

THE MAN IN THE SNAKEPIT AND THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE SIGURD LEGEND

by C. B. Caples

The legend of Sigurd Fafnisbani ('Fafnir-slayer') is to medieval Germanic Europe what the legend of Roland is to medieval France, and the Arthurian legend to Western Europe. Since about the year 1200 it appears in written form from southeast Austria to Iceland and the Faroe Islands, in long and short narratives, in epics and ballads. Even earlier it appears in carvings, from the Isle of Man to Baltic Russia. These various representations show that the legend enjoyed a wide popularity, and yet the emphasis of Sigurd's story in the carvings is quite different from the focus of the story in the texts.

The story of Sigurd is familiar to modern audiences from the late nineteenth-century operas of Richard Wagner, which are based on thirteenth-century Old Norse texts. In these stories Sigurd (German Siegfried) is a kind of young Hercules who slays the treasure-guarding dragon Fafnir on behalf of the smith Regin. In the aftermath of the slaying, however, Sigurd acquires magic powers with which he discovers that Regin plans to murder him; he slays Regin instead, thus gaining mastery over the treasure, but there is a curse on the treasure and all its owners. Later Sigurd rescues the Valkyrie Brunhild from a ring of fire, and they fall in love. Still later Sigurd falls in love with the sister of Gunnar and wins her hand by helping Gunnar to trick Brunhild and to win her as Gunnar's bride. Brunhild, resentful of such treatment, incites Gunnar, greedy for treasure, to hostilities against his brother-in-law, and Gunnar's henchman Hogni murders Sigurd. Modern audiences are probably less familiar with Wagner's continuation, in which Hogni murders Gunnar, than with the traditional continuation in which Gunnar's sister avenges her husband Sigurd by contracting a second marriage to Attila the Hun, whom she induces to murder Hogni and to cast Gunnar into a snakepit.

Except for the love-affair of Sigurd and Brunhild, the very existence of which has been doubted by some recent scholars,¹ this is roughly the legend presented by the great Germanic epics, the German *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), the lays of the *Elder Edda* (the extant manuscript is mid-thirteenth

Miss Caples is Assistant Professor of German at Rice University.

century, although some of the material may or may not date back several centuries), and the Old Norse *Thidrekssaga* and *Volsungasaga* (also mid-thirteenth century). All these works recount in detail the story of Sigurd's murder by his wife's kinsmen, and their death at the hands of Attila and their sister. The dragon-slaying is a minor episode in these works (it is scarcely alluded to in the *Nibelungenlied*). The detailed lays of Sigurd's youthful exploits, the *Reginmál* and the *Fafnismál* of the verse *Edda*, on the other hand, scarcely hint at Sigurd's marriage, far less the rest of the story, and never mention Gunnar. In other words, the two stories (Sigurd Fafnir-slayer, and Sigurd and his in-laws) never achieve a smooth integration. Quite possibly they should be regarded as separate stories, originally unrelated to each other.²

Dating from roughly between A.D. 1000 and 1200, or two centuries before there is any written evidence of the Sigurd stories we know, we have a pictorial source for the early form of the legend in wood and stone carvings from Scandinavia and the British Isles. Like most artistic monuments from this period, the carvings chiefly decorate objects intended for the church or burial-ground—crosses, burial-stones, church portals, baptismal fountains. Despite the secular, even pagan, character of the story illustrated, and despite the great rarity of the representation of the human form in Norwegian art of this period, at least twenty-five carvings of the Sigurd legend have been identified in Norway alone.³ All of the approximately thirty extant representations portray the story in a few formulaic scenes with such consistent imagery that they constitute visual metaphors for different stages of the story, that is, icons—there are less than a dozen of these icons in all. As told by the icons the story runs: (1) Sigurd assists the smith Regin, (2) who forges him a sword, (3) with which he slays the dragon Fafnir. Thus (4) he wins the treasure of the dwarf Andvari, enough gold (including a magic ring) to cover an otter-skin. (5) Sigurd cuts up Fafnir's heart, impales the slices on a stick, and roasts them; touching the hot meat, he burns his thumb and puts it in his mouth. At the taste of Fafnir's blood (6) he is magically able to understand the speech of birds in a nearby tree, and overhears them telling how Regin plans to murder him to gain Andvari's treasure, now in a treasure-chest on the back of Sigurd's horse Grani. (7) Sigurd slays Regin. Years later the curse on the treasure results in the murder of Sigurd's murderer Gunnar, (8) who is thrown into a snakepit with his hands bound. He plays the harp with his feet in an attempt to lull the snakes, but in vain.

The slaying of Fafnir (icon 3 in this list) occurs in all but three of the known Sigurd-representations, a striking statistic considering the fragmentary state of some of the monuments. In a number of cases this icon stands alone. Usually Sigurd impales the dragon from below, with a sword through its belly; in a few cases the icon has been simplified to an isolated

sword, thrust through the dragon from below.⁴ Other widely popular icons are the horse Grani bearing the treasure-chest on his back (usually in conjunction with a tree containing two or more birds); Fafnir's heart (represented as three rings encircling a stick), often juxtaposed with the image of Sigurd touching his burnt thumb to his mouth; the otter's skin; the smith's tools (with or without the smith). The regular reiteration of these motifs implies the existence of a strict tradition of representations.⁵

The most problematic of the icons is the rarest of them, Gunnar in the snakepit. All the other commonly represented scenes tell a strikingly *consecutive* story. Each successive episode flows from the last; the smith in (1) forges the sword in (2), with which Sigurd slays the dragon in (3) and so on. Gunnar's presence is conventionally explained as the *final* episode in the story of Sigurd and his treasure, the death of the man who had him murdered for it.⁶ Yet between the slaying of Regin and the death of Sigurd's treacherous brother-in-law there is a lacuna, many adventures, characters, and years having been omitted. No known icon refers with certainty to the widely popular story of Brunhild, to the murder of Sigurd by Gunnar and Hogni, or to the marriage of Sigurd's widow to Attila.⁷ For the single icon of Gunnar in the snakepit, playing the harp with his feet, there are half a dozen examples later than the early twelfth century, but only the thirteenth-century Austad portal from Norway, which juxtaposes this scene and the scene in which Gunnar's henchman Hogni is murdered, portrays with certainty any other episode from Gunnar's story.⁸ A plausible explanation for the omission of all these connecting episodes, which by the thirteenth century constitute the heart of the story in its popular form, is that the Gunnar story was added only belatedly to the Sigurd iconography, apparently by borrowing an already familiar Gunnar icon without adaptation.

Or is there a snakepit already connected with the Sigurd story? Of the two known examples of the snakepit icon within the Sigurd iconography, the better is on the Hylestad portal, ca. 1200, originally from south central Norway (figure 1). Particularly finely-carved in wood, the material of all Norwegian portals, and well-preserved, it bears an unusually complete set of seven different scenes, including six of the most popular icons. At the bottom of the right-hand plank, Sigurd and Regin work in the smithy; above this, Regin forges a sword for Sigurd; at the top, Sigurd slays Fafnir. At the bottom of the left-hand plank, Sigurd puts his thumb to his mouth while roasting Fafnir's heart; above him, two birds sit in a tree while Grani stands nearby with the treasure-chest on his back; above them Sigurd slays Regin; at the top, Gunnar in the snakepit plays the harp with his feet.⁹ The order of the icons in the other known carvings generally varies a good deal, but icons for the treasure appear toward the top of Norwegian portals such as those from Mael and Lårdal (figures 2 and 3).¹⁰ Gunnar in the snakepit likewise appears at the top of the Hylestad portal, but despite the



FIG. 1. HYLESTAD PORTAL. Reprinted from Emil Ploss, *Siegfried-Sigurd, der Drachenkämpfer* (Köln: 1966), by permission of the publisher, Böhlau Verlag.



FIG. 2. MAEL PORTAL. Photo by C. B. Caples.



suggestive location of his icon, it is difficult to connect the figure of Gunnar, except in the long-range sense, with Andvari's treasure.

In the *Elder Edda*, the *Reginismál* begins by recounting how Fafnir acquired Andvari's treasure. The god Loki kills a brother of Fafnir and Regin, who has assumed the shape of an otter. Their father threatens to kill Odin and two companions if the gods do not give him enough gold to cover the otter-skin. Loki steals the necessary gold (including a ring) from the dwarf Andvari, who curses it and all its future possessors. Later Fafnir kills his father for the treasure and refuses to give Regin a share of it. To guard the treasure, Fafnir takes on the shape of a dragon.¹¹ Elsewhere in the *Eddas*, the gods seize Loki, apparently for insulting them in the *Lokasenna* of the *Elder Edda*, but for his part in Baldr's death in the prose *Edda* of Snorri. It is interesting that they capture Loki as he hides, disguised as a fish, in a waterfall—motifs which forcibly recall the story of Andvari, who used the same disguise and hiding place. The gods punish Loki by binding him and fastening a poisonous snake over him to drip venom on him.¹² The icon of Loki, therefore, is that of a man bound and tormented by a serpent or serpents; "the bound one" is one of his traditional epithets,¹³ and he is represented in this attitude on Viking carvings.¹⁴ Leading characters in the treasure's history are thus the brother of Fafnir and Regin (actually implied on the Mael and Nesland portals by the otter-skin icon), Andvari, and Loki the "bound one."

The notion of a pagan god represented on a carving for a Christian church is not as aberrant as it may seem to the reader unfamiliar with medieval freedom in these matters. Recently the Norwegian art historian Martin Blindheim has suggested the presence of Loki in another form on the thirteenth-century Norwegian Nesland portal. This portal has four scenic 'medallions.' The bottom one (figure 4) portrays a horse with a treasure-chest on its back (obviously Grani); above it is a man on horseback (presumably Sigurd on Grani); then an unidentified man with a coin-like object in each hand, wearing a clerical stole, beside a half moon, which traditionally shone for dwellers of the netherworld, such as dwarves (figure 5);¹⁵ and at the top is a man holding a large round object and a horn (figure 6). There is no real counterpart to the last two figures elsewhere in the known Sigurd iconography, but Blindheim, the leading authority on the icons of the Sigurd legend, suggests they represent, respectively, Andvari the dwarf and Loki, because of their roles in the story of Sigurd's treasure.¹⁶ The tradition as we know it already contains more than one icon to evoke the treasure, which can be represented by the otter-skin, known only from the Ramsey cross on the Isle of Man (figure 7), ca. 1000,¹⁷ and from the two remarkably similar thirteenth-century Mael and Lårdal portals from Norway,

FIG. 3. LÅRDAL PORTAL. Reprinted by permission from *Siegfried-Sigurd, der Drachenkämpfer*.



FIG. 4. GRANI WITH TREASURE CHEST, NESLAND PORTAL. Photo by C. B. Caples.



FIG. 5. MAN IN CLERICAL STOLE, NESLAND PORTAL. Photo by C. B. Caples.



FIG. 7. RAMSEY CROSS. Reprinted by permission from *Siegfried-Sigurd, der Drachenkämpfer*.



FIG. 6. MAN WITH DISC AND HORN, NESLAND PORTAL. Photo by C. B. Caples.

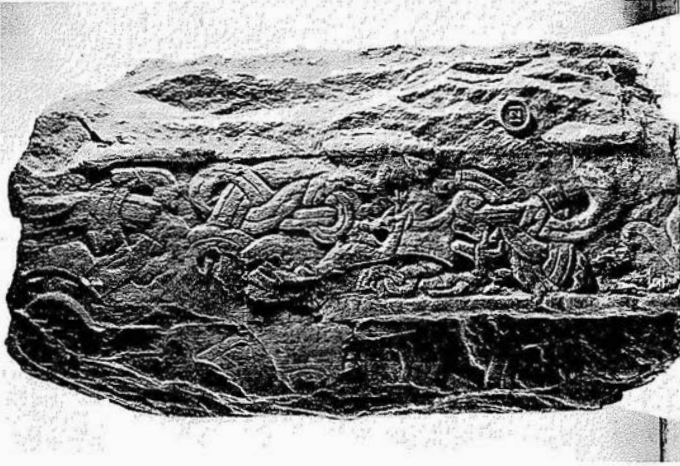


FIG. 9. KIRK ANDREAS CROSS. Reprinted by permission from *Siegfried-Sigurd, der Drachenkämpfer*.



FIG. 8. BÄHUSLEN FONT. Photo by C. B. Caples.

or by the treasure-chest carried by Grani. There is no reason to suppose the treasure may not have been portrayed in still other ways. If Blindheim is right, an evocation of Loki on the Hylestad portal would not be an isolated instance. The question then arises whether, as Ploss assumes, Gunnar appears on the Hylestad portal because of his role in the late version of the Sigurd story,¹⁸ or whether Gunnar's icon appears there because a tradition exists in which a snakepit icon is among those used to evoke the story of Sigurd and his treasure.

Although he may have arrived there through an iconographic resemblance to Loki, the man in the snakepit on the Hylestad portal is surely Gunnar. The harp played with the feet identifies him unmistakably. In all known separate representations of Gunnar, from the twelfth-century stone Båhuslen font in Sweden (figure 8) to the fourteenth-century drinking-horn of Mo (Norway),¹⁹ snakes and a harp accompany the bound Gunnar.²⁰ The one possible exception is the only other known monument linking Sigurd and Gunnar, the early eleventh-century Kirk Andreas cross from the Isle of Man (figure 9).²¹ On one side of the stone shaft we find icons of the Sigurd story (Sigurd slaying Fafnir, Sigurd roasting Fafnir's heart, Grani and a bird), and on the other we find a man bound, among serpents, with his feet linked by some kind of bond but, as observers agree, without a harp. Blindheim reasons that the association with the depiction of Sigurd's story on the other side of the cross proves that this is Gunnar and not Loki; he explains the absence of the harp as the result of stylization.²² But this is putting the cart before the horse. Why only in this very early carving, one of the earliest of the Sigurd monuments and earlier than any other of the Gunnar icons anywhere, does the man appear without the harp? Among the scenes most frequently represented on the pre-Christian Gotland runestones of the Ringerike style, which cannot be linked to the stories of either Sigurd or Gunnar, there is a recurring figure of a man in a snakepit, without the harp. To insist on identifying the harpless man in the Kirk Andreas snakepit with Gunnar presupposes that the story of Sigurd is iconographically linked with that of Gunnar—yet the Hylestad portal alone among the later carvings associates the two. By the time the Hylestad portal was carved, the stories of Sigurd and Gunnar had already combined, but for the period of the Kirk Andreas cross, there is no evidence for such a combination, and most scholars argue against it.²³ The likelier explanation is that the figure on the Kirk Andreas cross lacks Gunnar's harp because he is not Gunnar. If this is correct, then we have here Loki, "the bound one," as an icon for the treasure, performing the same function as the otter-skin possibly accompanied by Loki on the roughly contemporary Ramsey cross.²⁴

The theory that Gunnar appears on the Hylestad portal because of a contamination between his icon and that of Loki "the bound one" receives unexpected support from peculiarities in the Gunnar icons of the Numedal,

in southeast Norway. Blindheim's observation about the 'clerical' attributes, bestowed on the Nesland figure he identifies as Andvari (figure 5) perhaps because of the dwarf's otherworldly powers, reminds one of a curious feature of the late (thirteenth-century) representations of Gunnar on the Uvdal (figure 10) and Mellom-Kravik portals. These are isolated Gunnar icons, showing him standing on his harp among the serpents, wearing a bishop's mitre.²⁵ This is the more surprising, as Gunnar has no otherworldly powers. Contamination with the icons for the treasure seems here to have worked both ways, so that the figure of Gunnar has picked up clerical vestments from the treasure icons.

Whatever the role of Sigurd in the post-twelfth-century stories of Gunnar and Attila, the Scandinavian Sigurd icons all tell the story of Sigurd's slaying Fafnir and Regin, and gaining Fafnir's (Andvari's) treasure. If Sigurd came to a tragic end, the icons do not record it. The earliest indisputable Sigurd icons are all from around the year 1000: the Swedish runestones of Ramsunda and Gök, the Manx crosses of Kirk Andreas, Ramsey, Malew, and Jurby, and the Halton cross in Lancashire. All these early sources, in Sweden, England, and the Isle of Man, portray the legend of Sigurd's youth already in fully developed form, employing variously almost all the icons known from the later carvings in Norway. Around the year 1000 the story of Sigurd Fafnir-slayer was essentially what it still remained in the carvings two hundred years later, the period at which we find it in literature as little more than a minor episode in the lives of Sigurd's in-laws. This hardly implies a tradition in which Sigurd belongs to Gunnar's story, for only one late example refers with certainty to an association of the two legends. Then how did the icons converge? We know from the Mael, Nesland, and Lårdal portals, and the Ramsey and Halton crosses, how important a role the treasure's history played as one of the seven major iconographically represented episodes of the Sigurd legend. Loki the "bound god" is regularly associated with the treasure; indeed the Mael and Ramsey monuments probably portray him among their treasure icons.²⁶ The appropriateness of a man-in-the-snakepit icon to the general iconography of the Sigurd legend is obvious, and the Kirk Andreas cross confirms it. After 1100, slightly later than the early Sigurd tradition, the Gunnar icon, a man in a snakepit with a harp at his feet, became moderately popular in Sweden and Norway, although not as popular as the Sigurd legend with its thirty or more examples and wide geographical range. As far as we can tell, this was the only Gunnar icon, since only the Austad portal (figure 11—death of Gunnar) presents any other scene, and that one a closely related one (the death of Gunnar's henchman Hogni, which immediately precedes Gunnar's own death in the *Edda's* accounts). The simplest explanation for the appearance of a Gunnar icon on the Hylestad portal is contamination through the similarity of one of the treasure icons (Loki "the bound one") to the increas-



FIG. 11. AUSTAD PORTAL. Photo by C. B. Caples.



FIG. 10. UVDAL PORTAL. Photo by C. B. Caples.

ingly familiar snakepit icon of Gunnar.

To recapitulate, this study began as a response to the question, why is there an irrelevant scene, the man in the snakepit, among the icons of Sigurd's youthful deeds? The depiction of the dying Gunnar refers to an episode only very distantly connected to the events of Sigurd's treasure-winning, whereas all the other icons portray a tightly cohesive story from Sigurd's youth with no references to his later life. But perhaps the question should have been: is the snakepit icon in fact an irrelevant one? Must it refer only to a story so tangentially relevant to Sigurd's youth as the death of Gunnar? The assumption that the man in the snakepit in this icon must be Gunnar is based on the fact that we know later versions of Sigurd's life which associate him with Gunnar. But conversely, the reconstruction of an early association between the two stories is based on the theory that an early carving, the Kirk Andreas cross, must portray Gunnar among the Sigurd icons.²⁷ This is a circular argument, and it hardly supports, far less proves, the original identity of the man in the snakepit with the legendary figure of Gunnar. There is a figure closer at hand who can be identified both with the man in the snakepit and with the story of Sigurd's treasure, that is, Loki "the bound one." Unlike Gunnar, Loki is in sequence with the other events and characters portrayed from Sigurd's youth. Emblems for the treasure, and for its history before Sigurd won it, are fairly common among the Sigurd icons. The otter-skin is a direct allusion to the story of Loki, pagan figure though he is; and if Blindheim is right about the Nesland portal, another church carving may have portrayed the Old Norse god openly.²⁸

NOTES

1. R. G. Finch, "Brunhild and Siegfried," *Saga-Book* 17 (1967-68): 229.
2. K. C. King, *Das Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), p. 44, says "I have for years been of the opinion that we should not call this story [Brunhild's vengeance and the death of Gunnar] a Siegfried story at all."
3. Martin Blindheim, "Fra hedensk sagnfigur til kristent forbilde," *Den iconographiske post* 1973, fascicle 3, 7.
4. See Martin Blindheim, *Sigurds Saga i middelalderens Billedkunst* (Oslo: Universitets Oldsaksamling, 1972), p. 4, and James Lang, "Sigurd Fafnesbane og Volund Smed," *Den iconographiske post* 1974, fascicle 3, 20.
5. Henrik Schück, *Studier: I. Nordisk Litteratur- och Religionshistorie* (Stockholm: Hugo Gebers Förlag, 1904), p. 201.
6. Emil Ploss, *Siegfried-Sigurd der Drachenkämpfer: Untersuchungen zur germanisch-deutschen Heldensage* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1966), pp. 84-85.
7. There are three possible exceptions: on the fourteenth-century wooden chairback carving in Heddal stave-church, a figure approached by two men on horseback, one of whom is holding

out a ring (Brunhild, Sigurd, and Gunnar?); on the Øverhogdalstapet in Östersund museum, a seated woman approached by a man on horseback (Brunhild and Sigurd?); on the Alstad rune-stone, two mounted men on a hunt (Hogni and Gunnar?). See Blindheim, *Sigurds Saga*, pp. 34-36; but except for the ring in the first carving (the ring from Andvari's treasure?) there are no identifying details, and therefore the attributions strike me as highly conjectural. Blindheim and others accept the first of these three as a representation from the Brunhild story, but a recent article raises serious objections to this interpretation (Bernt C. Lange, "Andvare eller Brynhild?: om tolkningen af en stol i Heddal stavkirke," *Den iconographiske post 1973*, fascicle 4, 19-24).

8. Blindheim, *Sigurds Saga*, pp. 35-38.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23. See also Per Gjaerder, *Norske Pryd-dører fra Middelalderen*, Universitet i Bergens Skrifter 21 (Bergen: John Griegs Boktrykkeri, 1952), pp. 58-67.

10. See Blindheim, *Sigurds Saga*, p. 24.

11. Gustav Neckel, ed., *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern I. Text*, vol. 9 of Germanische Bibliothek, 2te Abteilung (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1914), pp. 169-175. See also Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, udg. af Finnur Jónsson, 2nd ed. (København: G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1926), pp. 101-102.

12. Neckel, *Edda*, p. 106, and Snorri, *Edda*, pp. 60-62.

13. Snorri, *Edda*, p. 84.

14. H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 179.

15. Blindheim, "Fra hedensk sagnfigur," 13.

16. *Ibid.*, 12-13.

17. P. C. Kermodé, *Manx Crosses, or the Inscribed and Sculptured Monuments of the Isle of Man from about the End of the Fifth to the Beginning of the Thirteenth Century* (London: Benrose and Sons Ltd., 1907), pp. 177-178.

18. Ploss, *Siegfried-Sigurd der Drachenkämpfer*, p. 85.

19. See Blindheim, *Sigurds Saga*, pp. 35-38.

20. Klaus von See, *Germanische Heldensage: Stoffe, Probleme, Methoden* (Frankfurt: Athenäum Verlag, 1971), pp. 117-121, attempts to link any figure in a snakepit with Gunnar, even in Viking carvings; but Blindheim points out that the snakepit fate alone is by no means peculiar to Gunnar in Norse legend and that snakepit icons can be securely identified with Gunnar only when there are further identifying details such as the harp (*Sigurds Saga*, p. 12). None of the Ringerike carvings include other figures or scenes which recall the story of Sigurd or Gunnar; see Sune Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*, 2 vols. (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1941-42), I, pp. 105-106.

21. Kermodé, *Manx Crosses*, pp. 57-58. On dating see pp. 179-180.

22. Blindheim, *Sigurds Saga*, p. 29.

23. See especially Andreas Heusler, *Nibelungensage und Nibelungenlied: die Stoffgeschichte des deutschen Epos*, 6te Aufl. (Dortmund: Verlagsbuchhandlung Fr. Wilh. Rufus, 1965), especially p. 49.

24. Kermodé, *Manx Crosses*, p. 178; but Blindheim, *Sigurds Saga*, p. 29, thinks this particular figure on the Ramsey cross represents Sigurd.

25. Gjaerder, *Norske Pryd-dører*, p. 193.

26. See notes 22 and 24.

27. Von See, *Germanische Heldensage*, pp. 114-116 on the Ramsunda stone: "Beachtenswert ist dieses Denkmal nicht etwa deswegen, weil es . . . ein Sagendetail belegt, das wir in dieser

Umgebung nicht erwarten möchten, im Gegenteil: alle Details der Felsritzung sind eben deshalb einwandfrei identifizierbar, weil sie genau der Sagenfabel entsprechen, die uns aus den Sigurdliedern der Edda bekannt ist."

28. Peter Anker, *The Art of Scandinavia*, 2 vols. (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1970), I, p. 417: "The acceptance of the Christian doctrine in Norway in the eleventh century probably did not mean that the people stopped believing in the existence of the ancient gods. . . . the pagan gods were now reduced to representatives of Evil." Anker suggests that *Scandinavian church portal iconography* was probably used to portray the foundation of Christianity and the victory of the Christian Church through images of the downfall of the pagan world and its gods.