

The Valknut: Heart of the Slain?

An East Coast Thing Workshop by Eirik Westcoat



Poetry

Valknut — Shortest Invocation

O Stone, Stone, Stone, make steady my Heart!

Valknut — Short Invocation

I'm hallowed now by this heart of the slain
— that steadiest stone from a stalwart etin —
as I strive to live in a state of courage.

Valknut — Regular Invocation

I name thee now, O knot of the slain,
a valknut invoked for vital main;
thou heart of heroes shalt hinder fears,
and through fiercest fire I shall face the day
with bold Høgni as bright exemplar;
thou steady my heart to a stone of valor,
as I work my will o'er worthy foes,
as Hlórriði o'er Hrungrir in hallowed duel;
to Valhøll I ride for Victory Father!

Thulknut — Short Invocation

Let the skill of skalds unscarcelly flow
from Kvasir's Core to my crafts and arts;
let this thulknut fill my thoughts with Mead.

Høgni Toast

Hail thee Høgni, Hero and Gjúkason,
both brave and bold when butchered by Atli.
Your sacred heart he set on a plate:
steady it stayed when standing there,
glorious and bloody for Gunnar to see
and the lore to know your life was true.
It is hallowed now as a holy valknut;
its steadiness sought by stalwart heroes.

Thor Toast

Hail thee Thor, Holy Thunderer,
the boldest warrior of bright Asgard.
In famous duel you fought that jötunn
of great renown and greatest strength.
For the gods you gained a glorious treasure:
'twas Hrungrir's Heart of hardened stone.
It is hallowed now as the holy valknut;
its steadiness sought by stalwart heroes.

Links

Valknuts with Point Down

<https://www.etsy.com/shop/JArthurLoose>

<http://www.jloose.com>

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Summary of Key Points

1. The valknut is, in at least some cases, the symbol of the ideal, steady heart of the brave, whether of the great hero or of the worthy foe — the kind that Óðinn seeks for Valhøll.
2. Hrungnir's Heart (*Hrungnis hjarta*) may be thought of as the archetypal valknut in the world of the gods. Though direct evidence is lacking, I see this stone as one of the treasures of the gods, to be put on a level with Óðrœrir or Gungnir.
3. The heart records the qualities of one's life, and reveals them even in death. The brave heart is steady, while the cowardly heart quivers.
4. Stone is a natural choice to represent steadiness. Its use as a *heiti* for heart could even be because of this, and perhaps Hrungnir is the “mythic origin” for this. I would contend that a coward's heart would never be called a stone, except in mocking.
5. The essential analogy for my theory is Høgni:Hjalli::Hrungnir:Møkkurkálfi, as the pairs of steady/unsteady hearts.
6. The presence of Møkkurkálfi in the Duel is then easily explained by my theory: he serves as the cowardly contrast to Hrungnir, just as Hjalli serves as the cowardly contrast to Høgni.
7. The word *valknut* could be old, but the earliest attestations are from only a few centuries ago.
8. By the natural image of the heart at the center of a knot of vessels, we can see valknut as a *heiti* for ‘heart of the slain’. [*If you know of any lore sources directly supporting the heiti knot = heart, please let me know!*]
9. The interpretation of the valknut as a binding symbol remains a valid alternative, with some possible textual support, and may be a better interpretation on some artifacts.
10. The valknut as heart is a viable, perhaps superior, interpretation on many Gotland picture stones and other artifacts, and one of the stones may even be showing Høgni's heart directly as a valknut.
11. The Hrungnir story has Valhøll-related parallels to the picture stones.
12. The interlocked-drinking horn symbol may be a Kvasir's Knot (*Kvasis knútr*), with the horn mouths corresponding to the large vessels that pour blood out of the heart. This would be a skald's symbol, for there are references to poetry as blood and poetry coming from the heart.

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Quotes from Original Literary Sources

From Völsunga Saga Chapter 39

- “One can see here the heart of Hjalli the coward, and it is unlike the heart of Högni the valiant, because now it shakes much, but it shook by half more when it lay in his breast.” (Trans. Eirik Westcoat)
- “One can see here the heart of Högni the valiant, and it is unlike the heart of Hjalli the coward because it now stirs little, and it stirred less while it lay in his breast.” (Trans. Eirik Westcoat)

From Snorri Edda, Skaldic Poetry

- “Heart is called [poetical word for heart]. It shall be referred to by calling it corn or stone or apple or nut or ball or similar and referred to with breast or thought. It can also be called house or land or rock of the thought.” (Trans. Eirik Westcoat)
- “Neither Þórr’s nor Þjálfi’s stone of valor shook with fear.” (Trans. Eirik Westcoat)
- “The prince, shunning mediocrity, had no small courage in himself, and the battle-swift heart of the king did not tremble in the helmet-din.” (Trans. Diana Whaley. SKALD II 2009, 272)
- “I offer Thorstein feast [the mead] of rock-men’s [giants’] thought-land [breast].” (Trans. Anthony Faulkes)

From Snorri Edda, Thor’s Duel with Hrungrnir

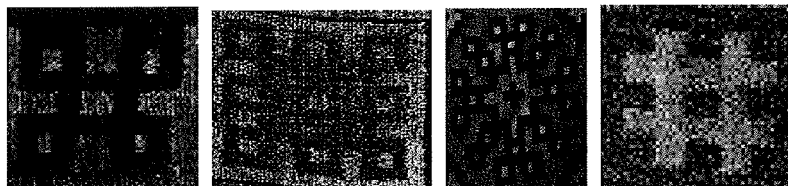
- “Then the etins made a man at Grjótúnagarðar from clay and was he nine leagues high and three broad under the arms, but they did not get a heart as mighty as befitted him until they took one from a certain mare, and it became unsteady in him when Þórr came. . . . On the other side of [Hrungrnir] stood the clay-etin, who is named Mǫkkurkálfi, and he was extremely frightened. It is said he made water when he saw Þórr.” (Trans. Eirik Westcoat)
- “Hrungrnir had that heart which is renowned, made of hard stone and spiked with three corners just as afterwards which was made that carved-figure which is called Hrungrnir’s Heart.” (Trans. Eirik Westcoat)

Important Scholarly Sources

- Andrén, Anders 1989. “Dörrar til förgångna myter. En tolkning av de gotländska bildstenarna.” In *Medeltidens födelse*, Symposier på Krapperrups borg 1. Ed. Anders Andrén. Krapperrup. 287–319.
- 1993. “Doors to Other Worlds: Scandinavian Death Rituals in Gotlandic Perspectives.” *Journal of European Archaeology*, 1. 33–55.
- Hellers, Tom 2012. *Valknútr: Das Dreiecksymbol der Wikingerzeit*, Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia 19. Wein.
- Nylén, Erik and Jan Peder Lamm 1988. *Stones, Ships and Symbols: The Picture Stones of Gotland from the Viking Age and Before*. Trans. Helen Clarke. Stockholm.
- Westcoat, Eirik 2015. “The Valknut: Heart of the Slain?” *Odroerir: The Heathen Journal* 3.2 (November 2015):1–23. Available at <<http://odroerirjournal.com/the-valknut-heart-of-the-slain/>>.

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Valknut Knitting Patterns (Hellers 2012, 48)



Larbro Stora Hamarrs I (Hellers 2012, 230)

Buttle Änge V (Hellers 2012, 234)



Lärbro Tängelgård I (Hellers 2012, 231)

Stenkyrka Lillbjärs I (Hellers 2012, 232)

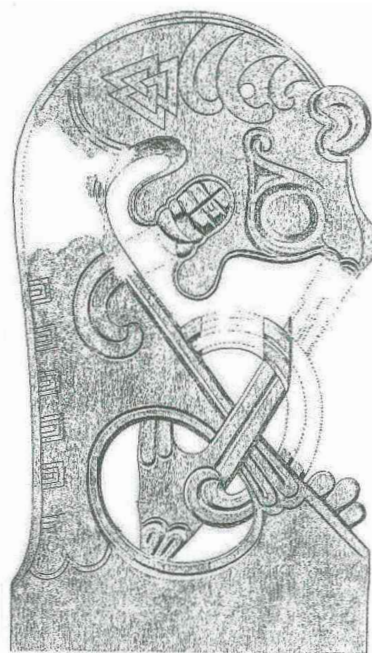


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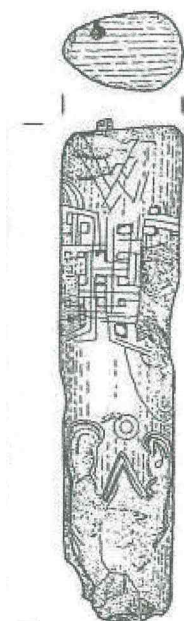
Stenkyrka Smiss I (Hellers 2012, 236)



Oseberg Bedpost (Hellers 2012, 253)



Hedeby Knife Handle (Hellers 2012, 258)



Peterborough Ring (Hellers 2012, 232)

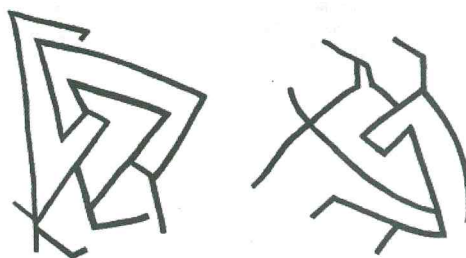
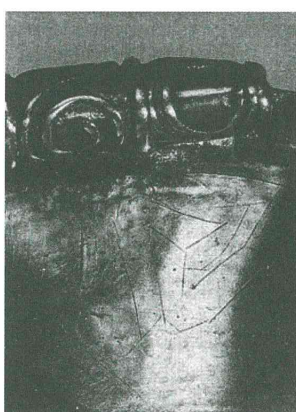
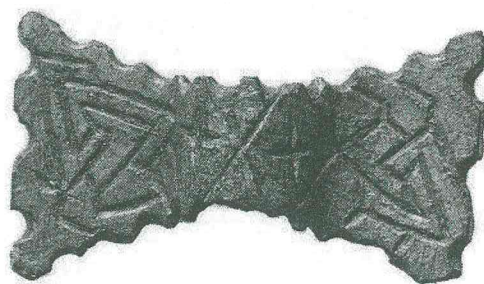


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Nygårds Bracteate (Hellers 2012, 83)



Kaupang Fibula (Hellers 2012, 84)



Snoldelev Runestone (Hellers 2012, 243)



Stenkyrka Lillbjärs III (Hellers 2012, 232)

