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Matthias S. Toplak

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**Die Bildsteine Gotlands. Probleme und neue Wege ihrer
Dokumentation, Lesung und Deutung**
Sigmund Oehrl

SCHRIFTFLEITUNG FRANKFURT A. M. PALMENGARTENSTRASSE 10-12



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drei umfangreichen Veröffentlichungen des Schiffsgrabes aus Sutton Hoo (R. BRUCE-MITFORD, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial I–III* [London 1975/1978/1983]), so ist überaus positiv zu vermerken, dass für Prittlewell das Umfeld sehr gewinnbringend mit ausgewertet werden konnte. Für Sutton Hoo erfolgte eine solche Einordnung erst später im Rahmen der Untersuchungen Martin CARVERS (*Sutton Hoo. A Seventh-century Princely Burial Ground and its Context. Reports Research Com. Soc. Ant. London 69* [London 2005]). Die Prittlewell-Publikation verbindet auf hervorragende Weise die detaillierte Analyse eines einzelnen Prunkgrabes mit der Einordnung in einen besiedlungsgeschichtlichen Kontext. Die unterschiedlichen „Ebenen“ der Auswertung sind dabei sehr gut aufeinander bezogen. Für den „eiligen“ Lesenden bietet der kleine Führer von Hirst und Scull alle wesentlichen Informationen.

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SIGMUND OEHL, Die Bildsteine Gotlands. Probleme und neue Wege ihrer Dokumentation, Lesung und Deutung. *Studia archaeologiae medii aevi* 3. Likias, Friedberg 2019. € 68.00. ISBN 978-3-9820130-1-5. Two volumes, XII + 418 pages and 347 plates.

Gotland's picture stones are a unique and invaluable source for mentality and mythology of late Iron Age and Viking Age Scandinavia. These monuments, mostly made of erected limestone slabs in different sizes and shapes, dating to the 5th to 11th century, are almost exclusively limited to the Baltic island of Gotland. The complex motives and iconographic programmes that were carved and painted on these stones provide a unique and direct approach to the pictorial world and especially to mythology and cosmology of a mostly preliterate era, for which we are otherwise dependent on later literary sources.

With his habilitation treatise, submitted in the disciplines of archaeology as well as Old Norse studies at the University of Munich and now published in form of a two-volumed monography, Sigmund Oehl opens a new chapter in the long and partially repetitive discussion about the reading and interpretation of these monuments. Even today, the publication 'Gotlands Bildsteine' from Sune LINDQVIST (*Gotlands Bildsteine 1–2* [Stockholm 1941/42]) is fundamental for most investigations on picture stones. Several stones have been seriously damaged in the last decades due to inappropriate storage – a fact which is heavily criticised by Oehl on several occasions (see especially pp. 294–298) – so that much of the iconography today can hardly be identified. Because of this, the drawings and photographs of the often later re-painted stones published in 'Gotlands Bildsteine' are, in most cases, the only access to the iconography. Over the years, these illustrations in Lindqvist's publication have become a widely accepted canon, even though the drawings and renderings presented are merely interpretations based on technically primitive analyses of the stones with varying illumination. Furthermore, the corpus of picture stones has increased twofold since the fundamental publication. However, due to the inadequate state of publication, the current research is still limited to a section of the known material, whose reading and interpretation mostly seem to have been determined more than 70 years ago. Several single picture stones or fragments of picture stones were published and discussed in the last years (e. g. B. BÖTTGER-NIEDENZU / A. NIEDENZU, *Neufunde gotländischer Bildsteine 1981–1985. Skandinavistik. Zeitschr. Sprache, Lit. u. Kultur nordische Länder* 18, 1988, 1–24), and Erik NYLÉN and Jan Peder LAMM (*Bildstenar*³ [Stockholm 2003]) updated the list of picture stones, beginning with a small number of finds in the first edition from 1978 to 467 finds in the latest publication from 2003.

Critical re-evaluations of the iconography remained rare, and the reliability of the later literary sources, particularly the famous Edda, for the interpretation of the picture stones was only sporadically questioned (e.g. B. BÖTTGER-NIEDENZU, *Darstellungen auf gotländischen Bildsteinen, vor allem des Typs C und D, und die Frage ihres Zusammenhanges mit Stoffen der altnordischen Literatur* [Unpubl. Master's thesis Univ. Munich] [Munich 1982]).

Oehrl aims at filling this academic void through the results of his research project. With Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) and 3D-digitisation – computer based photographic methods –, he presents technical procedures that allow for far more objective analyses of the iconography scratched into the surface of the stones and that even highlight structures which remain invisible with conventional methods. The far-reaching significance of these new methods for the pre-iconographic reading, as well as for the interpretation of picture stones, is illustrated in the present monography with 20 selected picture stones. Based on his investigations with RTI and 3D-digitisation, Oehrl intensely describes his new reading of these examples and discusses his evaluation, which can be retraced step by step in the comprehensive volume of plates. Different than expected, due to the above-mentioned research gap, 'Die Bildsteine Gotlands' is not a catalogue or actual compilation of all currently known picture stones and fragments but rather an exemplary examination of problems and new possibilities in the documentation, reading, and interpretation by means of representative or important examples. The book is well-written and even entertaining, even though some passages are too detailed and descriptive while other interesting aspects are only mentioned briefly, for example, especially the archaeological aspect of the investigation of picture stones would be worth a deeper discussion. The whole book is shaped by Oehrl's enormous knowledge of literature and material and his meticulous approach, which he explains step by step in both text and illustrations. The illustrations in the volume of plates are arranged in the order of their appearance in the text, which leads, at times, to the situation of scrolling back and forth. However, due to the extensive number of pictures, this seems to be the most practical way of arranging them, even though it complicates the selective search for certain illustrations. Furthermore, Oehrl's scientific demand to prove every single step in his argumentation, even in the iconographic material, produces some redundancies in the volume of plates; the warriors depicted on the stone of Bro kyrka I (SE) are presented on ten plates, each with several illustrations (pls 146–155).

In the first chapter (pp. 1–42), Oehrl reports the background of the Gotlandic picture stones. After a short introduction about Gotland, he presents a detailed overview over the research history and different interpretative approaches, yet without discussing them in detail or explaining his rejection of certain theories, e.g. the interpretation of certain motives as depictions of the *Sigurðr*-myth as suggested by several scholars (p. 6). The typology and dating of the picture stones are subsequently presented, whereupon Oehrl keeps Lindqvist's typology for the sake of convenience but modifies his chronology based on runological and archaeological aspects (pp. 17–21) following the work of Lisbeth M. IMER (*The Viking period Gotlandic picture stones. A chronological revision*. In: M. Herlin Karnell [ed.], *Gotland's Picture Stones. Bearers of an Enigmatic Legacy*. *Gotländskt Arkiv* 84, 2012, 115–118). In the two following subchapters, Oehrl discusses prototypes and parallels of the picture stones as well as the find situations and potential functions of these monuments. The intensive discussion of southern influences on the Gotlandic picture stones (pp. 23–31) particularly illustrates Oehrl's expertise that goes far beyond the normally quoted Old Norse traditions also in his later interpretation of the depicted iconography. While the secondary use of picture stones in churchly context is thoroughly described in the subchapter concerning the find situations of picture stones *in situ* or in churches, the question about their primary function is only roughly discussed. Oehrl limits this aspect to the unquestionable memorial function and the presence of some picture stones on grave fields, whereas other potential interpretations, such as the theories presented by Anders ANDRÉN (*Doors to other worlds. Scandinavian death rituals in*

Gotlandic perspectives. *Journal European Arch.* 1,1, 1993, 33–56. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1179/096576693800731154>), which interpret the picture stones as markers for ‘liminal spaces’, are dismissed without further discussion. The connections between picture stones and ideas of remembrance and mortuary rites are obvious. However, a deeper discussion of the potential and concrete usage of picture stones in religious and cultic rituals – for instance as markers of ritual sites or sacrificial altars as Leszek GARDELA (Worshipping the dead. Viking Age cemeteries as cult sites? In: M. Egeler [ed.], *Germanische Kultorte. Vergleichende, historische und rezeptionsgeschichtliche Zugänge.* Münchner Nordist. Stud. 24 [München 2016] 169–205) proposes for Viking Age cemeteries – from an archaeological perspective would be of enormous importance for the understanding of the iconography.

The perhaps most disputed and problematic aspect of the traditional research of picture stones is addressed in the next chapter concerning the cultural context of their interpretation (pp. 43–64). Here, Oehrl discusses the possibilities of the use of Old Norse mythology and cosmology – myths that were recorded at least centuries after the time of the picture stones – as context for the iconography. In doing so, he convincingly demonstrates that many individual motives from later-transmitted literary myths can be traced back to the Viking Age, so that Old Norse literature might in fact be used as an important and productive approach to the iconographical program of the picture stones when being used with the necessary source-critical caution. However, this does not mean to be a ‘charter for inconsiderate guesses based on every available literary source’ (p. 44), as Oehrl clarifies. This source-critical usage of the literary canon of Old Norse mythology is exemplified in the following sub-chapters based on the central and recurring motives of the iconography such as the rider motive or the ship / boat.

In the following chapter (pp. 64–104), Oehrl discusses the difficulties of the pre-iconographical description of the partially heavily damaged picture stones as well as the problems of earlier editions which occasionally tend to present subjective interpretations rather than objective reconstructions. Therefore, he dedicates a sub-chapter to the re-readings and interpretive approaches of selected picture stones done by Karl HAUCK (*Germanische Bilddenkmäler des frühen Mittelalters.* Dt. Vierteljahrsschr. Literaturwiss. u. Geistesgesch. 31, 1957, 349–379). By means of latex moulds, Hauck tried to present new technical ways of reading and analysing picture stones shortly after Lindqvist, being the first to highlight the problem of an ‘established reading’ based on Lindqvist’s work. The technical difficulties and the so far insufficient methods in the traditional reading of picture stones are the background for the two new technical procedures – RTI and 3D-digitisation – which are presented by Oehrl in the following sub-chapter. Both techniques allow completely new ways of documentation and analysis as has already been proven in the case of 3D-digitisation, e. g. of rune stones (L. KITZLER ÄHFELDT, *Work and Worship. Laser Scanner Analysis of Viking Age Rune Stones.* Theses and Papers Arch. B 9 [Stockholm 2002]).

The two central chapters (chapter 4, pp. 105–168; chapter 5, 169–280) are the backbone of Oehrl’s work with the presentation of almost two dozen case studies. Illustrated by a multitude of pictures in the volume of plates, he describes selected picture stones, discusses problems of earlier readings – an outstanding example is the picture stone of Hablingbo Havor I (SE; pp. 148–151) –, demonstrates his new readings based on RTI and 3D-digitisation, and interprets the iconography against the background of myths and motives from Old Norse mythology. Many of his results seem to be not so spectacular at first. However, his investigations prove that the new technical methods allow precise scientific reading and documentation as they are priceless instruments for the research on picture stones that enable a mostly unadulterated and objective access to the material. The enormous importance of such a documentation of almost lost material is visible in the example of Klinte Hunninge I (SE; pp. 191–208) which is virtually blank today due to bad preservation. Lindqvist presents two slightly different reconstructions of this picture stone that give

the impression of a distinct and accepted reading but are nothing more than mostly subjective and even inaccurate interpretations, as Oehrl's investigations reveal. Furthermore, his results deconstruct several traditional interpretations which have, so far, hardly been questioned. The most famous example is the supposed depiction of Thor's fishing of the Midgard Serpent on Ardre VIII (SE; pp. 181–191). This motive is known from some Viking Age picture monuments, thus being older than the literary transmissions in Eddic literature. But with the convincing re-reading of Ardre VIII, one of the oldest proofs and perhaps even the earliest for this myth has ceased to exist. Moreover, the identification of a man with a horned helmet next to a ship on the picture stone of Rute St. Valle 2 (SE) is rightly presented as a 'minor sensation' (p. 227) by Oehrl, as this motive relates especially to Vendel Period traditions and seems to refer to the myth of Odin. This allows an interpretation of the horned figure as a divine companion ("Sieghelfer") of the ship's crew. Thus, the new discovery is strengthening the interpretation of the ship motive as a vessel of the dead, crossing the borders between this world and the afterlife. Oehrl's line of argumentation for his new readings and interpretations are documented in a highly assiduous and scientific manner through text and illustrations. In contrast, he dismisses some alternative interpretations without further discussions, for example, the theory that the beast fight on the picture stone of Hangvar Austers I (SE) might depict a dragon slayer in relation to the *Sigurðr*-myth, which is quite prominent in Old Norse iconography (RGA² 28 [2005] 412–423 s. v. Sigurddarstellungen [K. DÜWEL]).

The final chapter (pp. 281–299) comprises a summary, as well as a discussion, concerning the future of research on picture stones, focussing especially on the handling of the monuments themselves. Attached to this discussion is a short summary in English, a detailed bibliography, and an extensive appendix. Together with the raw data, which is available online, tables with adjustments for the RTI-Viewer for all discussed picture stones given in the appendix allow the reproduction of all analyses done by Oehrl. Furthermore, the appendix contains a register with the basic data of all picture stones discussed in the work as well as registers for places, names, and subjects, and a list of figures.

With the present book, Oehrl certainly presents the future standard work for the research on picture stones. 'Die Bildsteine Gotlands' sets new benchmarks for the technical reading and documentation of the iconography as well as for the interpretation of the motives against the background of literarily transmitted Old Norse mythology and cosmology. Oehrl succeeds in presenting a practicable compromise between the traditional and often far too uncritical adaption of later literary sources and the total renunciation of this invaluable source as a direct approach to Old Norse mentality. Taking the chain of circumstantial evidence based on depictions and contemporary literary transmissions, such as skaldic poetry and single Eddic poems, he can prove the high age of many motives and even partially of complete myths. However, occasionally a short discussion or at least a reference to the assumed age of some literary sources in the footnotes would have been desirable. An example is the motive of the 'oath boar' ("Schwureber"), which Oehrl discusses on the picture stones I and IV from Lärbro Tängelgårda (SE; p. 172) and which occurs in two Old Norse texts: in the *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* and the *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* (R. SIMEK / H. PÁLSSON, *Lexikon der altnordischen Literatur*². Kröners Taschenausg. 490 [Stuttgart 2007] 174; 178–179). Both are difficult to use as sources for the 10th/11th century without further discussions. The methodology presented by Oehrl for the appropriate handling of the picture stones is a multi-level approach that starts with an objective 'pre-iconographical' reading. The digital techniques allow for a far more objective reading and documentation as well as identification of previously obscure details, all of which help to clarify controversial readings. By these means, the presented techniques are of highest importance for the iconographical analysis. However, it must be taken into consideration that the picture stones were painted in a way that is no longer detectable but originally had an effect on the iconography's intention. Furthermore, as

Oehrl admits himself, the following interpretation remains subjective despite the methodological approach, and it must also be considered that picture stones were used as ‘open media’ by being modified over the course of time (pp. 289–290), and as a consequence, this might complicate the interpretation of their original meaning.

‘Die Bildsteine Gotlands’ offers new inputs and especially new techniques and methodologies for the reading, documentation, and interpretation of the famous Gotlandic picture stones and updates central aspects of the previous research. Furthermore, Oehrl highlights the reciprocal relations between picture stones and literarily transmitted Old Norse mythology important for our understanding of Viking Age mentality and beliefs, thus helping to contextualise the picture stones in their original function as monuments for the cult of the dead and memento. His approach will hopefully lead to new and important results in combination with archaeological investigations.

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EGON WAMERS (ed.), Der Tassilo-Liutpiric-Kelch im Stift Kremsmünster. Geschichte – Archäologie – Kunst. Schriften des archäologischen Museums Frankfurt Band 32. Schnell und Steiner, Regensburg 2019. € 50.00. ISBN 978-3-7954-3187-7. 496 pages with 381 colour illustrations, 90 b/w illustrations, and 2 foldouts.

The title itself already announces one of the many noteworthy results published in this volume: the so-called “Tassilo chalice” from the Upper Austrian Benedictine abbey of Kremsmünster (AT), studied in the last century first and foremost by Günter Haseloff and Victor H. Elbern, was actually a “Tassilo-Liutpiric chalice”. While both donors are clearly mentioned in the inscription surrounding the foot of the chalice, this realisation is not banal – it is not just a result of our current attitudes to gender but based on the insight that Liutpiric, a daughter of the last Langobard rulers Desiderius and Ansa, was in many ways actively involved in the way her husband Tassilo III exercised his power. Tassilo, himself of the house of the Agilolfings, was tried in AD 788 at the Ingelheim kings’ court (*Pfalz*). On spurious charges he was found guilty of disloyalty and an alleged “desertion” several decades before and condemned to death – a judgment later converted to confinement in a monastery. Liutpiric, their sons and daughters, *familia* and *thesauri* had also been brought to Ingelheim (DE). Much like Tassilo himself, after the trial his wife and children vanished in Rhenish or West Frankish abbeys. Most likely, it was the Frankish king’s wish that they should be the victims of a *damnatio memoriae*. In AD 794, however, Charlemagne had the Agilolfing noble brought to a synod then sitting in Frankfurt (DE), where the prisoner once again had to renounce all claims to power in Bavaria in favour of the king. For Egon Wamers, the volume should thus be seen as a “counterbalance to the humiliating show trial” to which the Bavarian prince was subjected in *locus celeberrimus franconofurd* (“als Ausgleich für den schmachvollen Schauprozess”; *Einleitung*, p. 11). The book contains papers presented at a conference held in Frankfurt from the 21st–23rd of February 2018, themselves the result of a joint research project of the *Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum Mainz* (RGZM) and the *Archäologisches Museum Frankfurt*, begun in 2014.