



Sigurðr in the Medieval North

Sigurðr the Dragon-Slayer was a preeminent hero of the Medieval North and remembered in both narrative and art.

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EXPLORING THE MIDDLE AGES



ABSTRACT

Sigurðr is the supreme hero of the Völsung legend. He is widely represented in the art and narrative of medieval Europe.

Dragon-Slayer, King, Husband and Hero, the multifaceted character of Sigurðr forms the core of my project to develop a comprehensive analysis of his legend, its cultural context and how it developed over time.

The earliest depictions of Sigurðr are found on rune and image stones, mainly from Sweden. From the 12th and 13th centuries, Sigurðr decorates the portals of four Norwegian stave churches (Hylestad, Vegusdal, Lardal, and Mael), as well as appearing in a number of written texts.

Sigurðr roasts the heart of the dragon Fáfnir on the Hylestad stave church, from the late 12th to early 13th century (Norway).

The Aim

The aim of the project is to investigate the impulses behind and the structure and development of the legend surrounding the hero Sigurðr Fáfnisbani in the medieval North.

Sources

Both literary and artistic sources depict Sigurðr. From literature, sagas (such as *Völsunga saga*), eddic poems from Iceland, the *Nibelungenlied* from Germany, and the Scandinavian and Faroese ballads present various versions of the legend.

Sigurðr is found depicted pictorially on material from the British Isles, Germany and Scandinavia.



Sigurðr stabs the dragon Fáfnir on the Ramsund carving. Here the dragon is also the band containing the runic inscription (11th century, Sweden).

Sigurðr on Norwegian Stave Churches

Sigurðr decorates the portals of four Norwegian stave churches (Hylestad, Vegusdal, Lardal, and Mael). He is a figure in which the legendary and supernatural blur: although he is ostensibly human, he has many supernatural attributes and encounters (such as that with the dragon).

The Function of Sigurðr

Jesse Byock (1990) argues that the function of Sigurd on the stave church doors is a protective one. He replaces the Danish and German preference for the archangel Michael (also a dragon slayer and a figure of protection).

Did they believe in Sigurðr?

While the archangel Michael is biblical, and thus a legitimate object of belief for medieval churchgoers, this is less immediately obvious where it concerns Sigurðr. We can ask:

- How was Sigurðr conceptualised and understood in medieval Norway, particularly with regards to his physicality? We are presented with actual pictures of him on the portals. What did he look like?

- Did he indeed play a protective role and how might those who viewed the pictures of Sigurðr have expected to 'experience' him?

If the people who were behind the pictures of Sigurðr on stave churches truly expected Sigurðr to protect them, they must have believed in him and his ability to continue to be active on the supernatural plane after his death, at least to some extent.

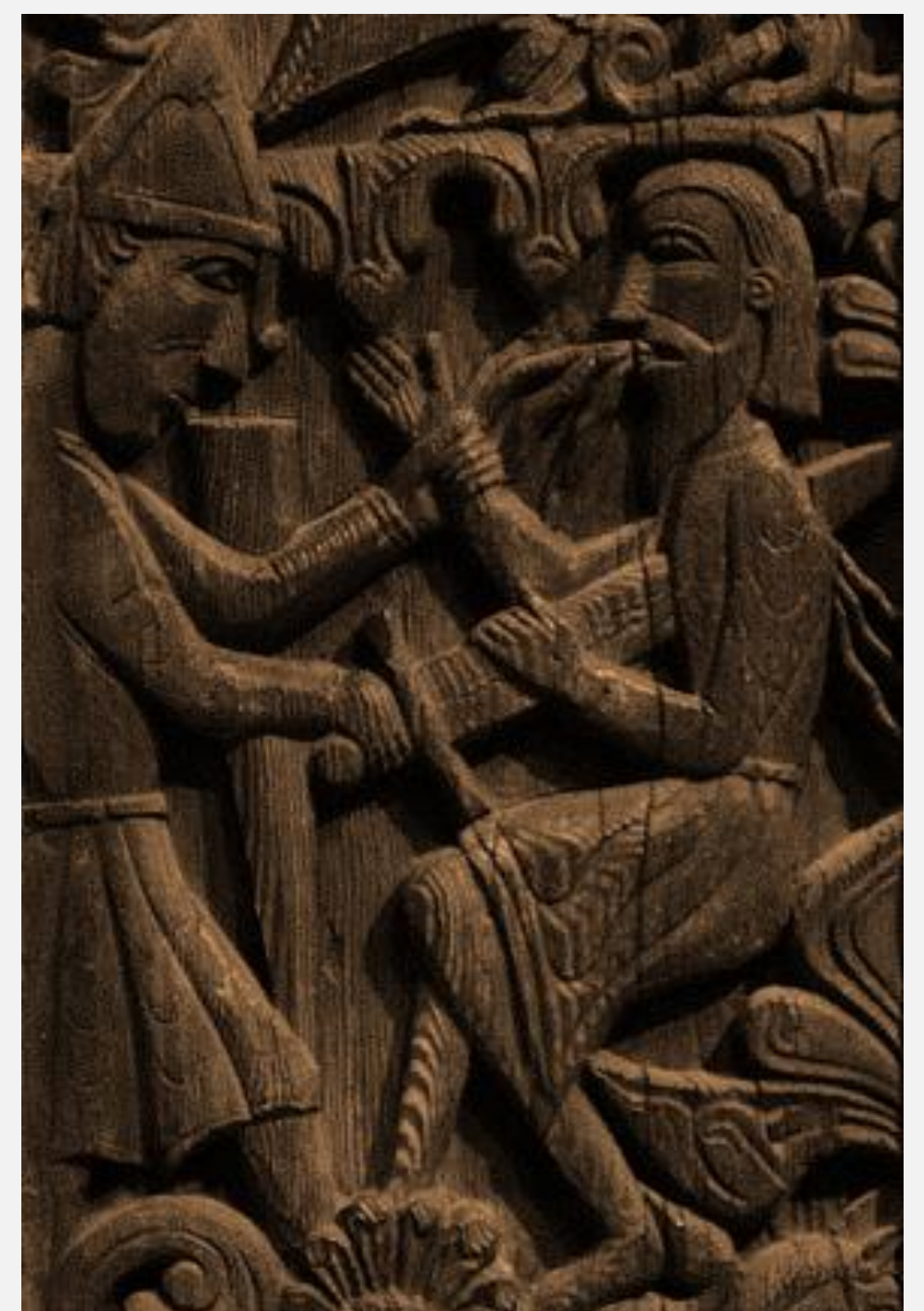
Comparative Analysis

The Sigurðr legend existed in several variations, some more developed than others. These, usually written sources, can be used to establish key scenes.

Key scenes can be used to identify Völsung scenes on artistic material, many of which are disputed.

One contribution the project will make is a catalogue and assessment of all material that has been posited as showing Sigurðr.

Sigurðr kills Reginn on the Hylestad stave church, from the late 12th to early 13th century (Norway).



REFERENCES

Jesse Byock. 1990. "Sigurðr Fáfnisbani: An Eddic Hero Carved on Norwegian Stave Churches." *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages. The Seventh International Saga Conference*. Ed. Theresa Pàroli. Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi Sull'Alto Medioevo. Pp. 619-628.

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