The Thorwald Cross
By Michael P. Combs

According to Norse mythology, Odin was very wise god who possessed a rather cunning intellect. He was known by the Norse for his deception and many forms of trickery, including shape shifting, were not beyond this god. Odin also had very human flaws. For instance, his relationship with his wife, Frigg, was besmirched with infidelity. These qualities put the underhanded Odin in stark contrast with his son, Thor, an honest, reliable god. Yet Odin was the ruling figure in the Viking pantheon which tells us much about the Vikings. The raven depicted in the relief is most likely either Hugin or Munin, the ravens which were believed to have sat on Odin's shoulders. These ravens served as Odin's eyes and ears, gathering news of events and information amongst both the living as well as the dead (Baker 70-71). One may find that Odin is associated with another bird, the eagle, as well. In both histories and the sagas we find several instances of warriors dedicating the "Blood Eagle" to Odin; this practice involves cutting slits in a fallen enemy's ribs and pulling his lungs out through these slits. In Orkneyinga Saga, we find an example of Earl Einar performing this very practice:

And that's where they found Halfdan Long-Leg. Einar had his ribs cut from the spine with a sword and the lungs pulled out through the slits in his back. He dedicated the victim to Odin as a victory offering (Chapter 8)

Because of this association, it is also a possibility that the bird accompanying Odin on the cross is an eagle. Odin's spear, Gungnir, and the ravenous wolf found on the cross lead one to believe this is a scene from the battle of Ragnarok, the Norse apocalypse. At the battle of Ragnarok, the benevolent Viking gods, the Aesir, headed by Odin would engage in combat with the gods of chaos. During this epic combat, as we find on the Thorwald Cross, Odin is eaten by the Fenrir wolf. Tragically, the battle results in the Viking gods' demise and all comes to an end. The Viking gods were not alone, however, at Ragnarok. The gods were accompanied by those great Viking warriors who, stricken down in battle, were chosen by Odin and thus were fortunate enough to perish once more, however this time it is alongside their gods (Roesdahl 149).

On the opposing face of the cross, is a very different image. Here one finds a figure adorned by a belt and holding a cross in one hand, and a book in the other, while either standing or stomping on a serpent. A fish is also represented within the engraving on this face of the cross (Cubbon 33). This figure and the symbols surrounding it are largely believed to be Christian. The image of the cross has a longstanding history in Christianity and is perhaps the most familiar of all Christian symbols. For Christians, it represents a promise of an afterlife granted through Jesus, who had suffered execution by means of crucifixion on a cross and defeated death through his resurrection. In addition to the cross, the fish is also widely understood as a symbol of Christianity. In ancient Rome, the fish became a secret emblem amongst Christians which allowed them to recognize one another without fear of persecution or punishment. This symbol aided in the survival Christians and is therefore an important part of Christianity and its history (Child and Colles10). The serpent on the cross is most likely an allusion to the serpent found in Genesis. This serpent, often considered the embodiment of Satan, is responsible for Eve's temptation and the fall of mankind from Eden (Child and Colles 139-142). It is fairly ambiguous as to exactly who the figure is and what book he is holding. Yet given the context, one may safely assume the belted figure is meant to be a monk or missionary of sorts. Consequentially, we may also assume the monk is able to read the book in hand, which is quite likely the Bible, as literacy was predominant exclusive to clergymen.

It may seem a bit strange to see both Norse and Christian images on one the same piece of art. After all, the early Vikings are notorious for raiding Christian monasteries. But these attacks had little to do with theological disputes. For the Vikings, the raids were strictly a means of obtaining fame and fortune (Graham-Campbell and Kidd 87). In reality, the Vikings were eventually receptive to Christianity. Missionaries, such as Ansgar, "Apostle of the North" preached Christianity to the pagans in Scandinavians as early as 823 AD. In 826, the first Scandinavian king, Harald Klak, was baptized as a Christian. Other Scandinavian kings followed in kind. Hakon Aoalsteinsfostri and Olaf Tryggvason, both kings of Norway, were baptized and converted to Christianity. While some of these conversions were strictly political, there were certainly sincere conversions. For example, Olaf was, in fact, overly enthusiastic about sharing his newly found faith as we find in Orkneyinga Saga:

Olaf sent a messenger to him [Earl Sigurd], asking Sigurd to come over to his ship as he wanted a word with him.
"I want you and all your subjects to be baptized," he said when they met. "If you refuse, I'll have you killed on the spot, and I swear that I'll ravage every island with fire and steel."
The Earl could see what kind of situation he was in and surrendered himself into Olaf's hands. He was baptized and Olaf took his son, called Hvelp or Hundi, as a hostage and had him baptized too under the name Hlodvir. After that, all Orkney embraced the faith. (Chapter 12)

By choice or, as we see here, force, come the end of tenth century, most of the Vikings had become Christians. An abundance of ornate crosses, like the Thorwald Cross, were produced in the wake of the Viking conversion (Roesdahl 160-165).

Many of these crosses may also be found at sites on the Isle of Man. Besides Andreas, several decorative crosses may be found at Maughold. These crosses depict common Norse themes and images such as scenes from the legend of Sigurd, Viking ships, animals, and interlacing designs. Other crosses or cross slabs may be found at Braddan, Jurby, and Michael, all decorated in a similar fashion with runic inscriptions and mythological figures (Ancient and Historic Monuments of the Isle of Man 41). These crosses represent the Jellinge and the Mammen phases in Scandinavian art (Kinvig 81-82). The Jellinge style art can be characterized by heavy reliance on animal figures and high levels of stylization. It was popular amongst the Vikings from the late ninth into the late tenth centuries. The Mammen style arose from the Jellinge style and was popular until the late eleventh century. It also relied on animal ornamentation, but it in a more natural style. These styles, like most Viking art, were heavily influenced by the work of their foreign neighbors. Not surprisingly, the countries in which were most frequently raided had the most influence on Viking art.(Graham-Campbell and Kidd 162-165). And though we may be armed with this knowledge of images on the Thorwald Cross, as well as their context, one may still ponder the reasons why they were both placed on the monument. What, if anything, was meant by the juxtaposition of these two images? It is possible that these images were placed on the cross as a means of comparing the old, traditional Norse mythology to Christianity in an attempt to demonstrate the Christianity's superiority (Cubbon 33). As the artist shows on the cross, Odin's fate at Ragnarok is far from glorious. He does not overcome those opposed to him; instead he is defeated and dies in a horrific manner: eaten alive by a wolf. The Christian figure, in comparison, is presented as a strong and powerful figure that is able to vanquish those who oppose him. He defeats his enemy, the evil serpent, and is victorious. Most would agree that the latter image, of power and victory, is far more appealing and desirable than the former. Therefore, this possibility, that the cross demonstrates Christian superiority, is quite plausible. Yet it is likely that the artist did not intend for us to stop the comparison at what has been displayed on the monument. Continuing the assessment of Norse beliefs and Christianity, we see that Christianity appears much more favorable in other ways. For example, in Norse mythology, only

those who die in battle are granted entry into Valhalla (Roesdahl 149). This made Valhalla rather exclusive, reserved almost entirely for male warriors. Christianity, on the other hand, does not require a death in battle. Most Christians believe their god allows entry of all people into the afterlife, making it far more accessible than the Norse Valhalla (Ward 73-74). In laying the Norse beliefs and Christianity side by side, as the artist did with the Thorwald Cross, it becomes quite clear as to why many Norse might decide to convert.

Yet such a decisive conversion from the old Norse beliefs to Christianity simply did not always happen. For many Vikings, religion was nothing more than a necessary formality in the process of building a political alliance with Christians. Similarly, Viking immigrants in Christian countries usually adopted the religion in order for a more copasetic existence among the locals (Roesdahl 158). Already polytheists, many of those Vikings who found the Christian god favorable often included him into the already existing Norse pantheon with little, if any, theological dilemmas (Baker 66). This perversion of Christianity was fairly common and became a source of aggravation for many missionaries in Scandinavia. In Orkneyinga Saga, we find several examples of this Christian/pagan synthesis. Here we are given insight into a possible reason for the blending of the religions:

In Sweden, Christianity was in its infancy, so there were still a good many practicing paganism in the belief that by it they would gain wisdom and knowledge of many things yet to happen. (Ork 79-80)

This fusion of Norse and Christian beliefs eventually became so problematic that missionaries called for the destruction of many pagan sanctuaries in order to keep worship limited to the Christian god (Roesdahl 161). Taking these facts into consideration, it is quite possible that the images on the Thorwald Cross could also demonstrate the blending of Norse and Christian beliefs.

Supporting this claim, the images on the cross have several themes in common. The theme of struggle, for example, is illustrated on both faces of the cross. The Christian figure struggles to overcome the serpent, and thus defeat evil. Likewise, we find Odin in the midst of a struggle for his life, while his foot is deep within the mouth of the Fenris wolf. Violence is a theme in both images as well. Uncharacteristic of mainstream Christian beliefs, the monk on the cross is physically taking charge and stamping out evil. Again, the image of Odin is also violent, even to a greater degree, as we see him devoured alive by the wolf. These themes, violence and struggle, were particularly central to any warrior culture, including that of the Vikings. The symbols on the two faces of the cross also yield several commonalities. The image of the cross, though traditionally a Christian symbol, bears a close relation to a Viking symbol of divinity, Thor's hammer. A brutal warrior, honest and trustworthy in nearly all regards, Thor was perhaps the most praised of all the Norse gods. Also, the serpent, a common symbol of evil for Christians, may have been recognized by Vikings as the World Serpent, a symbol of evil for them as well (Roesdahl 150). By emphasizing such themes and symbols in Christianity, Vikings made the religion more familiar, and very much their own.

Whatever the artist's intentions were in designing this cross, one thing manifested by his work is for certain: over time, the lose structure of the old Norse beliefs crumbled under well order and hopeful promises of Christianity The conversion affected various aspects of Viking life and culture and brought a great deal of change to the Norse. Their long-standing oral tradition became obsolete. Along with salvation, the Christian monks brought books and literacy. Now able to effectively record poems and events, the reliance on individual narratives diminished. Christianity also introduced the concepts or morality and sin, which were entirely foreign to the Viking mind (Sawyer 221-223). The conversion helped make the stereotypical, blood-thirsty Viking identity become an image of yesteryear. With

Christianity, the Vikings eventually changed from the horse-eating heathens into god-fearing men. The monasteries they once raided were now considered sacred. And so the Thorwald Cross provides us with an insight into the lives and mindsets of those Norse who were confronted such decisions during this time of change.