1966. 10-18.
- Napier, A.S. "The Franks Casket." An English Miscellany Presented to Dr. Furnivall on Honor of his Seventy-Fifth Birthday. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1901, rpt. 1969. 362-381.
- Osborn, Maryjane. "The Grammar of the Inscription of the Franks Casket, Right Side." Neuphilologische Mitteilungen. 73 (1972) 663-71.
- . "The Lid as Conclusion of the Syncretic Theme of the Franks Casket." Old English Runes and their Continental Background. Ed. Alfred Bammesberger. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991. 249-68.
- . "The Picture-Poem on the Front of the Franks Casket." Neuphilologische Mitteilungen. 75 (1974) 50-65.
- . "The Seventy-Two Gentile Nations and the Theme of the Franks Casket." Neuphilologische Mitteilungen. 92 (1991) 281-88.
- . "Two Inconsistent Letters in the Inscription of the Franks Casket, Right Side." Neuphilologische Mitteilungen. 72 (1971) 30-34.
- Webster, Leslie. "The Iconographic Programme of the Franks casket." Northumbria's Golden Age. Ed. Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills. Phoenix Mill, Sutton, 1999. 227-46.
- Wood, I.N. "Ripon, Francia, and the Franks Casket in the Early Middle Ages." Northern History. 26 (1990) 1-19.
-