WAYLAND: SMITH OF THE GODS

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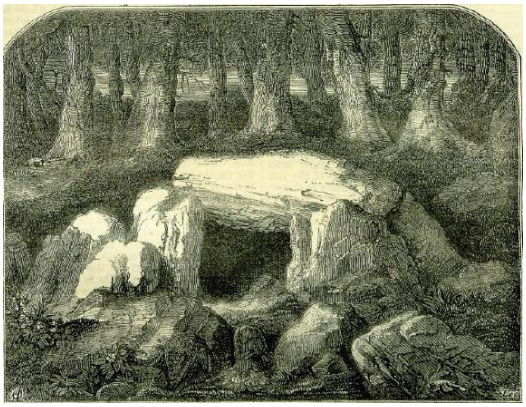

Hidden away in Berkshire is a Neolithic long barrow called Wayland's Smithy. It's not on any modern road, although it sits on Britain's oldest road. Five thousand years old, the Greater Ridgeway ran from the Dorset coast in the south, to the north Norfolk coast.[1] It consists of four sections: Wayland's Smith is on the Ridgeway which runs for 87 miles from West Kennett in Wiltshire to Ivinghoe Beacon in Buckinghamshire and where it joins the Ickinield Way. It follows the ancient chalk route used by prehistoric man as it was higher and drier than the woodland. Along the route you will find Bronze Age and Iron Age hill forts such as Liddington Camp and Uffington and Barbury Castle; also sites such as Avebury Stone Circle, the West Kennet Long Barrow, as well as the Uffington White Horse, which has been dated as some three thousand years old by the Oxford Archaeological Unit. With so many important locations along the route, the Ridgeway was of both spiritual as well as practical importance. Mythology gives reasons for natural or unusual features in the landscape once their original purpose has been forgotten. Gods become symbols of the natural process.

In 1738, the learned antiquary, Frances Wise, wrote concerning Wayland's Smithy:

> At this place lived formerly an invisible Smith, and if a traveller's Horse had lost a Shoe upon the road, he had no more to do than to bring the Horse to this place with a piece of money, and leaving both there for some little time, he might come again and find the money gone, but the Horse new shod.[2]

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[1] The Wessex Ridgeway, the Ridgeway National Trail; the Ickineld Way and the Peddars Way National Trail.

[2] Francis Wise, *A letter to Dr Mead concerning come antiquities in Berkshire* (Oxford: Thomas Wood, 1738), p. 37.

Walter Scott repeats this legend in his novel *Kenilworth*, published in 1821.[3] He includes additional historical information as an endnote with which Thomas Hughes, writing in *The Scouring of the White Horse* in 1859, takes issue. Hughes complains that Scott should have known better than to claim Wayland's Smithy was the burial mound of the Danish King, Bagsecg, killed at the Battle of Ashdown in 871;[4] but Scott was repeating material that he had read in Camden's 1586 edition of *Britannia* in which he describes an 'idle tradition' that the White Horse at Uffington had been cut on the orders of Alfred the Great. Hughes, at least, had realised that the Long Barrow of Wayland's Smithy was over a thousand years old, but he hadn't realised *how* old.

Archaeology demonstrates that the burial site, the earliest structure – a stone and timber box – dates from between 3590 and 3555 BC. The box was covered by an oval mound of chalk and earth between 3460 and 3400, and then a larger barrow was constructed over that, and over a period of fifteen years, fourteen people, predominantly adult males were buried there.[5] The tomb was constructed in the style of older monuments such as the West Kennet long Barrow at the start of the Ridgeway; such a similarity suggested the builders could claim a long ancestral connection to the land.

Francis Wise's letter to Dr Mead describes Wayland's Smithy in terms of an altar and argues 'it is not improbable' that 'these burial bounds were applied to the purpose of sacrificing'. Wise believed Wayland's Smithy is a *cromlech*: 'a sepulchral altar, where sacrifices were to be annually performed in honour of the defunct'.

In 1921, an excavation of Wayland Smith's cave (as it was then called) revealed two iron bars, used as currency during the Iron Age. One may speculate that, at some time, a Smith did work here, and was paid in iron, long after the tomb had

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[3] Walter Scott, *Kenilworth* (London: Penguin, 1999). "The great defeat given by Alfred to the Danish invaders is said by Mr. Gough to have taken place near Ashdown, in Berkshire. "The burial place of Baereg, the Danish chief, who was slain in this fight, is distinguished by a parcel of stones, less than a mile from the hill, set on edge, enclosing a piece of ground somewhat raised. On the east side of the southern extremity stand three squarish flat stones, of about four or five feet over either way, supporting a fourth, and now called by the vulgar *Wayland Smith*, from an idle tradition about an invisible smith replacing lost horse-shoes there", William Camden, *Britannia; or A Chorographical Description of … England, Scotland and Ireland*, trans. Richard Gough, 2nd ed., 4 vols, (London, 1806), vol. i., p. 221.

[4] Thomas Hughes, *The Scouring of the White Horse*, (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1989)

[5] Timothy Darvill, *Prehistoric Britain*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), p. 107, 108, 111

ceased to function as a burial mound.[6] The legend of Wayland probably developed in England when the Saxons settled in the mid-fifth century.[7] Their mythology gave a coherent purpose for the 'cave'. The earliest written evidence for the cave appears in an Anglo-Saxon charter for Compton Beauchamp, dating from 955AD, describing it as a boundary marker.[8] Ancient monuments were often used as boundary markers because they had a spiritual, or perhaps even supernatural, purpose. Boundaries are liminal points where the fabric between this world and the otherworld becomes thinner.

Wayland is mentioned in another Saxon charter dating from 903 which mentions a boundary mark at Whiteleaf called *Welandes Stocc*. This is now the Whiteleaf Cross near Princes Risborough. The boundary marker could describe 'Wayland's Phallus' possibly a Neolithic fertility symbol like the Cerne Abbas giant. Presumably, at some time in the fourteenth century, when monks came to the area, they adapted the pagan symbol into something that was more acceptable to them. However, the site is pre-Roman and *Welandes Stocc* was a heathen worship site. Massingham observes that the barrow on the top of the hill is the one certain Neolithic tomb in the Chilterns.[9] In 1742, Francis Wise claimed that the image could be seen from Uffington (by which he no doubt meant the hills next to the smithy), even though the cross was smaller than it is now and that it was some 35 miles away. The Whiteleaf Cross, and the Bledlow Cross which is four miles to the east, were both on the Ickinield Way. This suggests a visual as well as a physical connection between the two sites.

The legend of Wayland is found in the 9th century poem *Deor*, where the *scop* compares his own lamentations with characters from Teutonic and Scandinavian mythology. He tells how his lord has replaced him with Heorrenda, a more skilful

[6] H.R. Ellis Davidson, 'Weland the Smith', *Folklore* 69 (1958): 145–59, p. 147.
[7] Clive Spinage, *Myths & Mysteries of Wayland Smith (*Charlbury: Wychwood Press, 2003), p. 3.
[8] L.V. Grinsell, 'Berkshire Barrows. Part III – Evidence from the Saxon Charters', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal* 42 (1938): 102–16, pp. 105–6.
[9] H.J. Massingham, *Chiltern Country*, 2nd Revised Ed (London: B.T. Batsford, 1944), pp. 28, 37.

poet. Thus, Deor attempts to reconcile his troubles with difficulties faced by principal figures in Germanic mythology, ending each section with the refrain: 'þæs ofereode; þisses swa mæg' – that passed away, so might this. So, Wayland lives in exile; King Nithhad has captured and maimed him. That passed away; this may too.[10]

Franks Casket Front Panel © Trustees of the British Museum

This story is depicted on a panel of the Franks casket, which was carved in Northumberland or Yorkshire in the mid seventh century, and demonstrates just how far-reaching this legend was.[11] The background, for which we need to go to a saga in the Old Norse Elder Edda called *Volundarkviða*, (which John McKinnell posits was composed in ninth century Scandinavian Yorkshire).[12] Völundr (as he is called here) is a skilled goldsmith: while waiting for his swanmaiden wife to return, he is captured by the greedy king Nithhad who then has him hamstrung him so that he cannot escape. The Franks casket shows the maimed Wayland at his forge. Here Wayland plots his revenge: at Wayland's feet is a decapitated body of Nithhad's son. Wayland plans to fashion the skull into a chalice for the boy's father, extinguishing the king's lifeline. Wayland holds the skull in tongs in one hand. Next to the anvil is Niðud's daughter Beaduhild. She takes a cup of drugged beer. Wayland will rape her, so when she bears his son, Wayland will continue to live at his enemy's court. As this shows three scenes, like a graphic

[10] Kemp Malone (ed.), *Deor* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1977), p. 17.
[11] Michael Swanton, O*pening the Franks Casket*, Fourteenth Brixworth Lecture (1999), p. 12
[12] John McKinnell, 'The Context of *Volundarkviða'*, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* (1990): 1–27.

novel, this second woman is *also* Beaduhild, whom Wayland has sent to get the beer. Having punished his enemy, Wayland can leave. Egil, Wayland's brother, kills the birds so Wayland can make the wings to fly to freedom.[13]

The inclusion of the Wayland story on the Franks casket suggests the legend was well-known, and could be conveyed by allusion.[14] Through his trails he is represented as a master craftsman while also maintaining the cunning to outmanoeuvre his enemies and overcoming adversity; therefore, even though the heroes were pagan, they could also be *exempla* for Christians. However, to the devout Christian, any heroic action can correspond with a Christo-mimetic event, and Wayland's presence on the Franks Casket could be an attempt to reinvent him as a Christian hero. It *could* depict a triumph of Christianity over Paganism, rather than trying to incorporate it. However, Victoria Thompson argues that churches incorporating the Wayland material have a strong pre-Viking tradition, suggesting these stories were well-known long before the Viking invasion of Lindesfarne in 795, which is analogous with John McKinnell's suggestion that the *Volundarkviða* was composed in ninth century Scandinavian Yorkshire.[15] In any pagan/Christian conglomerate iconography, the pagan characters should be accompanied by an established figure from Christianity, including the Crucified Christ, which might invoke religious ideas and cultural memories. When taken with the fashioning of the Franks casket in Northumbria, she argues that the connection between Germanic heroic legends and Biblical imagery suggests an established practice of systematic exposition in the Northumbrian church.

Additional details are later provided by the thirteenth century Norse Wilkinasaga: King Wilkin is Wayland's grandfather; his grandmother was the sea-goddess/mermaid, Wâchilt. Their son, Wade, is a giant. Weland's supernatural heritage associates him with all of the elements: water (mermaid and swanmaiden), air (swanmaiden) and earth (giant). As a Smith, he is associated with fire. Because of his mutilation, he is bound to the earth, yet, with his brother's help, he can fly to his freedom.

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[13] G.B. Depping, *Wayland Smith: A Dissertation on a Tradition of the Middle Ages*, (London: William Pickering, 1847), vii–xii.
[14] Richard N. Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture* (London: Collins, 1980), pp. 106, 116.
[15] Victoria Thompson, 'Heroes as Vehicles of Memory: Sigurd and Weland on the Sculpture of Viking-Age England', Unpublished Paper, n.d., University of Nottingham.

There are allusions to other legends of Wayland and his family: In 'The Merchant's Tale', Chaucer mentions Wayland's father Wade, saying: 'thise old wydwes' who 'konne so muchel crafte [skill] on Wades boot' (ll. 1423–4). The story was known at the start of the seventeenth century – Thomas Speight in his 1598 edition of Chaucer glosses the reference to Wade's boat thus: 'Concerning Wade and his bote called Guingelot, and also his strange exploits in the same, because the matter is long and fabulous, I passe it ouer'. Scholars gnash their teeth at a lost opportunity.[16]

Beaduhild appears in the second stanza of *Deor*. It is initially unclear how these stanzas are connected, however, with the additional details from the Franks Casket, we realise Wayland is the source of Beaduhild's grief. She knows he murdered her brothers; furthermore, she has been drugged and raped, and ultimately, Wayland's offspring will rule her father's court: her father is Niðud; her son is Widia, mentioned in the second *Waldere* fragment. The description of Beaduhild's plight ends with irresolution: "she was never able to think boldly how things must turn out". But that passed away.

I'd like to consider the *festival* of Wayland. It no longer exists in the Christian calendar which has eradicated pagan festivals... except Easter and Christmas. However, it is believed Wayland's Feast Day was the 23 November. Now it is the feast of St Clement, who was martyred by being thrown into the Sea, tied to an anchor, hence his nomination as patron saint of blacksmiths. The tradition of 'clemming' also involved the 'firing of the anvil', as a test of the anvil's durability. In the feasting that followed, the toasts would include one to Vulcan – and the link to the maimed god Hephaestus is seen in the *Volundarkviða,* where Völundr is maimed by king Niðhad to prevent his escape.

If Clement *is* a Christianisation of a feat to Wayland, then this day is the Saxon first day of winter, when the sun moves into Sagittarius, a fire sign, and moves out at the Winter Solstice on 21 December. However, November was called Blodmonath by the Saxons – the Blood, or sacrifice, month. Suddenly, leaving sixpence and a horse at a sacred shrine has more sinister undertones. Giraldus Cambrensis describes the inauguration of a new king by a tribe in Ulster: the

[16] Other legends speak of Wade's boat, complete with glass windows, made of two halves of a tree so tightly fitted together that the vessel could sail underwater in a manner similar to Alexander the Great's 'submarine'. We might also consider that the name of the boat, *Guingelot*, and Gawain's steed *Gringolet* could both be considered as carrying their riders to Otherworldly places.

king approaches a mare as a mating stallion. The mare is sacrificed, the flesh cooked and the king then drinks from, and bathes in, the broth, then eats the flesh. Some commentators observe that Gerald presents his readers with anecdotal evidence, arguing this was only *symbolic* practice in twelfth-century Ireland; however, there are parallels with a Viking ritual, where the king drank the broth of the cooked horse and the Wayland legend *may* recall, even in a diluted form, a version of ritual sacrifice.[17]

Let us move towards a conclusion by considering classical sources for the Wayland's legend. His story parallels the legend of Hephaestus (in Greek) or Vulcan (in Roman), the lame smith; in particular, a legend from the Lipari islands describes how someone might leave a piece of unwrought iron with a fee for Vulcan and, the next day, a sword, or whatever else was desired, was found in its place.[18]

Likewise, Wayland is associated with the character Dædalus, the artificer behind the labyrinth in Crete. Although there is no *actual* labyrinth in the Wayland legend as we now know it, Jacob Grimm explains the German name "*Wieland's* houses" means 'Smithy", whereas the Icelandic word "*Völundarhûs*" means 'labyrinth'.[19] Wayland was associated with labyrinths. Ovid's *Metamorphosis* contains another parallel with the legend: King Minos, delighted with the intricacies of the labyrinth, imprisons Dædalus in a tower to prevent him from revealing the secrets. Daedalus then fashions wings for himself and his son, Icarus. Dædalus escapes, however, Icarus flies too close to the sun and falls. This parallels Wayland's escape, but Egil cannot fly with the wings and falls himself.

The significance of this legend is – or was – attested to by the features of the landscape. Locally, the barrows had been named to associate them with Wayland, and they are named in Saxon charters are boundary markers. In addition to Wayland's Smithy, these places include Beaduhild, Widia (their son), Wayland's father, Wade, and his brother, Egil. Another local legend says that Wayland's apprentice, known either as Snivelling or Flittertigibbet, was trapped

[17] Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John O'Meara (London: Penguin, 1982),
[18] Davidson, p. 147.
[19] James Bradley, 'Sorcerer or Symbol? Weland the Smith in Anglo-Saxon Sculpture and Verse', *Pacific Coast Philology* 25 (1990), 39–48, p. 42

by the heel, hence the boundary stone known as Sniveling Corner, although Clive Spinage posits that the word *heol* may refer to the sun (*helios*) and the 'heel stone' is a tangent to stone circles to mark this position of the midsummer sunset; in this instance, the alignment is correct from Wayland's Smithy, although Spinage admits that it would be obscured by the brow of the hill.[20] In addition, although there is a tradition that the White Horse at Uffington was originally an image of the dragon slain by St George, and the hill beneath it, Dragon Hill, the place where the dragon was slain. There is a patch of white where grass does not grow. It is said that this was the place where the dragon's blood was spilled. Another local legend suggests that the horse belongs to the Norse hero Sigurd, and is now frozen in chalk. However, the White Horse awakes every century and leaves the hill to thunder across the sky to Wayland's Smithy, where the smith is compelled to shoe the horse again. This, apparently, last happened in about 1920.

There are a few other sources that I have not had time to mention, but there is an irony of having to piece together Wayland's story from a variety of sources because it was once so well-known there was no need to write it down. This part of our English mythology has resonances from strands of Greek mythology, but has come to us from Scandinavia through Saxony. But for this sacred space, there are key features across the landscape attesting to the importance of the Wayland legend. However, in the absence of much other evidence, the topography is left to remember the lost legend.

[20] Spinnage, p. 33.

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