Horned ship-guide – an unnoticed picture stone fragment from Stora Valle in Rute, Gotland
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As a guest researcher at the National Heritage Board in Visby and the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, I studied and documented a range of picture stones from Gotland with Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) during 2013. My forthcoming monograph about the main problems of picture stone research and the possibilities of re-interpreting the carvings (cf. Oehrl 2012; 2015) will be based on this digital documentation (for selected examples, Oehrl in press).

On 29 May 2013 I discovered a previously unpublished and unnoticed picture stone fragment in the stores of Gotland’s Museum in Visby (figs. 1–2). It is a 10 cm thick stone slab, about 36 cm wide and 29.5 cm high. Rather unusually, no inventory number was inscribed on the stone. However, after investigations in the museum’s archives I found that the fragment was collected already in 1940 during the excavations of a Medieval house foundation called Munkskällaren at Stora Valle in Rute parish (Raä Rute 23). This is near the Valleviken inlet in the northern part of the island. The fragment (GF C 9212:20) was found i källargången, “in the cellar passage”. Apparently, it had been re-used as building material in the Medieval house. In addition, a complete type C stone (c. 190 cm tall) without any remains of carved pictures was found, lying in front of the house’s entrance. This stone was re-erected at the find spot and still stands today.

The re-discovered fragment belongs to a type C stone as well, representing the slab’s lower right-hand part, approximately 15% of a relatively small monument. No closer dating of the piece is possible. It must have been carved during the 8th to 10th centuries. It has relatively distinct and well preserved bas-relief, about 1 mm deep. The relief features remains of an unusual rhombus-patterned border on the right-hand side and the stern of a ship on the left side. Only one crewman is preserved. In addition, the fragment depicts a person with horned headgear, which makes it unique in the iconography of Gotland’s picture stones. The horned person is hovering behind the stern of a ship, above the waves of the sea, in a manner similar to that of the horned eidoson figure who helps the rider on Vendel Period helmet panels to throw his spear (fig. 3). This figure is

Fig. 1. Picture stone fragment from Stora Valle in Rute parish on Gotland (GF C 9212:20; Raä Rute 23). RTI image, rendering mode Specular Enhancement.
usually interpreted as a divine helper in battle, inspired by Roman depictions of the numen victoriae. For ancient Mediterranean models and Medieval Christian parallels, see Hauck 1981.

The motif on the helmet panels corresponds with Old Norse written sources (Beck 1964, pp. 31–45) such as the Skaldic poem Gríðarfardrápa, written by Þórir Geirason after AD 974. Here the poet says that the gods guide or steer (stýra) heroes on the battlefield. In the Eddic poem Hljóskviða stanza 28 (probably 9th century), the King of the Goths invokes Óðinn, god of war and father of the fallen, to steer his javelin (látí svá Óðinn flein flíuga). That the Vendel and Viking Period depictions of horned warriors (the corpus has been gathered by Helmbrecht 2011, pp. 140–146) may represent Wodan/Óðinn is shown by the fact that some of them are one-eyed, like the so-called weapon dancer on one of the Torslunda dies (fig. 4; Arrhenius & Freij 1992, p. 76, fig. 6; Helmbrecht 2011, p. 168). Óðinn is described as one-eyed in Skaldic and Eddic poetry from the 11th century on. The horned and one-eyed figure from Torslunda is accompanied by a warrior with a wolf-like animal mask, reminiscent of the úlfheðnar – animal warriors mentioned in early Skaldic poetry who, according to Snorri Sturluson’s Ynglinga saga, were closely linked to Óðinn (about berserkir and úlfheðnar see Samson 2011, concerning the helmet panels: pp. 288–336).

Against this background it seems likely that the hovering horned figure behind the ship on the Rute fragment also represents a deity, probably Wodan/Óðinn. As on the helmet panels, he may be regarded as a divine helper, accompanying and protecting the crew. Alternatively, the god of the fallen heroes may in this case be considered as a psychopomp guiding the ship of the dead and escorting the deceased on their afterlife journey.

More parenthetically, the Rute fragment’s motif is reminiscent of the ship carriers on Bronze Age rock carvings such as the famous one at Brandskog in Uppland. Horned men actually play an important role in Bronze Age iconography, occasionally relating to ships or appearing onboard. Due to the considerable chronological gap, I find a straight connection to be unlikely. Nevertheless, these prehistoric images and the Rute figure may express similar ideas.

I plan to publish longer discussions of the fragment from Stora Valle in Rute in a forthcoming paper in Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur, as well as in a future book of mine about Gotland’s picture stones.
References

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Fig. 3. Helmet panel from Valsgärde 8. Drawing W. Lange, after Hauck 1981, fig. 26.

Fig. 4. Torslunda, die D. Drawing by Bengt Händel in ATA.