

Do the Christian elements of the monument complex at Jelling complement or subvert the earlier pagan ones?

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Jelling is an intricate site, which hovers between the pagan period and the Christian. In a battle of material culture, the last pagan king of Denmark, Gormr, and the first Christian one, Haraldr Blåtand, fight for the supremacy of their ideologies. As each new phase is added to the monument complex, the overall ideology of the site mutates: sometimes subverting, and sometimes highlighting that which went before. By looking in detail at the individual elements at this site, and what their authors seem to be expressing by them, I intend to discover what this reveals about the interplay of ideology in the memorial complex at Jelling and ultimately how the later Christian elements affect the way we read the earlier pagan ones.

Before discussing the way in which these monuments work together and against each other, it is important to realise the ambiguities surrounding them. The critical debate about this complex has been fierce, and began in 1704 with the first excavations at the site (Hvass, 1991, 149). It has only been since the proposal by Dygve (1948, 196) that the body of Gormr may have been translated, and by the confirmation of this by the later excavations by Krogh (1982) that something approximating a complete picture has been realised. Also, more accurate dating methods have assisted in defining a chronology at the site (Krogh, 1982, 192). It is never certain that new elements will not emerge. However, it is possible to attempt to recreate the original monuments, and to define the stages in which they were made. In fact, it is necessary to do this in order to draw any conclusions about the ideologies displayed within the parts of the site raised by the different members of the 'Jelling dynasty'.

Despite the twenty-first century advantage when viewing this complex of seemingly having all the different stages intact, there are still many uncertainties which remain. Firstly, Gormr's stone states that he raised these 'kumbl' to his wife, Thyra (Nielsen, 1974, 156). However, what form these 'kumbl' take is unclear. Underneath the Southern mound are some large stones, which could be the remains of a stone setting. This could form part of the Bronze Age phase of the site, as Krogh has suggested (1982) or they could be part of the 'kumbl' to Thyra, built by Gormr in conjunction with the smaller rune-stone. Some archaeologists have suggested that the stones formed some sort of ship setting (Krogh, 1982, 182). It has also been argued that they were part of an earlier pagan 'Vé' cult site (Dyge, 1948), however, this suggestion has been largely contested now (Olsen, 1966; 1974). There cannot, however, be any certainty as to what these stones could have been part of and, as yet, they cannot be dated either. Thyra's body has not been found at the site, although had it been cremated, this may account for it. Also, any memorial to Thyra could have been destroyed or dismantled by Haraldr, during the building of the large mounds. If there had been a stone setting, either a Bronze Age construction, or as a memorial to Thyra, then this has certainly been partly dismantled, and wholly concealed.

As well as the archaeological uncertainties, it is important to recognise that the documentary evidence about these people is sparse. The site is mentioned in Adam of Bremen's account, but this was written in the late eleventh century, and was not a contemporary account (Batey, 1994, 44). It is possible that he was influenced by favouritism or folklore in his depiction of the reigns of the Jelling kings. Saxo's account is almost certainly influenced by popular local tradition. Therefore, as Moltke (1974) has pointed out, it is generally more important to allow the site to speak for itself. The rune-stones do add a more concrete

contemporary literary record. So, uniquely, at this site, we do at least know which kings were associated with the monuments. It is highly likely that Adam of Bremen's indications of the dating of the deaths of Gormr and Haraldr are inaccurate, and certainly cannot be trusted any more than any of the evidence from the archaeological dating methods (Lund, 1991).

Nevertheless, despite these ambiguities, there has been a lot of critical discussion concerning this site, over the three centuries since the first excavations took place. These have created a picture, which it is possible to analyse, albeit with a realistic awareness of the limitations of our knowledge. So, before forming any conclusions about the ideologies expressed within the different elements of the monument, it will be necessary to identify to which king, and in what stages I am ascribing them. These monuments seem to be placed in three groups: those built by Gormr, those built by his mourners (presumably Haraldr) but still within the pagan mode, and those built by Haraldr post conversion. It is possible to show that, despite the magnificence of the individual elements, the intricacy of this site is produced by the layering of elements and ideologies over time. It is only when the final Christian flourish had been added to the site, that the parallel between the traditionally pagan Gormr, and the new Christian, Haraldr could be seen. The linguistic evidence of the rune-stones is an important element in realising this parallelism.

I have ascribed to Gormr's stage in the monument complex the small rune-stone, and possibly some accompanying monument of which the large stones might play a part. Because of the uncertainties discussed above, this stage of the monument complex is difficult to define.

The pagan memorial to Gormr and Thyra seems to consist of the Northern mound, which can be dated by dendochronology to 958/9 AD (Hvass, 1991, 149). The burial chamber in the Northern mound also belongs to this phase. Again, the archaeologists are unsure as to whether

this was a burial for just Gormr, or for Thyra as well. It is also unclear as to whether there are Christian elements in the burial, which could indicate its construction after Haraldr's conversion. For instance, Schultz has suggested that a cup found in the chamber could be a Christian chalice. However, Roesdahl has concluded that the grave-goods within the site can all be confidently linked to the pagan faith and consequently, I am placing it within the second phase (Schultz in Roesdahl, 1974). Despite its seemingly pagan nature, the Southern mound has been dated, again dendochronologically, to approximately 960-970 AD. Consequently, it must have been built after the conversion, and belongs to the next phase (Krogh, 1982).

The third phase of this memorial site consists of those definitely Christian, and therefore later elements: the Southern mound, the large rune-stone, the wooden church, and with it the translation of the body of Gormr. Christensen has argued that the large rune-stone was carved in two phases. The first phase, consisting of the top three lines of inscription, was carved at the same time as the burial of Gormr and the building of the Northern mound, and the second, consisting of the Christian elements of the inscription, was carved some time later, possibly as a memorial to Haraldr himself. However, as Moltke has argued convincingly, the rune-stone, as we now see it, seems to be conclusively an artistic, and linguistic unity. The difficulty in seeing it as such only arises in trying to fit it to the documentary evidence, which, as I have previously stated, is no more certain than the runic or archaeological evidence (Moltke, 1974). So, despite the critical arguments to the contrary, I have ascribed these elements to the three phases outlined above. Now that these different phases have been clarified, it is possible to examine them more closely to look for evidence of the ideologies expressed within them.

In some ways, the ideology of Gormr's monuments is difficult to ascribe, because we are not certain exactly what his 'kumbi' consisted of. However, the location of the site is not

something that subsequent monument building by heirs can destroy, and so, this would be a good starting point. The Northern mound is built directly on top of an earlier Bronze Age barrow, which was in turn built upon the highest point of land within the area. If a stone setting had also been built here in the Bronze Age, the site must have had even more of a significant pre-existence. The Bronze Age monument used the natural landscape to emphasise its own natural authority. Similarly, Gormr used the double authority of the initial topography and the earlier monument to lend weight to his own statement. From the beginning of the construction on this site, we can see that the need to place one's act in the context of an earlier statement was important in emphasising the magnitude of the action which had been made. This is a gesture which can be seen in many other examples throughout the Germanic world. The royal palace at Yeavinger, for instance, was constructed on a site which already had Bronze Age ring ditches, pits and material culture, indicating that the owner of the palace wanted to draw upon the associated awe and ritual significance of an earlier site to increase his own status (Hope-Taylor, 1977). In Jelling, a similar thing can be seen. This new dynasty used the existing features in the region to emphasise its own power. Even without the presence of the large mounds, which would not have been built at this stage in the history of the site, the natural topography is commanding. The man who chose to build at this site was making a definite statement about his own importance, and thus the importance of the monument he was erecting.

If this rune-stone placing had been accompanied by the building of a stone setting, either in the shape of a ship, or a 'V' or in any other shape, this could lend further weight to the argument that the king was making a grand and imposing statement, not only a standard memorial to his queen. It is possible that such a combination of gestures show a response to

Christianity: an individual stating his own power opposing the higher authority of the Church, approaching Scandinavia at this time.

Despite the arguments for Christian elements within the barrow burial of Gormr, and maybe also Thyra, mentioned above, it seems quite evident that what we see here is continuation of the extravagant pagan ideology of the early memorials on this site. Barrow burial does seem to be a pagan statement, at least in so far as it states the authority of the individual as distinct from the authority of the Church. Also, at this particular site, we do not just see a common barrow burial. This is something out of the ordinary. The Northern mound is of immense proportions: 65m in diameter and 8.5m high (Roesdahl, 1982). Even before the building of its twin, it would have made a mighty impression on the surrounding landscape, making a statement, as much about the power of Gormr's heir Haraldr, as about Gormr himself. Even from the early stages of Haraldr's contribution at Jelling, we can see him using the previous sovereignty associated with the site to amplify his own power. However, more than this, he also went beyond the necessary praise of his father in his burial, and set the pattern for the later subversions of Gormr, by means of the extravagance of his memorial.

However, it is in the introduction of the 'Christian' elements that this site becomes really unusual. The Southern mound, dated to as late as 970AD, must have been built after the conversion. So, in this stage, the newly converted Haraldr built an even larger mound to mirror the burial mound of his father. This mound had long been thought to contain a burial, and it does seem similar to the mounds which generally commemorate the dead. It is possible that, as on the rune-stone, we see Haraldr commemorating himself, this time with a cenotaph. It was the practice of the Scandinavian elite to be given memorials which were visual in the landscape. Maybe despite his conversion Haraldr could not allow himself to be surpassed in any way at the

site in which his memorials paralleled his father's point by point. One can only speculate as to the reasons for this gesture. However, looking at the monument complex now, what is immediately evident is the geometrical placing of the units within it in such a way as to focus the attention onto the church and the rune-stones (see fig. 1). Maybe the building of the Southern mound not only further stated Haraldr's authority, but also drew attention to his new ideology, as expressed in this site.

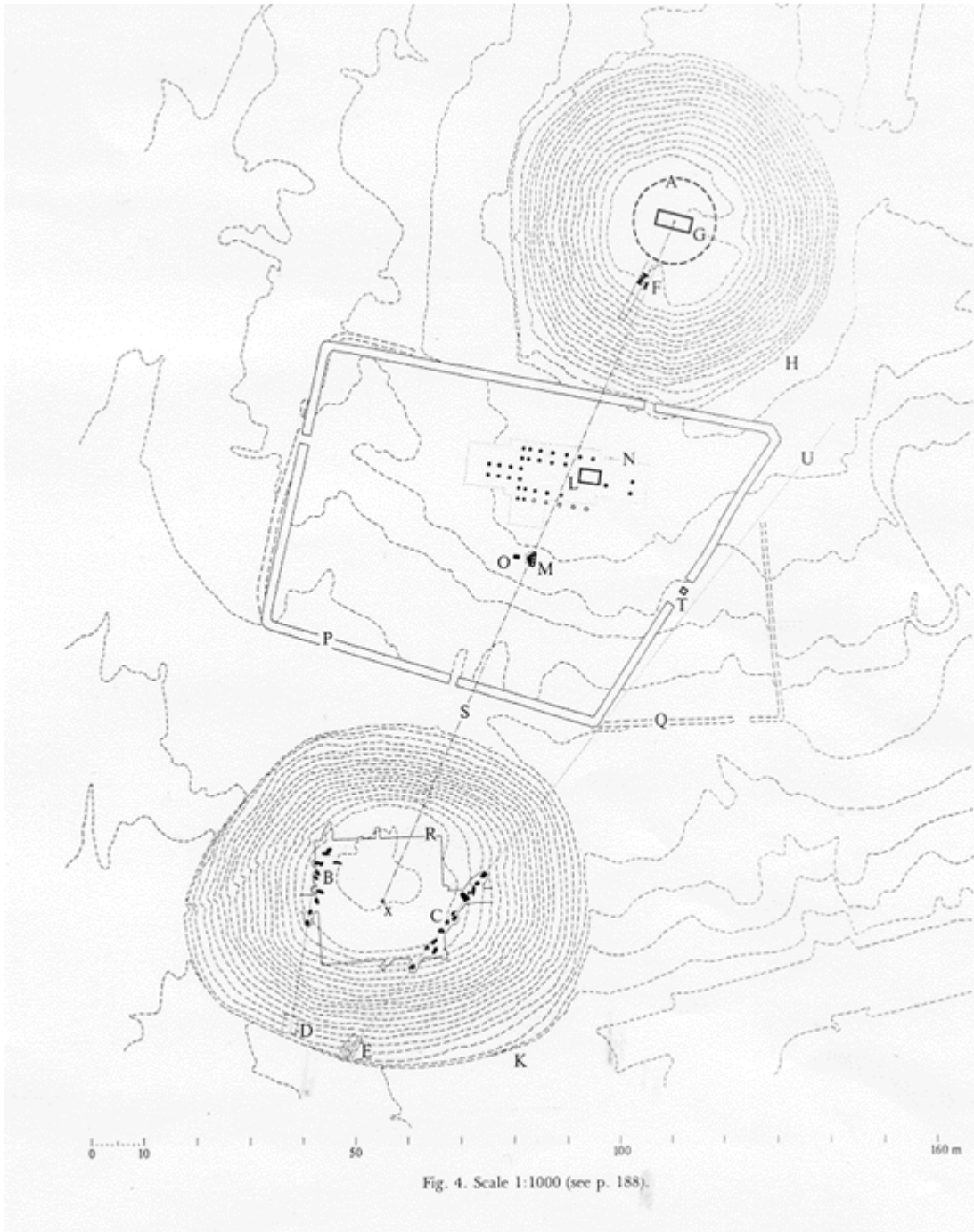


Fig. 1. Site plan.

A: Bronze-Age barrow. B and C: Rows of standing stones ... G: Burial chamber in the Northern mound. H: The Northern mound. K: The Southern mound; x denotes the centre-post. L: Post-holes of the roof-bearing posts in the oldest wooden building, probably a church, and the grave chamber contemporaneous with it. M: King Haraldr's rune-stone. N: Ground-plan of the present church. O: King Gormr's rune-stone. P: The extent of the churchyard 1861 ... S: Connecting line between the centres of the two mounds (centre of the burial chamber in the Northern mound and the centre-post of the Southern mound.)

(Fig. 4. from Krogh, 1982, 189)

In the construction of the church at Jelling, we see further evidence of Haraldr adding to his claims to status by building in a context of power. It could be construed that the founder of a church would not want to place it on a heathen site. Olsen's studies have shown that churches built on the sites of places of heathen worship are not commonplace (Olsen, 1966; 1974). Consequently, when they do occur, as at this site, it is useful to look at why. The building of the church did not seem to have just a religious motive. In this context we can see that the church does much more than simply state a change of faith. Building a church away from this site would be effectively turning one's back on the tradition and making a fresh start. However, building it amid the relics of a past religion is the ultimate subversion of that religion. Again, in this respect it is possible to see an analogy with Yeavering, where the old pagan temple was changed into a church in one phase of the site's history. Bede describes Paulinus baptising hundreds of Northumbrians here (*HE*, II, 14). So, the redefinition of a site and the subversion of its former pagan identification is fundamental at Yeavering as at Jelling. Like Edwin, Haraldr used the established power and authority from the location and subverted it to make the ultimate statement in undermining that which went before.

A similar ideology can be seen in the translation of Gormr's body to its new resting place. This is a gesture which would have been horrific to the pagan Gormr. Roesdahl has

suggested that Haraldr may have translated the body in order to secure an afterlife for his father by giving him a Christian burial (Roesdahl, 1992, 166). However, this seems to discount the evidence of the power struggle going on at this site. Had Haraldr been so concerned about turning away from paganism and all it stood for, he would have moved the body right away from the site and its pagan associations. Rather, the translation of the body of the last pagan king of Denmark is the ultimate gesture of power. So that, when Haraldr boasted on his runestone that he ‘made the Danes Christians’ he could have been intending Gormr himself to be included among those Danes. Haraldr used the authority of his new religion to restate his personal authority and his royal power. The great ritual significance of Jelling lies specifically in the re-definition of the site.

At this point it would be useful to examine the runic inscriptions on the stones and to see how they show further evidence of the legitimisation of power to be found at Jelling. The inscription on Gormr’s stone reads:

:kurmR: kunukR:

:karpi:kubl: þusi:

aft: þurui : kunu:

sina: tanmarkaR: but:

(Elliot, 1959, 31)¹

(King Gormr made these ‘kumbl’ in memory of Thyra, his wife, Denmark’s ‘bod’.)

This inscription seems fairly straightforward and follows a fairly brief, formulaic structure, of person who commemorates, followed by what they did, followed by for whom. However, this

¹ [It was not possible to reproduce the runic text contained in the original of this essay.]

stone has caused a dispute, because of certain ambiguities within it. As I have discussed above, there is uncertainty as to whether the ‘kumbl’ referred to are the stone, or the ‘stone setting’ or some other monument which is now lost, or all of these. However, the use of the plural in describing the monuments indicates that it is referring to more than simply the rune-stone itself. This argument is lent further weight by the ‘Jelling group’ of stones in the area, which proclaim that the men who erected those two separate stones did so in honour of Thyra, and one explicitly states that he built the burial mound (Nielsen, 1974). All this evidence seems to indicate that Gormr’s memorial was of some significant size. However, there is also an ambiguity surrounding the final phrase of the inscription. In 1927 Brix proposed that linguistically this phrase could refer to Gormr, as well as Thyra, because it would look the same in the nominative and the accusative, and could be applied to men as well as women. This argument was subsequently accepted by Lis Jacobsen in 1931, who argued that ‘framing’ was a mechanism that did occur in other rune-stones (Brix; Jacobsen in Nielsen, 1974). However, many later scholars, such as Nielsen, have refuted it. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that there is a possibility that this re-interpretation could be valid. We cannot know what Gormr intended to write when he erected the rune-stones, but it can be argued that if the ambiguity exists, then both of the alternative readings are possible. This is particularly important to remember in a site such as Jelling, where so many of elements of the site are unusual to say the least. The significance of this ambiguity is that Gormr could be praising his wife as ‘Denmark’s grace’, or ‘improvement’. However, he could also be praising himself in this way. The linguistic ambiguity allows the possibility that he is simultaneously praising both.

This stone was moved from its original setting, and placed alongside Haraldr’s stone which reads:

:haraltr: kunukR:bap: kaurua kubl:þausi : aft kurm faþur sin

auk aft: þaurui: muþur:sina: sa haraltr ias: sąR.uan tanmaurk

ala auk nuruiak .auk.tani karþi kristna

(Ingvorsen, nd, 8-9)

(King Haraldr asked these ‘kumbl’ to be made in memory of Gormr, his father and in memory of Thyra his mother, that Haraldr who won for himself the whole of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christians.)

It has been argued that this stone is unique in its flamboyant self-praise (Nielsen, 1974). However, runic stones often commemorate the erector, as well as the person in whose memory the stones were erected (Jansson, 1987, 70). In fact, if we look at these two stones placed alongside each other, as Jackobsen pointed out, we can see a parallel of he who erected, what he did, for whom, and an expression of praise of the erector of the monument (Jackobsen in Nielsen, 1974, 164). It is important to remember that the ‘Danmarka bot’ could refer to Thyra. However, as stated above, the language allows this second reading as well. In the context in which the stone has been placed, alongside one which parallels the formula of one of the possibilities, it favours the interpretation that the stone praises Gormr rather than Thyra. Consequently, we can see Haraldr paralleling, but surpassing the actions of his father in the stone inscriptions just as in the monuments themselves.

Ian Hodder states that ‘we can consider the archaeological record as a ‘text to be read’. (1991, 125) He also says that ‘archaeology is not the study of isolated objects’ (1991, 126) and argues for the importance of studying the context of the material culture in order to provide an

interpretation. If the site at Jelling is viewed in this way we can see firstly that, like a literary text, this ‘material culture text’ holds within it the possibilities of several different readings, and secondly, that it is important to view the site as a complex unity. The monuments do not exist in isolation. It is the intricate interaction between the monuments at this site which allows the reader to interpret the opposing ideologies expressed here.

When considering whether the Christian elements at the site complement or subvert the earlier pagan ones, it is important to recognise the multiple stages of development here. Haraldr’s large mound monument had an effect on the interpretation of Gormr’s monuments, but in turn, the second mound and the other later monuments had their effects on Haraldr’s earlier statement just as much as on the original monument. All of these levels express the perpetrator’s self-declarations of power, as we see mirrored in the runic inscriptions. However, these declarations are made in opposing directions. What is interesting about this site is the way in which the layers of individual expression have been able to act with and against each other. Haraldr did not have to build around his father’s burial mound, he could have built his church away from Jelling and provided some level of closure. However, he did not. By choosing to build both stages of his monument here, he showed a desire to construct upon a platform of pre-existing authority and power. As the monuments are added, the ideology of the site complex mutates.

Haraldr struggled at this site against the earlier power of Gormr. Ironically, it is with Haraldr’s final flourish of authority, the translation of his father’s body, and the building of the Christian church and rune-stone, that Gormr’s original statement is most closely paralleled. In one sense this act was the ultimate subversion of Gormr’s authority. In another sense, however, by changing the site to proclaim his own new ideology, he drew closer attention to the ideology

of his father than he had done in the previous pagan monument, which continued his father's own cultural maxims. If Haraldr placed the two stones together, rather than this having been done in modern times, in doing so, he highlighted the parallels between them. Even if this had been done at a later stage, the present context still remains the same. It may well be that the 'Danmarkar bot' was meant to refer to Thyra, but in the context in which we now see it, there is a legitimate case for reading the linguistic alternative, that Gormr declared himself to be 'Danmarkar bot'. This self-proclamation was closely followed by Haraldr in the wording of his own monument. Haraldr intentionally re-defined Gormr's ideology, by placing his remains in a Christian context, but by doing so, he drew attention to the ideology as it was originally stated.

This cycle of power and self-expression came to an end after Haraldr's death. Roesdahl has suggested that the off-centre burial in the church indicates that Haraldr had intended to be buried alongside his father in his new church, thereby completing the statement of the conversion, not only of his nation, but also of his own pagan dynasty (1992, 166). However, Haraldr could not control what was done after his death any more than Gormr could. His remains now lie in the cathedral at Roskilde. We cannot know whether this was his intention. The final stage of the monument at Jelling is a silent one. The empty space alongside Gormr's remains shows that even the most well defined statement of self-identity cannot entirely be controlled. The action of the heir of Haraldr rounds off the monument at Jelling and ends the struggle for self-definition at this site. This 'text' has been left for us to read as a powerful expression of the interface between paganism and Christianity at the end of the tenth century in Denmark. The final monuments have subverted the earlier pagan ones, but they have not silenced them. If anything, the multi-layering at this site has drawn greater attention to these pagan monuments than simply leaving them would have done.

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