

## On Þórr's Hammer sign

The “Hammer signs,” more or less opposed to Christian “sign of the Cross,” generated a beautiful imaginative enthusiasm among these interested in a religion inspired by a reconstitution of the ancient Scandinavian religion.

I also met strict unbelievers who claim that the Hammer sign is an urban legend. Their argument is that it is quoted in one work only, the contents of which are confusing (that it is a coarse lie as you will see) and of a not very reliable origin (but *Heimskringla* is considered by the historians as the reference work for Scandinavian medieval history. Snorri Sturluson, however, still meets wild enemies, that it is true, even if we follow them we know little of this civilization. In particular, skaldic prosody, the effect of which has been to prevent too many Christian ‘corrections’, would be incomprehensible without him.

Here is a small text that will expose what we know of this sign according to testimonies of the old Scandinavian literature.

### 1. Sigurðr jarl's trick to ‘cover up’ Hákon the Good

The only reliable evidence of a “sign of Þórr (Tor)” is found in Snorri's “The orb of the world” (*Heimskringla*), a poetic way for Snorri Sturluson to name his “History of the kings of Norway.” We find it in the part devoted to king Hákon the Good which reigned between 934 and 961. Let us suppose that the ceremony that speaks of a ‘sign of Þórr’ takes place around year 950. Norway is still strongly Heathen, whereas Hákon was raised in England where he received a Christian education. He is thus trying to establish his power in Norway and, simultaneously, he works at Norway Christianization.

With the help of jarl Sigurðr, a Heathen person who collaborates with the Christian influence, he convenes an assembly of the leaders and warrior-landowners, all convinced Heathen. It turns out rather badly, and Sigurðr jarl tries to quiet down the Heathens, furious of Hákon's behavior. Here the part speaking of “sign of Þórr.”

Ch. 17. My literal translation. Remarks between [ ], additions between () (see also Monsen's translation is p. 89 of “*Heimskringla*,” Dover, 1932.)

*En er hið fyrsta full var skenkt þá mælti Sigurður jarl fyrir og **signaði** Óðni og drakk af horninu til konungs. Konungur tók við og gerði krossmark yfir.*

When the first horn was completely filled then Sigurðr spoke over (it) and **consecrated (it) to** Óðinn [Heathen meaning - the Christian meaning (to bless) would be absurd here] and drank from the horn to the king's honor. The king accepted (it – the horn) and did the sign of cross above.

*Þá mælti Kár af Grýtingi: "Hví fer konungurinn nú svo? Vill hann enn eigi blóta?"*

Then Kár of Grýting said: “Why now behaves thus the king? He does not want to make a blót? [here a “once more” is understood since Hákon had recently refused to do a blót “for good harvest and peace” as his predecessor did].

*Sigurður jarl svarar: "Konungur gerir svo sem þeir allir er trúá á mátt sinn og megin og **signa full** sitt Þórr. Hann gerði hamarsmark yfir áður hann drakk."*

The jarl Sigurður answered: "the king acts as all of those who rely on their power and their force and they 'sign' or 'consecrate' to Þórr. He traced the sign of the hammer above (the horn) before he drunk."

*Var þá kyrrt um kveldið.*

It was then calm in the evening. [calm was restored]

On the vocabulary:

*Signa*: to sign, consecrate.

For Heathens, *full signed* meant 'consecrating to (or making the sign of)' Þórr. The sentence "og **signed full** Þórr" is thus redundant.

For the Christians: 'to make the sign of cross, to bless'.

Comments:

It is quite obvious that the jarl tries to cloud the issue by claiming that Hákon made the *hamarmark* (sign of the hammer) while he did a *krossmark* (sign of cross).

Besides, the above text is very clear: the jarl's trick is possible if...

- either there is a kind of analogy between the two signs. I suggest strongly below that Mjöllnir sign contains a vertical move (from down to up).

- or he has just invented at once this *hamarmark*, which amazed the warrior-landowners who cannot figure out what happened. This second assumption is possible but quite improbable since the warriors felt being messed about by Hákon from the very start,

In any case, one cannot honestly claim that "no text" deals with this topic and it is very probable that this *hamarmark* existed before year 950.

## 2. Mjöllnir is used for consecrating

Two other interesting evidences of Mjöllnir use are found in Gylfaginning, ch. 44 ('Resurrection of Þórr's goats') and 49 ('Baldr's death').

Gylfaginning, chapter 44

*En í óttu fyrir dag stóð hann upp ok klæddi sik, tók hamarinn Mjöllni ok **brá upp** ok vígði hafrstökurnar.*

But he (Þórr) rose early the morning and got dressed, seizes the Mjöllnir hammer and **holds it up** and consecrated the goat skin.

Note: Dillmann translated *vígja* by 'to bless'. This is an obvious anachronism by which (I believe) he tries to take into account the fact that this move is not a brutal action.]

Vocabulary:

*Bregða upp* (preterit *brá*): 'to quickly move something upwards, 'to hold up, to lift'. Here, he holds up his hammer in order to consecrate ("*vígja*") something. In its Heathen use, *vígja*

means ‘to consecrate with Þórr’s hammer’. In a Christian context it obviously means ‘to bless, anoint, to ordain a priest’. The “holding up” move of the hammer can perfectly belong to mysterious famous “sign of Þórr.”

Comment:

To consecrate the skins of goat, it is not very probable that Þórr will brutally striking the skin that he would be likely to tear.

Gylfaginning, chapter 49

[The pyre on which Baldr and Nana are lying is set to fire.]*Þá stóð Þórr at ok vígði bálit með Mjöllni.*

Then Þórr was put upright and it *consecrated* the funerary pyre with Mjöllnir.

Comment:

To consecrate Baldr’s funerary pyre which is already burning, it is impossible to believe that Þórr will strike the pyre, brutally or not. We have here a second example of a use of Mjöllnir without much brutality, which differentiates from the many examples of its use to kill. This second example does not specify that he ‘held up’ his hammer, but as the two cases are a consecration, it is probable that the gestures are similar. It follows that ‘to hold up’ does not take here the possible meaning of ‘to prepare a strike’, but the one of to ‘lift aloft’.

As this ‘holding up’ is common to many examples of use of Mjöllnir, it appears clear to me that it belongs to the “sign of Þórr.” This clearly differentiates it from the “sign of cross”, by including only one vertical displacement of the hand and no horizontal move, as in the sign of cross.

### 3. What is the most probable “sign of Mjöllnir”?

We do not have any indication from the old sources on the shape of this sign. However, there is a significant secondary source which speaks of it, Cleaby-Vigfusson’s dictionary (see Hamarr I).

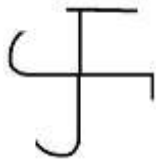
#### 3.1 First assumption

C.-V. says: “... hence Þórs-hammar = the character [drawing of a swastika] which occurs on a few on some of the earliest heathen Runic stones... [list of references] this [drawing of a swastika] is evidently an imitation of the thunderbolt.”

However, the swastika is actually (‘obviously’) a simplification of the solar wheel and a solar symbol. Moreover, if you have seen lightnings of this shape, or two lightnings crossing at right angles, you had a lot of luck!

If we want to follow this reasoning, the swastika could thus be a “sign of Freyr,” the solar god par excellence, or the one of Freyja, the “brilliant goddess,” but certainly not the one of Þórr.

We might wonder where such an hypothesis comes from. The solution is found in a book by Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri*. 1862 –partial translation by Ben Waggoner, *Norse Magical and Herbal Healing*, The Troth ed. 2011, p. 51. Jón Árnason claims with no other comment the symbol for Þórr’s hammer (*Þórshamar*) is as follows:



this is indeed a kind of svastika and we can be sure that it was Þórr's sign at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, as Jón Árnason says himself: "I shall even try to describe, even briefly, all the multitude of seals and sigils against various evils," magic phantasy produced so many different sigils that can hold a simple statement as any kind of 'proof' that such Þórr's hammer sign had a svastika-like shape before the middle ages.

A move recalling a lifted hammer would be to hold it upwards in a sharp way. Then, to supplement the shape of a lightning, it could be lowered more slowly (see section 2 above) by tracing a kind of Z recalling indeed the traditional symbol of a lightning.

This is perhaps not a correct reconstitution of the 'hamarmark', but at least that is a honest and of good sense rebuilding: a quick lifting which respects the 'holding up' in Gylfaginning chap. 44 followed by relatively slow slowness when lowering, as in chap. 44 and 49 in the case of a consecration. The hammer sign would thus consist in two vertical movements, the first up, the second down, in the direction of what it consecrates.

Obviously, any movement downwards looks as a lightning constitutes a rebuilding quite as valid as mine. Conversely, all that looks like, even vaguely, to a sign of the cross appears to me to be a modern Christian influence.

### 3.2 Second assumption

The dictionary also says, in Hamarr II: "2. A kind of mark on sheeps', probably of heathen origin, denoting the holy mark (*sic*: 'holy') of the hammer of Thor: cutting the top of the ear thus is called *hamar*, (1 in the figure below), whence *hamar-skora* a cleft hamar (as 2 below);"



This is not very credible but possible: ancient Icelanders could have thus 'consecrated' each one of their sheep with a "holy mark" as Cleasby says. A kind of amulet marked on each sheep is much more probable: When we humans carry a Þórr hammer, seldom we claim to be consecrated to our god, as opposed to sincere Christians carrying a cross. All however publicly claim thus their bond with their god or God. Similarly, this has been their sheeps owners' mark of a bond with Þórr.