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The riddles of the Franks Casket: Enigmas, agency and assemblage

Since its recovery from Auzon, France, in 1859 by English antiquary Sir Augustus Franks, the whalebone chest known as the Franks or Auzon Casket has been a 'fascinating enigma' to those who have studied it and among the most 'intriguing and irritating' of Anglo-Saxon artefacts to have survived.[1] Now held in the British Museum, it has been dated to the early eighth century and is likely to be of Northumbrian craftsmanship, though more exact details of its original context are unknown. The casket has traditionally been assigned to a highly learned milieu and to a syncretistic era, as its imagery draws on diverse sources, including Germanic and Roman legends, as well as Jewish and Christian stories. The images work in tandem with texts that are mostly displayed in Anglo-Saxon runes and written in the Old English language, but which also make use of Latin and the Roman alphabet. Not only do these inscriptions shift between different types of lettering and languages; they also run backwards, read upside down and even use cryptic runes.

The verbal play represented by these complex inscriptions is reinforced by the visual riddles of the casket. The rectangular, lidded box features intricate yet deeply puzzling carvings on each of its five panels. The lid appears to show the archer Egil from Germanic legend defending a fortress from attack. The back panel, meanwhile, shows the Romans, led by Titus, sacking Jerusalem. The left end panel presents us with the Roman legend of Romulus and Remus, while the right end panel displays an unidentified Germanic legend. The front panel differs slightly from the others inasmuch as it features two clearly contrasting scenes from Germanic legend and Christian biblical history (see Figure 2). The former alludes to Wayland the Smith at his forge as he is about to take revenge upon the children of his captor while another figure,

possibly his brother Egil again, strangles birds to manufacture wings for escape. The biblical scene is a visual representation of the Three Magi paying homage to the Virgin Mary and the infant Christ. These two scenes are framed by an Old English runic riddle about the whale from whose bone the box has been fashioned. The front panel originally carried the now-missing lock, implying that it holds the key to unlocking the physical and perhaps intellectual contents of the casket.[2]

This chapter explores the Franks Casket as a three-dimensional series of riddles, whereby the interpretation of this artefact is bound up with movement. I open with a brief overview of previous criticism on the casket in order to look at how different scholars have read it, but especially how they have moved around the box as they try to solve its riddles, so that different movements result in different readings. Is there a correct order in which we might read the Franks Casket? Can the reader finally solve its riddles and 'unlock' the box? Or does it read, move and make sense of us? I contend that the casket can be seen as a 'thing' that has the ability to move those who encounter it. In doing so, it actively forms human identities. Although some scholars have tried to divide the Franks Casket into discrete 'scenes' and categorise

2 Franks Casket, front panel (© The Trustees of the British Museum). All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder

these as Christian or pagan, Roman or Germanic, and so have seen the artefact as either a hoard box or reliquary, belonging to a warlord or an ecclesiastical context, the thing itself resists being fixed in this way. That is, it does not allow us to impose our manmade categories onto it, but instead makes us rethink how we categorise ourselves. It resists human mastery through continuous movements: back and forth transformations, repetition, misdirection, the concealment of space and assemblage.

The second section of this chapter examines, in more detail, the ways in which the Franks Casket is able to transform Anglo-Saxon identities. For instance, the casket depicts its various figures in more than one role (pagan and Christian, Roman and Germanic, human and animal, shepherd and spearman) within space and time. The various movements the casket forces us to make mean that we cannot read a single 'figure' and the 'scene' they inhabit the same way twice. There is, therefore, no hierarchy in terms of reading one side in light of another (whether pagan/Christian or secular/spiritual or magic/religion) but how each side is read transforms and is transformed by the others. This manner of reading the casket is as much about concealment as revelation and our constant awareness of what we are *not* seeing defies resolution. Even the text (on the back panel) slides from Old English to Latin, from Anglo-Saxon runes to the Roman alphabet and back. Again, this transformation is not fixed but rectangular and continuously on the move. Via its use of different languages as well as writing systems, the casket is both informed by and able to form varied levels of interpretive competency. If its text is read by some and not by others, or only partially read by still others, we must ask how the casket identifies each one of its makers, handlers and owners differently in terms of role, status and authority. These identities can also be transformed over time as interpretive power waxes or wanes. Thus, the casket is telling its Anglo-Saxon observers who and what they are (literate/illiterate, secular/ecclesiastical, Germanic/Roman) while at the same time suggesting that these roles are always liable to change.

By directing us around and around its whalebone body, or dictating that we hold it and turn it this way and that, the Franks Casket keeps us guessing at its inner mystery (OE *run*). The casket *insists* on its basic function and materiality (it openly declares that it is a whalebone box) but *resists* human mastery (we cannot claim ownership of it or know what was kept inside it). Such resistance

involves repetition and misdirection. It tests our mental agility, exercising our intellect by moving us around and around, back and forth, asking us to look and look again. Such movements induce tiredness and frustration. Indeed, the casket rewards our efforts only by sending us towards dead ends (the right side) and empty holes (the back). Even if we do reach what can be taken both literally and metaphorically as the start and close of the casket (that is, the lid) we are confronted by a confusing warning: here, both the image and the runic label (*ægili*) suggest that trouble waits for those who try and break in.

The final section explores the Franks Casket as an assembly. Here, I will relate my analysis of the casket to seventh- and eighth-century Northumbria which undergoes its formation through movement and assemblage. My intention is not to try to name and identify an owner or contents for the Franks Casket – an endeavour it resists – but to understand how this *þing* might have the autonomous ability to gather other elements to it. What kinds of ideas, texts, images, material goods, and human and animal bodies, were available to Anglo-Saxons in this time and place and how does the casket draw them into itself? Ian Wood makes a strong case for linking the Franks Casket to the milieu of Wilfrid of York's monasteries.[3] As such, I take into account figures such as Wilfrid and Benedict Biscop, who travelled back and forth to the Continent, gathering cultural goods such as books and relics, as well as ideas and customs, as they moved about, both within and beyond Northumbria. It is within this environment that the Franks Casket moulds the identities of its observers and handlers, assuming the role of an 'assembly' in the Germanic etymological sense. Is something like the Franks Casket similar, therefore, to an assembly such as the seventh-century Synod of Whitby, in which different elements are brought together and remade? I connect this notion of assemblage with Daston's thing-making whereby the 'tension' between chimerical composition and unified whole means that talkative things 'instantiate novel, previously unthinkable combinations'.[4] Even though a casket may be like a meeting in its ability to gather, the very thingness of a whalebone chest differentiates it from meetings of the less material kind. How does the bone of a once-living creature not only mould meaning into a distinct whole but hold it together over time?

Moving, reading, riddling

> [The subject is] that which lies under that which lies before it, holds itself back: attentive, concentrated, humble, silent. Subject. This word retains the trace of an act of humility. The subject subjects itself to the dominion of that which forms and loses it. Yes, kills it. Only the object exists and I am nothing: it lies before me and I disappear beneath it.[5]

When I encountered the Franks Casket in the British Museum for the very first time, I could not read Anglo-Saxon runes and my visual literacy, with regards to Anglo-Saxon art, was poorer than it is now. But even then, I was struck by how, the more that I moved around the box, the more that its mysteries deepened; and yet the more I moved around it, the closer I felt to it: it was telling me what I knew about it already, but also what I needed to do and to know to move closer to it still …

The runes on this side look different to the ones before. Are they upside down? Back to front? If only I knew what they meant. But that script is not runic. Is that a horse? Is that a horse, too? Those look like spear-carriers. Did I not see them a moment ago? Another bird here. Why is it flying in that direction? Am I moving the wrong way? Maybe I should have started round the other side (I had entered from 47: Europe 1800–1900; maybe I should have come from 49: Roman Britain). Is it broken? It is broken. What did that bit do? What is missing? Is something missing? I can see inside. Nothing. Something *is* missing.

I am misremembering a lot of the above, but other visitors might have had similar thoughts and asked similar questions. Some of them might have moved around the casket in the same way; many will have moved differently, or started reading it from a different end, or started and not finished, bored, frustrated, humbled, some not reading it at all but merely looking at it, or glancing at it, or ignoring it altogether. Others still will have moved around it and read its riddles with considerably superior interpretive skill. A few have been fortunate enough to read it by feeling it. It is said that, blind and approaching death, Jorge Luis Borges made a special trip to the British Museum in 1986 to fulfil a longstanding desire to touch the Franks Casket and trace its riddles with his fingers, hoping that the relief carvings and inscriptions would magically bring to life the Anglo-Saxon language and literature that otherwise seemed so far away in time and place.[6] Despite its promise to provide immediate, physical access to a distant world, however,

many of the Franks Casket's mysteries remain unsolved. Are we really any closer to this enigmatic artefact? Many scholars have moved around and around and around the whalebone box, trying to solve its myriad riddles while also engaging with it as a single, three-dimensional enigma. Different movements result in different readings. But is there a correct order in which one might read the casket? Can the reader finally solve and unlock it?

R. I. Page's treatment of the Franks Casket in *An Introduction to English Runes* focuses primarily on the runic material found on all fours sides and the lid. According to Page, the complexity of the texts makes it impossible to go beyond a summary account. Page finds his starting point in the materiality and design of the casket as a whole and opens with the information that each 'side of the Auzon casket is a plate of whale's bone, intricately carved' before relating how the 'plates were fixed to corner posts and were clamped by metal mounts, now missing' and then moving on to convey what else is lost and unknown about the artefact: much of the plain bone base has been lost, how the lid originally fitted is unknown, the front has a hole for a lock or hasp, etc.[7] Mystery and unknowing seems, to an extent, to dictate Page's movement around the casket. Broadly, he starts with what is conventionally described as the front panel, which he divides in two, moves around to the left side, around once more to the back, then up onto the lid, leaving the right side till last. Why finish here? Page claims that he has left the casket's right side until last 'because of its difficulty'. The cryptic vowel runes, in particular, are 'very hard to interpret' and the inscription refers to a carving that is both 'unknown and unusual'. Page dismisses the 'unconvincing' readings of 'excited and imaginative scholars' since the 'story' illustrated on this side has probably been 'lost in the course of years'.[8] And yet leaving this elusive, enigmatic side until last is itself a tantalising move, hinting at a future resolution (which will not only solve this one side but, maybe, unlock the casket as a whole) and thereby provoking further excitement and imagination. But this, in any case, is what the casket wants from us.

Page's fascination with the right side, and especially its cryptic runes, is partly determined by his role as a runologist. In her 1972 article, Amy L. Vandersall makes disciplinarity an issue in relation to the Franks Casket. At the time of writing, Vandersall remarks that the critical studies to date had had two primary concerns: linguistic on the one hand and literary on the other. But there had been 'no comprehensive examination of the date and provenance of the

casket in light of art-historical evidence'.[9] Vandersall encourages us to look again at the casket: it is a visual, as well as a verbal, artefact. Ostensibly, the article seeks to fix the casket within its context. Its purpose, claims Vandersall, is to 'present a body of visual material that had not generally been considered in relation to the Franks Casket' and which 'indicates that both the traditional date and provenance of the casket are questionable on art-historical grounds'. Although the ultimate aim may be to assign the casket to a new milieu, however, the thing is also liberated in the course of Vandersall's writing. Early on, for instance, she reminds us that the 'lack of critical art-historical attention can be accounted for by the *singularity* of the casket in early medieval English art' (emphasis added). Moreover, the style of carving and conventions of the representations are 'not directly comparable to Northumbrian art of ca. 700 unless the casket is regarded as a unique surviving example of folk art of the period'. A page later, our attention is drawn to the 'striking' variety of visual sources suggested for the casket, ranging from 'Oriental, Coptic, Merovingian, Celtic, and Viking to Northumbrian'. From here, Vandersall works through previous criticism on the casket, noting the deprecation of its artistic merit, the doubts over whether it is 'English' work at all, and its resistance to the 'great art' of the Northumbrian renaissance, reaching the conclusion that the casket is, by consensus, 'unusual, even unique in the context of Northumbrian art of about 700'.[10] In the process of finding the casket a new context, then, Vandersall succeeds in evoking some of its *thingness*: a refusal to be named and neatly categorised. At the same time, the casket will not be made into an art object. We see from Vandersall's article that there is still a lot of text to be read (she provides us with translations and descriptions of the runic inscriptions) and stories to be retold (the legend of Wayland the Smith is recounted for us). Indeed, strangely enough, Vandersall's movement around the casket is dictated as much by the verbal as by the visual. She moves from the front, round to the right, to the back, the left, and onto the lid. At first glance, the fragment of the lid might seem the least talkative side, identified 'only by a single rune word in the pictorial field'.[11] And yet the silences of this lid encourage Vandersall to return to the Wayland legend – where she began, on the front – and discuss what the written sources have to say about Wayland's brother Egil. Even as the Franks Casket lends itself to art historical study, then, it also refuses to be wrested away from linguistic and literary concerns. It insists on hovering between disciplines, perhaps superseding (or

preceding) them. And with this move, the thing resists disciplinary ownership.

Like Borges, Alfred Becker's engagement with the Franks Casket begins with touch:

> Exactly 30 years ago I could actually touch it in the rooms of the *Department of British and Medieval Antiquities* at the British Museum. And I did. It must have been at that moment that it cast its spell on me.[12]

The past and the present of this artefact – and the related question of obscolescence – spellbind and frustrate Becker in turns. Is it too distant for us to utilise in some practical way? Is it merely an object to be studied from afar? Why can we not still touch it (maybe even open it, turn it, carry it, too) if we could a mere thirty years ago (so that, in this sense, thirty years may as well be one thousand and thirty years)? Becker takes issue with previous scholarship; but, rather than disciplinarity, his concern is that no convincing answer has been offered 'as to the nature and the purpose of the box'. Evidently, he wants to know how this thing (now an artefact out of its time, inaccessible within a glass case) ever functioned. For Becker, the key to unlocking such an answer lies in a careful consideration of time and motion. Time, because 'the assumption that it *must* be a piece of Christian art' obstructs our understanding of the way in which a Germanic pagan past has influenced the casket as much as a Christian present. Motion, because too often critics isolate and treat a single panel or 'sometimes only picture or inscription' and 'from such approaches we cannot expect clues as to the concept of the casket'.[13] For Becker, in order to fully grasp the functionality, the usefulness, of the casket, we have to move around it.

It is, nevertheless, worth noting that Becker identifies purpose and ownership from the outset, before the analysis of each side. He is keen to point out that the casket 'was not meant to be a religious piece of art' and that, as none of the carvings apart from the Magi scene would have suited religious purposes, it is 'very likely' that the casket 'had been meant for some noble layman, for a king, an *æðeling* or a thane'. Becker acknowledges that such statements must remain 'hypothetical' but still wants us to 'assume' that the casket 'once used to contain the hoard of some noble warrior, king or thane' and that the carvings and the runes were meant to 'augment his fortune (from all aspects of this word) and fate by means of magic'. Becker wants us to establish a 'logical, even chronological

program' for the casket. And, indeed, his movements around the chest are nothing if not ordered and logical. We start with the front panel, and move round to the left, to the back, the right, and finish with the lid; but the discussion of each side is subdivided as follows: *the inscription*, *the picture* and, finally, *magic and how it is worked*, where the last provides not a mere description but an ingenious explanation of how each particular charm or spell operated. As to whether the overall magical programme of the Franks Casket actually worked for 'our' thane, Becker can only conclude that the 'records of Valhalla will know the answer; – surely kept in runes'.[14] We end, once more, with unknowing.

Two of the more recent studies of the Franks Casket, by Marijane Osborn and Leslie Webster, are similarly concerned with identifying a logical and coherent programme for this artefact. Osborn's reading of the casket deals with its 'syncretism'. In her essay 'The Lid as Conclusion of the Syncretic Theme of the Franks Casket' Osborn claims that a syncretism 'directed at promoting a Christian idea appears to inform the four sides and the lid of the Franks Casket', which she describes as 'an ivory box carved with rune-framed pictures illustrating stories from both Germanic and Mediterranean sources'.[15] This syncretism 'finds a thematic unity in the idea of exile' on the casket, and this theme 'culminates' on the lid. Osborn's ensuing movements around the chest are clever and intriguing: unlike many scholars, who deal with the front panel in one spatio-temporal moment, she divides it into two, starting with the Wayland scene on the left, moving clockwise (or sunwise) around the box, before returning to the Magi scene on the right-hand side of the front panel. Via this movement, Osborn identifies both a 'secular story' and an 'eschatological history' running from scene to scene: starting with Wayland, then Romulus and Remus, the exile of the Jews on the back, the riddling 'Harmberga' scene and then the approach of the Magi; but the real conclusion and spiritual 'homecoming' is on the lid, where *ægili* 'defends the soul in her Christian homeland against those hostile forces that eternally attack … from exile'.[16]

Webster's movement around the Franks Casket differs to Osborn's because she is less concerned with 'story' or 'history' and instead reads the artefact as a 'three-dimensional riddle'. It should be approached with the awareness that the Anglo-Saxons 'had a long, preliterate tradition of non-verbal messages, often structured in a complex and riddling manner'.[17] For Webster, the learned mindset behind the Franks Casket 'ingeniously combines verbal

and visual riddles to deliver a serious message'. Yet this combination of riddles serves a 'contrapuntal' overall programme. Thus, the casket may be read 'as three pairs of opposed scenes in each of which a Christian topos offers a commentary on a pagan Germanic one'.[18] Indeed, Webster is keen to assert that behind the riddling there is a message to be decoded. We see this in her treatment of the front panel, which is her starting point, and which she identifies as 'literally' the 'key to the casket'. And it is the 'heart, the content, that matters' for 'in the case of our three-dimensional riddle, there is a precious three-dimensional content' which is accessed both physically and intellectually. In contrast to Osborn, who splits the two scenes on the front panel, Webster contends that these 'twin scenes' are to be read together and so introduce the idea that 'the four other panels are also organized in contrapuntal pairs'.[19] Thus, the lid and the back panel should be read in tandem, as should the two side panels. And so Webster moves as follows: front, lid, back, left, right. This is different to other movements we have encountered, in some ways awkward or counter-intuitive. It is, perhaps, dictated by intellectual rather than practical or functional concerns: to read the left, then skip to the right side, is to defy the form of the box (the two are not adjacent); to finish not with the lid but with the right side is to defy its function (it is the lid, not the right side, that allows us physical access to the three-dimensional content). Similarly, Webster started by stating that it is the heart, the content, that matters, and yet finishes by asking where we have arrived, what we have learnt about the casket's function and context. For Webster, this 'learned and complex' artefact 'has to have been made in a monastic context, and for a royal patron' and served an instructional purpose 'as a container for a gospel book, perhaps'. But, even as she finishes with the riddling right side, Webster, like so many others, concludes her essay with the enigmatic: in the end, 'this casket is *sui generis*; this extraordinary object will never cease to excite speculation and debate'.[20]

What can be deduced, then, from this selection of Franks Casket criticism? What similarities arise from these movements and the readings they generate? What differences may be observed? First, and most obviously, it is worth noting that the readings are carefully ordered, with a clear start and finish. While this may seem sensible, it is worth reminding ourselves that a casket is not a book: it offers no definite beginning and end; we do not open and close covers, or turn pages. Why could one not move around and around the thing infinitely? Why not return to the same side

twice, or three, or four, times? Why not oscillate between one side and another? Admittedly, the casket does offer clues as to where one ought to begin and end with it, though these have less to do with reading and more to do with function: that is, the casket has a (missing) lock and a lid. Scholars such as Vandersall, Becker and Osborn organise their readings accordingly. They start with the front, finish with the lid. On the other hand, both Page and Webster have elected to start with the front but finish on the right side – an odd choice, if one thinks in terms of functionality. In both cases, however, this choice has something to do with mystery, with unknowing (the right side being acknowledged as the most difficult to unravel). While this may seem an issue of readability, it is not unrelated to form and function, either; for a box, by virtue of being a box, tempts us to try and unlock its inner secrets in a way that a book cannot.

Another point to make is that most of the readings are dictated by the three-dimensionality of the artefact itself. Commonly, the order in which the panels are treated follows the manner in which the casket has been constructed (or reconstructed). That is to say, from the front panel to the lid, or from the right side to the back to the left, or from the front to the left and round to the back. The adjacency of the sides is held intact. Such scholarship continuously rejoins the left side with the back panel, the back with the right, and so on. There is, moreover, an awareness of spatial existence here, a refusal to violate the way in which embodied humans can or cannot interact with a casket. We cannot, for instance, skip from the left side to right without moving over the lid or across the back or front. We are forced to engage, however fleetingly, with an intermediary panel. As noted, the one reading that does contradict this tendency is Webster's reading, which moves from the front to the lid to the back, but then leaps from the left side to the right side. The photographic reproductions of the four panels and the lid in Webster's essay also follow the order of this reading – so that the casket has been disassembled and rearranged in a way that suits Webster's intellectual aims but is at odds with the three-dimensional form of the artefact.[21]

This leads to my final observation, which concerns the practicalities of the casket *as a casket*. The lock and lid predetermine a reading order for a number of scholars. As these readings usually start with the front and finish with the lid, the implication – in terms of practical usage – is that one would take the key to the casket (imagining that we have a key) and insert it into the lock,

and thus encounter the scenes on the front panel (Wayland and the Magi) first. But then what? Surely, if we continue to think in terms of practicality, the next logical move is to open the lid. Only Webster moves from front to lid, but does not finish there, continuing over to the back, then left and right. Vandersall, Becker and Osborn all decide that interaction with the lid must be delayed and move round to the left side or the right instead. Other practicalities are almost ignored. The extant panel on the lid has a fixing for a (now missing) handle. Who carried this casket and how did they interact with it? If one carries the box before unlocking it, does the lid not come first in order of reading? How is the casket lifted, turned, tilted, opened and closed? Does this not encourage a kind of tactile engagement? Are we not meant to read with hands as well as eyes? And what about the bottom of the casket? Does it have nothing at all to say to us? Like the inside of the box, the bottom of it becomes an inscrutable space.

My conclusion must be that there is no single, correct way of reading the Franks Casket. There is not a fixed, logical order in which the panels or scenes must be dealt with. Despite the familiar scholarly insistence that 'I' have discovered the right programme, an ingenious thematic unity that will 'unlock' the many riddles of this three-dimensional riddle, the casket ultimately frustrates us. More than that, it humbles us. This object subjects us to continuous interpretive failure and defeat. What to do in the face of such defeat? What is there to say? We could begin to acknowledge its agency. We ought to understand it as a 'thing' that has the ability to move those who encounter it. Rather than form our own movements, we submit ourselves to its movements: the back and forth transformations, the misdirection, the repetitions, which work to resist human mastery.

The agency of the casket

One mode of resistance exhibited by the Franks Casket is its refusal to allow us to impose manmade categories onto it. Instead, it makes us rethink how we categorise ourselves. For instance, a number of scholars have tried to divide the casket into discrete 'scenes' and categorise these as Christian or pagan, Roman or Germanic, Mediterranean or northern European. This often leads them to hypothesise about the context and/or contents of the casket. Becker remarks that none of the four runic inscriptions refers to a Christian item, and among the carvings there is only one

biblical scene, the adoration of Jesus by the Magi. The fact that 'none of the other carvings would have suited religious purposes' encourages Becker to identify the casket as a royal or aristocratic 'hoard box' rather than a reliquary.[22] To the contrary, Webster acknowledges that while the 'unambiguously pagan content' of the scenes has cast doubt over the casket's ecclesiastical character, the 'assimilation of a Germanic past to a Christian message is by no means unusual' and therefore it remains likely that the artefact had some 'religious intent'.[23] But the casket eludes easy identification. Like a riddle, it delights in wrong guesses. Any attempt to work out intent/content from a straightforward ratio of pagan to Christian scenes is fraught with danger.

A look at the right side of the casket (see Figure 3) soon reveals why this is the case. What do we see here? My initial impression is one of disorder (compare this with the relative neatness of the front or the back). My eyes are drawn first to the horse, which is almost floating in the midst of things. The horse faces to the right, and yet I cannot help but glimpse the strange hybrid creature sitting on a mound, being guarded (or confronted?) by what looks like a helmeted warrior. There are three figures on the far right, though, and they also grab my attention. The horse is looking at them, so they must be significant. But what have I missed in glancing so casually from left to right? Look carefully among the foliage and you might see runes. This is an image that asks to be disentangled; but it is also an image, or congregation of images, so busy that the observer finds it difficult to focus on any one thing at any one time. The lack of any neat division invites the observer to take everything in at once, and yet as soon as I try to do so, I swiftly find myself lost in a dense wood.

It is this sense of bewilderment that leads several scholars to categorise this side as 'the impenetrable world of an unknown Germanic story'.[24] Lack of scholarly access to earlier 'pagan' sources is hereby linked to the knotty, tangled density of the carving. Some attempts have been made to penetrate this impenetrable paganity by linking the scene with elements of the Sigurd Saga, though the texts detailing this story are much later.[25] In any case, the casket is misleading us here. The difficulty of this side cannot be attributed to lost stories. It is deliberately unclear. The runic inscription that frames the picture only adds to this impression. What is puzzling about it? For a start, the runes read upside down on the lower border. Second, the carver uses arbitrary or cryptic runes to replace vowels, a provocative trick. Third, the alliterative

3 Franks Casket, right panel (© The Trustees of the British Museum). All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder

verse, even when decoded, is linguistically ambiguous. R. I. Page gave the following reading:

> 'Here Hos sits on the sorrow-mound; she suffers distress as Ertae had imposed it upon her, a wretched den (?wood) of sorrows and of torments of mind' or, with different punctuation, 'Here Hos sits on the sorrow-mound; she suffers distress in that Ertae had decreed for her a wretched den (?wood) of sorrows and of torments of mind.'[26]

Is this verse related to the carved images it surrounds? If so, how? Does it comment on them, illuminate them or add another riddle? It would not be surprising if the text were unrelated to the images, since the other instance of riddling alliterative verse on the casket – the front – is usually assumed to be unrelated to the images it frames, referring instead to the whalebone from which the artefact is made. In fact, Karkov suggests that the inscription on the right side may provide 'an echo of the inscription on the front of the casket in its tone of sadness and change in fortune, and imagery of death'.[27]

Yet, ambiguous as it may be, the verse on the right side does seem to direct or redirect our attention to the carving it frames. 'Hos' sits on a sorrow-mound and, fittingly, the carving shows someone or something sitting on a mound. Our gaze is directed towards the leftmost side of the carving. As we continue reading the runes, our gaze moves slowly to the right. So this is one way of untangling the tangled wood; we read the image as we would read a sentence, from left to right. But this only takes us partway through the verse. The upper border tells us only of 'Hos' and the sorrow-mound:

|| herhossitæþonhærmbergaagl ||

If we wish to read on, we must tilt the box – even turn it upside down if we wish to read the lower border of runes. Not only are we gaining further linguistic knowledge ('she suffers distress as Ertae had imposed it upon her, a wretched den of sorrows and of torments of mind') but our view of the image is literally being distorted. The runic verse and the carved images are working in tandem to suggest that there is more than one way to read this side of the casket.

Accordingly, alternative readings of this side have been offered, emphasising its Christian aspect over its paganity. Austin Simmons, for instance, sees Christ's nativity in the midst of these images. Look carefully at the tiny, enclosed figure beneath the horse. Here, the 'infant Jesus lies atop the hay in his manger' while 'a shepherd kneels over him with a staff in his left hand'. Now glance again at the rightmost scene. The central figure here is Christ with 'his captors on either side'. Take another look at the leftmost image. The setting is 'hell' and the 'mound-sitting figure is Satan in the form of an ass' whose mouth is 'bound fast with the coils of a snake'.[28] Osborn is another who sees Christian elements. She recognises that the coded runes contained within the runic inscription are 'meant to provoke rather than discourage an alternative reading of the text'. For Osborn, there are three different ways of reading the inscription which can alternatively refer to the far left, the centre or the far right of the carving. This leads to an interpretation of the *harmberga* as a human figure, the 'drinker of woe'. The 'name of the victim, Harmberga, links her (the gender revealed by the following pronoun) to Eve, the original taster of harm or sorrow'.[29] This is one of the 'allegorical' implications of the inscription, which Osborn links to her overall understanding of the casket as a 'syncretistic' artefact, whereby its paganity is converted and transcended. While Osborn is right

regarding the possibility of alternative readings, one need not see a hierarchy. The right side cannot be said to move us from a starting point to a finish. The moment of 'transcendence' (if there is one at all) is endlessly delayed and ultimately denied. The runic verse is inscribed in a way that does not follow the logic of the manuscript page; it is rectangular, and continuous: it asks to be constantly reread, and the more one rereads it, the more its meaning (and the meaning of the carving) shifts back and forth. Nor is it certain that we ought to begin by reading the border-runes. The modern scholar may be more comfortable with image as 'marginalia' but here we have the reverse. We are confronted first and foremost by image – the runes likewise being image as much as word – and, again, imagery does not lead us from beginning to end or from unconverted to converted in any straightforward sense. Rather, the viewer must take everything in at once and be taken in by everything at once. The right side draws us in, overwhelms us, misdirects us. Whatever categories we may bring to it soon become entangled. The warrior faces the monster on the mound; the horse faces the shepherd; the captors face the captive, who faces us. This side of the Franks Casket is less about transcendence than it is about meetings, encounters, confrontations.

All across the Franks Casket we witness its ability to transform what we know about Anglo-Saxon identities. It depicts its various figures in more than one role within space and time so that we cannot read a single figure and the scene they inhabit the same way twice. Take the left half of the front panel. Even if we leave aside what we think we know about this 'story' momentarily, it is evident that a kind of doubling and repeating effect is at work here. Farthest left stands a smith at his anvil, holding a head in a pair of tongs, standing over a decapitated body. Beside the anvil stands a female figure, reaching for a cup. But the figure to her right looks almost identical. Is she not standing beside herself? And what are we to make of the rightmost figure, smaller than the others, who is strangling birds? Birds suggest flight. Who might want to escape this enclosure? I am encouraged to look left again, to try and figure it out. I look at the headless figure on the floor. He or she also looks small. There must be a link. Look at the way the rightmost figure seizes the birds by the neck. Now look again at the severed head and headless corpse. The mutilated in one space turns mutilator in another. Even without bringing a 'missing' story to this enclosed scene, we begin to make sense of what we are seeing by looking back and forth, back and forth, remembering and repeating.

Even with the Wayland story to work with, ambiguity remains. Are we seeing Beaduhild (King Niðhad's daughter) twice? Why are there floral symbols, or runes, to the right and left of the second female figure? Does this indicate a shift in time or a shift in identity? Is this other female actually a Valkyrie? What about the figure strangling birds? The smallness of this figure, which connects it to the headless body, suggests we are seeing one of King Niðhad's sons. Yet Wayland is the one escaping on manmade wings in *Þiðreksaga*. The casket expects us to bring our stories to it, but it is unwilling to follow the logic of a linear narrative. Maybe, therefore, we are meant to see both Beaduhild and a Valkyrie in the second female figure. Maybe we are meant to see Wayland escaping the first time we look but King Niðhad's son strangling birds the second time.

A similar sense of motion and doubling occurs on the left side (see Figure 4). Here, we are in the wilderness again. Trees with visible roots and twisting branches fill every bit of free space. Two figures on the left face right and two figures on the right face left. One wolf lies on its back, while another prowls above it. Two lean, lithe youths are suckled by the lower wolf, their bodies twisted like the trees. As on the right side, different things come together and become entangled. This is also true of time and space, which overlap across this panel. We need not read this as a 'scene'. This is not one place, one moment in time. I see one wolf, not two. A lone wolf is prowling through the wood. The same wolf is lying on its back, feeding the twins. We may put ourselves in the position of the spear-carriers as they witness the event-in-motion. Notice that they watch from both sides, now following the wolf through the trees, now observing as it suckles the young. This encourages the observer to take two, even four, differing views of what is going on. The upside-down runes on the lower border also provoke movement and alternative ways of seeing.

So let us bring in some outside knowledge, as before, and see what the casket does with it. This is the 'Romulus and Remus' panel: the runic inscription tells us so. Yet the carving deviates from the story commonly found in classical sources. Carol Neuman de Vegvar has highlighted some of these anomalies. The twins are shown as 'young adults, possibly bearded, sprawling on the ground beside a recumbent wolf, rather than as infants seated underneath the belly of a standing wolf'. There are four shepherds, whereas normally there are 'at most three'. These shepherds carry 'spears rather than crooks' as they 'kneel in homage' rather

4 Franks Casket, left panel (© The Trustees of the British Museum). All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder

than 'gesturing their surprise or standing by'. Most anomalous, according to Neuman de Vegvar, is the 'second wolf at the top of the panel'.[30] For Becker, such changes take the image further into the realm of pagan Germanic worship. The men with spears are Germanic warriors, by no means Roman shepherds. The two wolves are Woden's famous beasts of battle and the trees evoke the holy grove.[31] Webster, thinking along similar lines, links this, the left side, with the impenetrably pagan right side, since both 'are set in dangerous wilderness, symbolized by the wood'.[32]

For other scholars, the anomalies of this carving serve to Christianise the scene. Simmons sees the four shepherds as 'kneeling' before Romulus, 'here an infant, but one who will someday found Rome as its first king'. They therefore 'represent all the world with its four ends which was made to kneel to the Roman Empire'. They carry spears 'which signify the war which was necessary for Rome to extend its lawful authority over the earth; war which ended with the closing of the gates of Janus and the birth of Christ'.[33] What makes Simmons view the left side in this way? His movements around the casket do. He is thinking back to the right side, with the shepherd kneeling before Christ, giving hay

to the ox; he is recalling the right half of the front panel, where the three wise men are kneeling before the throne with gold, frankincense and myrrh. This is a legitimate way of reading the left side. The casket invites such a reading. Yet it is not the only way. The watching spearmen, two on the left facing right and two on the right facing left, imply that we should come at this scene from both directions. We might start with the right half of the front, the Magi bearing gifts, then move to the right side, seeing Satan and Hell, the Nativity, the Passion, then to the back and the Fall of Jerusalem, and finally to the left side and Rome invested with temporal authority 'in preparation for Christ's universal rule'.[34] Alternatively, we might arrive at this left side straight from the left half of the front. What have we seen there? Brothers in danger. King Niðhad's sons. One beheaded. The other trying desperately to flee. Now what do we see when we engage with the left side of the casket? Kneeling shepherds are suddenly crouching spearmen. They may even be walking or running – if we compare their legs to those in the Titus panel, upper right. These armed warriors encroach on the two brothers. A wolf prowls through a dark, dense wood. It all depends on where we are coming from, where we have been.

The front panel, by virtue of being 'the front' of the chest, might be considered crucial in determining what sort of movement and reading one chooses to take. It has the ability and the power to direct us: to the left, or the right, or else straight to the lid. The first thing we see is a gaping hole where the keyhole should be. There is a runic border which tells a kind of riddle, but one that seems, initially, to be unrelated to the images. The images consist of two 'scenes' depicting Wayland the Smith on the left and the three Magi on the right. A narrow column of interlace neatly separates the left scene from the right scene. It is tempting and, perhaps, reasonable to see some sort of deliberate contrast or comparison at work. But it is harder to know what to do with this contrast. Are the two scenes paired? Should they be viewed together and scrutinised for similarity and overlap? Or are they actually pulling the casket apart? Are they leading the observer, the handler, off in different directions? Once again, it is easy to be lured into categorisation whereby the left is pagan and Germanic while the right is Christian. But, like before, such classification becomes complicated as soon as we begin to move.

Starting with the right half, the Magi scene, is a move that apparently 'baptises' the casket. Is it a monastic product, then?

Is it a reliquary? The three kings are presenting gifts to Christ and Mary. They are offering their valuables to a sort of container: Mary is housed within a pillared and arched structure, while Christ is housed within Mary's womb. In typically riddling manner, the casket is inviting us to guess its function and contents while simultaneously refusing to yield a straightforward answer. Three earthly kings are bringing treasures to a sacred container. Now look at Mary and Christ looking back at us. Their wide eyes are staring out from the whalebone, but also drawing the observer in with their gaze. This sense is heightened by the relief carving. Mary's body emerges from the panel, but the dark space left behind it draws the observer inwards. By this stage, my mind is full of half-formed solutions about what this box contains, what it is for, and the carving is playing on this, luring me inside. To think practically, if I really want to find out what the box holds, I must open the lid; the motion of the Magi scene does not lead me to the lid, however. The three kings and their little bird are moving off to the right. Should I follow them? If I choose to do so, I find myself amid the bewildering right side of the casket. But what is this? The little bird has followed me here. It is flying through the wood, again rightwards. The motion of its flight is taking me towards yet another container or enclosure. Should I recall Christ enclosed within Mary's womb and see the infant Jesus in his manger, watched over by a shepherd? The runic verse in the borders suggests something different altogether. Is this actually a sorrowful burial mound (*hærmberga*) containing a skeleton with grave goods? Have I been led, or misled, into a dead end?

Even if I decide to carry on, to the right, I must move round to the back, then to the left side, and at last I am back inside Wayland's smithy on the front. The ostensibly 'pagan' and the 'Christian' are always meeting across the casket. Since we are back once more in the smithy, we ought to ask where this scene directs us. The two female figures (maybe Beaduhild twice, or Beaduhild and a Valkyrie) are staring to the left, their eyes slightly diverted. Their movement, too, is mostly leftwards. Wayland is facing right. But the real way out of this scene, I think, is up. I am drawn to the small figure strangling birds. As discussed, this figure (whoever it is) wants to escape. Birds suggest flight, and accordingly the four birds look as if they are yearning skywards. If I follow their motion, I am led up onto the lid. This move alters the meaning of the casket in yet another way. If we isolate this, the left half of

the front panel, and follow its progression straight onto the lid, it becomes perfectly plausible to see the archer – labelled Ægili by the runes above his head – as the famous brother of Wayland, Egil. We remember the smithy scene that sent us here, and try to link what we have seen there with what we now see on the lid. If we know the legends associated with Wayland and Egil, we might bring them into play. The casket thus becomes the 'Wayland' casket and suddenly seems a lot less 'Christian'.

And yet to get too caught up in either the left scene or the right one obscures the obvious fact that we must, in the first instance, take the entirety of the front panel in at once: Wayland, Valkyrie, Magi, Mary, Christ, runes, riddle, lock and all. Does this mean that the front panel is united? I do not believe so. The front of the Franks Casket is playful in a contradictory, deceitful way. It is aware of its role as the 'key' to a container. As such, the carved figures stare out at us and draw us in, while others direct us towards the lid. And yet other figures are distracting us and sending us off to the left or the right. Why? From a practical perspective, if you actually had the key to the Franks Casket, it would be all too easy to unlock it, open the lid, and acquire access to the precious contents. The game ends before it begins. But why should it be in the interest of the carved 'ornamentation' to support this accessibility, which renders any sustained engagement with the outer texts and images pointless? They must instead be there to mislead us, divert us, to delay the moment of penetration for as long as possible. The runic riddle around the borders of the front panel is especially complicit in this, since it takes as its subject the materiality (not the inner contents) of the three-dimensional object.

Like the front, the back panel could be described as neat. The challenges it poses are different to those posed by the bewildering right or left sides, but the effects are similar. The border text is especially interesting in this respect. It can be seen, straightaway, that the text looks different to that found in the borders of the front, right and left sides of the casket. The top border is narrower than the borders found elsewhere, so the letter forms have been compacted. As on the front panel, the top border is punctuated by a space; here, the intervening space is occupied by images rather than a lock or any other functional device. This space also prompts a change in script, from Anglo-Saxon runes to the Roman alphabet. The two borders that run down the left and right of this panel are similar to those found elsewhere on the casket, but there

is no lower border on this back panel; instead, we see two three-letter inscriptions in the bottom corners. We can see all of this even before we try to 'read' what we see.

The texts on this back panel therefore present the observer with an immediate, visual signal – indicating that different levels of interpretive competency will now be called into play. As with the separated scenes on the front panel, there is a very visible contrast or comparison at work. The Anglo-Saxon runes could be said to embody a native characteristic, hinting at a long tradition. As the 'distinctively Germanic form of writing, runes made available to English readers something offered to no other European culture: a system of representation that could, in its formal and its functional differences from the Roman alphabet, embody the literacy of a tribal or national vernacular'.[35] This does not mean that reading runes would have come 'naturally' to any given Anglo-Saxon encountering the back of the Franks Casket, for runic inscriptions also 'call attention to the skills of the carver and exhort the reader to interpret symbols accurately'.[36] Being a 'native' Anglo-Saxon does not automatically entail the ability to read runes. It is a difficult skill, which must be learned and maintained. As with any skill, reading runes can be half-learnt, exercised or abandoned, forgotten or erroneously utilised. The Roman alphabet serves to remind one of this. Situated fairly innocuously on an artefact that otherwise displays runic texts, the alphabet is a subtle reminder (lest one become too nonchalant about reading runes) that our engagement with this thing is not an innate or natural process. That is, one does not simply carry the necessary skills to the casket, but the casket is constantly evoking, summoning, forming or reforming those skills for us. The observer recalls what sort of script they can or cannot read by encountering it here, by having to suddenly switch modes, or by failing to do so. If one has the skill to penetrate the runes and alphabet a little further, it becomes evident that there is a switch in language too. Commencing with the left border, and running across the left half of the top border, we read, in Old English:

|| herfegtaþ || titusendgiuþeasu ||

But then, as the right half of the top border moves into the Roman alphabet, the language also moves into Latin:

|| HICFUGIANTHIERUSALIM ||

However, as the text switches back into the runic script down the right border, the language remains in Latin, albeit an Anglo-Saxon pronunciation spelling of *habitatores*:

|| afitatores ||[37]

You will note that the switch in language does not exactly 'match' the switch in script. We might expect a simple and consistent pairing of Germanic runes with Old English, and Roman alphabet with Latin. Of course, the casket is more playful than this. What does this do to potential readers of the back panel? Should we assume that all who encountered it were equally confident with both scripts and both languages? On the contrary, the casket is both informed by and actively able to form varied levels of interpretive competency. More than one scenario may be imagined. You can read runes but not the alphabet. You can read Latin but can make no sense of runes. The Roman alphabet looks familiar but you have not mastered Latin. You know Old English but have not learnt runes. You think you know runes, and the alphabet, but the sudden switch proves tricky. You are confident with Latin but the move back into runes, and the alternative pronunciation, stumps you.

In this way, the casket reminds you of what you already know, but also tells you what you need to learn if you wish to know it (the casket) more intimately. It prompts and provokes us. What is more, such interpretive power – or lack thereof – is linked to notions of identity. The casket is prompting the beholder to adopt a series of interrelated roles: literate/illiterate, initiated/uninitiated, secular/ecclesiastical, Germanic/Roman. Some Anglo-Saxons would have been able to take on most, if not all, of these identities. Others would have had more limited access to them. At the same time, however, the casket is suggesting that these roles are always liable to change. Far from being stable, these identities can be transformed over time as interpretive power waxes or wanes. For Webster, the 'unique use of Latin and the Roman alphabet at this point in the text emphasizes the pictorial message of a new world order'.[38] I agree that there is an element of transformation at work here, but do not think that the transformative movement is as fixed as this implies. The movement – if we are able to make it – is more complex and multivalent than a simple shift from Germanic to Latin and Roman. It calls on skills that are both visual (seeing runes, recognising the alphabet) and oral (the syllabic voicing of a rune, the reciting of Old English or Latin) as well as aural (hearing different

pronunciations). Nor does this movement end with a Roman 'new world order' but turns a corner, shifting into an inventive and challenging combination of runic symbols, Latin language and Anglian pronunciation. Karkov points out that *afitatores*, as a corrupt form of the Latin *habitatores*, written in runes, transforms the inhabitants of Jerusalem 'into a people that is both Roman (language) and "Anglo-Saxon" or "Germanic" (alphabet), yet not quite either'.[39] It is a rectangular, rather than linear, shift; it is a transformation that keeps us in between two states and on the move.

Does this constant movement lead anywhere? As I have already suggested, there may be a case for taking the lid as a 'close' to the Franks Casket. This is mostly determined by its practical function. If opened, the lid promises to reveal the contents – the heart – of the casket. Is this not, after all, what we have been working towards? The extant lid has a fixing for a missing handle. The former function of this handle gives us our first clue as to the double nature of the lid. On the one hand, this handle would have enabled anyone who had already unlocked the front panel (and, remember, there is no need to think that this individual must have been a riddle-solver or rune-knower; they merely possessed a physical key) to more easily lift the lid and peer or reach inside the box. On the other hand, the handle would have been used to carry the casket from one location to another. This is a quite different matter. To carry the casket by the handle, the front needs to remain securely locked, lest the lid suddenly spring open and spill the precious contents. We do not know exactly what sort of travels the Franks Casket would have gone on, but we can safely assume that in the midst of this travelling a secure, rather than accessible, box would have been crucial. So, all at once, and in a very practical sense, the handle hints at accessibility and security, openness and closure.

The carved detail on the lid (arranged around the central disc) supports this contradictory view. It is important to recall, first, that the extant 'lid' under discussion is too small and so it is likely that at least two other constructional components have been lost. As it is, the lid seems frustratingly taciturn. The four sides of the casket have accustomed us to seeing texts and images working in tandem. Here, those border-runes are absent, making the search for meaning harder still. If you look carefully enough, you will see a runic label, discreetly concealed within a fortified structure, above the head of the defending archer. The label reads *ægili*. This has often been understood as a name, identifying this bowman as the brother of Wayland, Egil. Yet, as Simmons has pointed out, we would

expect the name to appear as '*Æ*gel' or '*Æ*gil', but are confounded to read the form *Æ*gili, which has an -i appended to the end of the word. For Simmons, 'the form *Æ*gili would be the expected form of an OE dative singular *Æ*gil, though uncontracted; it would yield the meaning "to/for *Æ*gil"'. It is also possible that 'the name was Latinized, and so given a Latinate o-stem genitive singular' so that a 'possessive genitive could make sense here, "of *Æ*gil"'.[40] Either way, this form of the name implies ownership. The casket is a gift for '*Æ*gil' or an item that belongs to him. The runic label may be an attempt to link the legendary Egil with the real-life owner of the casket, whoever this '*Æ*gil' might have been.[41] This is all very well for '*Æ*gil' but sends a stark warning out to the rest of us, identifying us as intruders. This thing does not belong to you. Hands off. Keep out.

Taken along with the images carved on the lid, the warning gathers force. What do we see? There is a great battle unfolding. The panel is crowded with armed and armoured figures. A number of figures on the left are attacking the fortified enclosure to the right. There are at least four attackers and two of them loom larger and taller than the rest. They might be giants or other superhuman beings. The two smaller attackers are distinguished by their coats of mail, and one of them, the leftmost one, looks as if he is treacherously stabbing his giant ally(?) through the back of the skull. The fortress on the right encloses two figures. One is the labelled archer (Egil?) who is shooting arrows at the attackers. The other is usually taken to be a female figure. She has been tentatively identified as Alrun, a Valkyrie.[42] It looks as if she is weaving. The birds and beasts above and below her link this inner sanctum with the one on the back panel, which is likewise surrounded by strange birds and beasts. We cannot know the outcome of this siege, but the attackers are being showered with arrows, one of which has pierced the heart of the figure low and to the left of the circular handle fitting. This, along with the treacherous stab, suggests that they are up against it, while the defended fort and its inner sanctum remain safe and secure. This imagery, then, adds to the 'keep out!' warning implied by the *ægili* label. Osborn's discussion of these runes lends further weight to this reading. For Osborn, the Old English translation of Psalm 90 illuminates the runic label as 'in this verse the word *egle* ("trouble") appears, apparently the same word as the *ægli* and *ægili* on the Franks Casket'. In this sense, the bowman on the lid may mean 'trouble' for the opposition, like a scourge of God. The archer may be interpreted as a symbol for the preacher.

Equally, Osborn recognises that *ægili* could be construed as the casket's owner's name in the genitive in Latin.[43] For me, the overall effect of the lid – as we have it – is to serve as a warning. It promises trouble and death for intruders who try and break in. And so the lid 'closes' the Franks Casket in more ways than one.

Yet for all its riddling the casket does offer us a very open and simple solution as to its nature. There, on the left border of the front panel, in plain view, is our answer:

|| hronæsban ||

Whale's bone, it says. As with the lock and lid, the obviousness, the easiness, of this statement stands at odds with the complex and problematic nature of the carved texts and images. This thing *insists* on its basic function and material (it openly declares that it is a whalebone box) but *resists* human mastery (we cannot claim ownership of it or know what was kept inside it). So this talking thing is telling us to engage with it as both whalebone *and* as a chest, something at once organic and crafted, natural and man-made, autonomous and functional. This view of the Franks Casket is echoed by Karkov when she claims that the artefact is 'something that hovers between inanimate object and living being'.[44] In this sense, the casket is asking us to embrace its riddle-like double nature. I will try to heed this call in the next section.

But since I began by considering how previous scholars have moved around the Franks Casket, I should finish with some brief remarks on my own movements. Suffice it to say that they have been random and repetitive. I have not tried to follow a single coherent programme, have not tried to unlock anything. I have instead attempted to create an impression of what it means to move around, and be moved by, to look at, maybe touch, scrutinise, and be scrutinised by, the casket. At times, my movement from panel to panel has maintained the three-dimensional form of the artefact; at other times I have moved in a more arbitrary manner and skipped from front to back, side to side. At times, I have tried to get as close to the thing as one can through words; other times I have interacted with it in a more distanced, virtual way. This reflects my relationship with the Franks Casket in the course of my research. Although I have, on numerous occasions, visited the thing itself in the British Museum,[45] I have also engaged with photographic reproductions and digital images. In this sense, there are many Franks Caskets, demanding a flexible methodology and writing style.

The Franks Casket as assembly

Until now I have been arguing that the enigmatic Franks Casket resists human mastery through continuous movements, back and forth transformations, repetition, misdirection, concealment. But the casket is also a *þing* in the original, Germanic sense of the word: an assembly with the autonomous ability to gather other elements to it. If the Franks Casket can be thought of as an assembly, within what sort of environment would it have carried out this role? Most commonly, the artefact is considered to be of Northumbrian origin and dated to the eighth century. R. I. Page, for instance, dates and locates it thus on philological grounds, while Leslie Webster does so for iconographic reasons.[46] Particularly interesting for my purposes here is Ian Wood's article 'Ripon, Francia and the Franks Casket in the Early Middle Ages', in which he makes a strong case for linking the casket to the milieu of Wilfrid of York's monasteries, finding that this iconographically sophisticated and self-consciously clever artefact is in keeping with the monastic culture of Ripon.[47] Whereas Wood's intention in assigning the Franks Casket to this context is to cast light onto some of the less discussed aspects of Northumbrian culture, mine is more or less the reverse. I wish to ask what the monastic culture of Ripon can reveal about the autonomous ability of the casket to gather other elements to it. What kinds of ideas, images, material goods, bodies and so forth were available within this time and place and how does a whalebone chest draw them into itself?

An illuminating figure, in this regard, is the founder of Ripon, Wilfrid. According to his biographer, Stephen of Ripon, Wilfrid was a Northumbrian nobleman who made his way in the royal court through service in Queen Eanflæd's retinue.[48] Using these royal contacts, Wilfrid was able to travel to Gaul and Rome. On the first such occasion, he accompanied Benedict Biscop. Like Biscop, Wilfrid sought out books, relics and other exotic, cultural goods and brought these back to Northumbria. As Peter Brown puts it, the 'steady drift of books into Britain ensured that fragments of a Mediterranean world … now came to rest at the far end of Europe' where each book 'opened a window down the centuries'.[49] But more than books was transferred to northern Britain at this time. Wilfrid, for instance, introduced Frankish architectural ideas to Northumbria and may even have brought Gallic masons with him as part of his building programme. Wilfrid also brought the

tonsure of Saint Peter back from his travels, a very Mediterranean hairstyle that 'would distinguish Wilfrid and his eventual followers from the Irish monks of Iona'.[50] In addition, according to Stephen's Life, a Roman archdeacon taught Wilfrid how to calculate the correct date of Easter.[51]

Traditionally, this activity, with the resulting controversy, has been understood as culminating with the famous Synod of Whitby in 664. Michelle Brown warns us that the conflict focused upon this synod was 'not governed by the overly simplistic nationalistic complexion with which it has been imbued in modern scholarship in which "Celtic" opposed "Roman", and "Roman" won'.[52] Nevertheless, we can see the synod as a moment in time when different things met, where the material (i.e. differently styled and adorned bodies) and the immaterial (i.e. ideas about the dating of a festival) came together. It was an assembly. It was, in this sense, a *þing* – a meeting with an issue and an outcome. Although, in all likelihood, the Franks Casket came into being slightly later in time, this Northumbrian environment, and the movement and assemblage that formed it, may shed some light on our whalebone chest, especially if we are linking it to Ripon. But how far can we take this? In what ways is the casket like or unlike assemblies of the less material kind?

Like any meeting or assembly, the casket does bring together a wide range of things that may not have been combined in such a way before. Indeed, I have noted throughout this chapter the extent to which critical praise for this artefact focuses on its eclecticism. Scholars like Vandersall have identified its visual sources as being variously Oriental, Coptic, Merovingian, Celtic, Viking and Northumbrian. Its verbal sources are equally eclectic. Parallels have been drawn between the casket and a number of manuscripts, such as world chronicles and historical compilations which juxtapose scenes from Christian, Jewish, Roman and Germanic histories.[53] Additionally, the casket has literary equivalents in the Old English riddles and wisdom poetry and, like the runic riddles of the Exeter Book, skilfully employs alternative scripts as a means of wordplay.[54] On the Franks Casket, runes work as images, not always confined to the borders but sometimes also embedded in the midst of bodies, beasts, birds and foliage; while in the carving of the panels forms are 'sharply defined, simplified, and isolated like silhouettes' so that figures float freely, ambiguously, like enigmatic signs.[55] Words and images, the visual and the verbal, meet across this box. Factor in the representation of different styles of dress,

architecture, tools and weapons, and we are not far away from the sorts of meetings instigated by Wilfrid and others.

This shows that the Franks Casket took shape within a dynamic environment and that the maker or makers of the casket were drawing on the range of different resources available to them. Yet, even though we recognise the casket as an eclectic artefact, does it really allow us to identify and isolate its sources? As we have seen, attempts to designate one scene as Roman, another as Germanic, one as Christian and another as pagan, soon fail. Furthermore, while its role as an assembly can link the casket to somewhere such as Ripon and to travellers such as Wilfrid, its composite character simultaneously takes it out of place, out of time. Vandersall commented on the casket's singularity in early medieval English art, the deprecation of its artistic merit, the doubts over whether it is 'English' work at all, its resistance to the 'great art' of the Northumbrian renaissance. Ian Wood similarly observes that 'the iconographic scheme of the Franks Casket seems to have no parallel in the Northumbrian products of its own period'.[56]

What is more, the different things brought together by the casket do not float freely. Rather, they converge thickly within and throughout the whalebone. They are forced together into a visible, tangible whole. The casket assembles, but it also crystallises a moment in time. The disparate, fragmented bits and pieces that this artefact has drawn to it are compatible enough for us to recognise the thing as probably Northumbrian, probably eighth century, and yet these bits and pieces have never quite been combined in this way, frozen at one time, so that the thing also remains distinct enough to elude its own context. There is a tension here. For Daston, it is 'precisely the tension between their chimerical composition and their unified gestalt' that makes things talkative. Things that talk 'instantiate novel, previously unthinkable combinations' but 'their thingness lends vivacity and reality to new constellations of experience that break the old moulds'.[57]

The Franks Casket is an eclectic or 'chimerical' composition but it is also a resolutely material artefact made from whale's bone. The talkative thing tells us this itself. The runes on the front panel read as follows:

	fisc flodu		ahofonferg		enberig	
	warþga:sricgrornþærheongreutgiswom	
	hronæsban	

The moment of the whale's death and its transformation into a box of bone is the particular aspect of the Franks Casket that makes it a one-off. While one can point to other artefacts that juxtapose different myths and histories, and can attempt to draw parallels on this basis, there is no other thing that is so self-consciously aware that it once was, still is and always will be *this* whale.

It is the riddling verse, running around the front panel, which highlights the physical origin of the casket. The riddle is set alongside, and punctuated by, the missing central lock. But if this lock once allowed someone access to the contents of the casket, it is the riddle that gives us access to the material body of the thing. The lock is inviting us in; the riddle is drawing is out and around the three-dimensional chest.

R. I. Page translated the verse as follows:

> 'The fish beat up the sea(s) on to the mountainous cliff. The king of?terror became sad when he swam on to the shingle. Whale's bone.'[58]

There are several points of difficulty in translating this text. I will not discuss these in detail here, except to note the problem of the adjoining words *hronæs ban*. How is this phrase linked to the rest of the riddle? It is similar in kind to the Latin *enigmata* by Aldhelm which readily provide their solutions as titles; but similar, also, to a number of the supposedly 'answerless' Exeter Book riddles which offer their solutions in runes that ask to be transliterated. Many scholars, Page included, divide *hronæs ban* from the rest of the verse. This leads one to ask whether the phrase should come at the end or at the start of the riddle. Personally, I do not believe we need to choose. It is as it appears on the casket, positioned on the left part of the border, deliberately situated at both the start and end of the rectangular riddle, defying any easy divide between living fish and dead bone, between animate creature and inanimate object. This riddle is not purely intellectual in intention, then, but a key to the tactile, sensual, organic nature of this thing. The riddle on the front invites us, through runes, to reflect on and interact with the thingness of the Franks Casket. Compare this to the way in which the material body of Christ is revealed to onlookers through the mystery (*gerynu*) of the Mass, which is itself a sort of enigma, or riddle.[59]

It is hard for most of us to get to grips with the casket through the glass case that now contains it in the British Museum. Nonetheless, we can take into account the physical processes and

conditions that assembled, disassembled and reassembled it. Each side of the casket is a plate of whalebone and these plates were fixed to corner posts and clamped by metal mounts. How the lid once fitted is largely unknown, though Arthur MacGregor informs us that it 'originally sat on a rebate running around the top edge of the box, secured with a lock on one side'.[60] The extant lid is too small and therefore seems to be missing at least two panels, but the surviving panel has a fixing for a handle in its centre. The front of the chest has a hole for a lock or hasp: the many fixing holes that survive indicate that this lock was renewed on at least one occasion; but the way that the runes and ornament on the front panel avoid the square field around the keyhole shows that the lock was always a feature of the chest.[61]

As we think about how the casket was put together, we also start to take it apart. In this way, we are moving backwards through time. Can we go further still? What sort of thing was the Franks Casket before it began to look and act like a casket? The aptly named 'living history society' that is Regia Anglorum provides us with some useful information on bone-working. For instance, before shaping, polishing and carving a bone plaque, one needs to clean it. To do so, bone 'could be exposed for woodland insects and maggots, or buried for the worms and such to clean it, or even placed in an ants nest'. In a few days 'they will clean off every bit of tendon and fat from the bone'.[62] Such details bring the organic nature of the casket to life for us. Presumably, this process would have likewise heightened the Anglo-Saxon bone-worker's sense that he or she was working with something still living or, at least, undead.

The carving stage would have had a similar effect. Each side of the casket is intricately carved, the runes and images cut with a knife. From the earliest times, 'in a society where pen, ink, paper or parchment were not easily come by but where everyone carried a knife', rune-masters incised their texts in wood, chiselled them on stone, scratched them in metal or cut them in bone.[63] Riddle 60 of the Exeter Book may offer us a glimpse into the cutting process, as the speaking thing describes how the knife's edge cut and carved it in order to send a message. Riddle 26, working along similar lines, has a book tell us about its violent transformation under the knife's sharp edge, which bites and scrapes it. While neither of these riddles can be applied directly to the Franks Casket, they do demonstrate the imaginative awareness, even sympathy, which Anglo-Saxon craftsmen were capable of when carving organic material. It is clear that the cleaning, cutting and carving stages in

the construction of the Franks Casket served to reinforce, if not shape, the life–death obsession that runs across the panels, from the riddle on the whale to the revenge of Wayland and the birth of Christ, from the battles on the lid and back to the burial mound on the right side.

There are other ways in which the materiality of the casket moulds its meaning. There was a long Germanic tradition of cutting runes into bone. Runologists have traditionally claimed that the runic script was developed for the material into which it would be incised – for soft, grained wood, initially, but also for stone and bone, which allowed for forms with more curved lines and rounded loops or bows.[64] And so the whalebone had its own say as to what kind of script and what kind of texts would be carved into it. The linguistic playfulness of the inscriptions on the casket would not have worked so well had those inscriptions not been, for the most part, runic – the cryptic runes on the right side that need to be decoded, for instance, or the runic symbols found within the foliage, disguising as images amongst other images. There is also the fact that, from the start, there was no recognised direction of writing runes. A runic inscription and its letter forms could run from left to right or right to left, or could mix the two.[65] Across the Franks Casket, we can see how the rune-carver revelled in this freedom; the runes run back and forth, up and down, upside down and so on. They form rectangular riddles, and misdirect us in a physical as well as intellectual manner, often inviting us to tilt and turn the box this way and that. There is a 'runic' element to the carved figures, too. Discussing the front panel, Vandersall identifies the style of carving as more evocative than descriptive, where the simple differentiation between foreground and background creates an impression of decorative surface pattern and dark–light contrasts, thereby matching the inscriptions which are carved as raised, rather than incised, letters. The aesthetic result is a 'tendency to treat persons and objects as decorative elements'.[66]

But the size and shape of the bone plates further condenses the texts and images on display. Parts of the whale's jawbone have been used for these plates, and the size of this jawbone would have determined what sort of dimensions the craftsman could work within, again contributing to the evocative nature of the panels. When working with this whalebone throughout these various stages of construction, the makers of the Franks Casket must have been acutely aware that the whale was still having a say in its own transformation.

This, then, takes us all the way back to our living whale. We are led to ask whether the moment of its death, the stranding of the whale, occasioned the construction of the Franks Casket or whether the casket was already conceived, maybe even designed, before the bone became available. The riddle on the front, which has the king of terror swimming onto the shingle, suggests the former. If Ælfric's Colloquy is anything to go by, this beached whale would have been received as a real gift, since actively hunting whales could be a very risky endeavour:

> Master: Wylt þu fon sumne hwæl?
> Fisherman: Nic!
> Master: Forhwi?
> Fisherman: Forþam plyhtlic þingc hit ys gefon hwæl. Gebeorhlicre ys me faran to ea mid scype mynan, þænne faran mid manegum scypum on huntunge hranes.
> Master: Forhwi swa?
> Fisherman: Forþam leofre ys me gefon fisc þæne ic mæge ofslean, þonne fisc, þe na þæt an me ac eac swylce mine geferan mid anum slege he mæg besencean oþþe gecwylman.
>
> [Master: Would you like to catch a whale?
> Fisherman: Not me!
> Master: Why not?
> Fisherman: Because catching whales is a risky thing to do. It is safer for me to go to the river with my boat than to go hunting whales with many boats.
> Master: Why so?
> Fisherman: Because I prefer to catch a fish that I can kill, rather than a fish that can sink or kill not only me but also my friends with a single blow.][67]

Here, the practical risks posed by the whale blend with the symbolic, diabolical perception of this terrible 'fish'. Harder to obtain than many other materials, but also imbued with a partly supernatural power, it was surely the boon of the whalebone itself that warranted the creation of such a time-consuming, high-status artefact. As Vicki Ellen Szabo points out, 'the material must matter, otherwise its origins would not have merited mention'. One must 'question whether the material would have merited inscription if it had been something more mundane; the archaeological record offers few such examples' and so the inscription on the front 'implies that the material itself is as fantastic as any of the magical iconography

spanning the box'.[68] Indeed, the bones of this 'king of terror' were deemed special enough to be adorned with silver fittings, as well as intricate ornament. Along similar lines, Karkov proposes that the runes chosen for alliteration in the front-panel verse (i.e. *feoh* and *giefa* or 'treasure' and 'gift') could possibly relate to the casket's material as well as its function 'as the whalebone is both treasure and a gift from the sea'.[69]

Intriguing parallels between the nature of the Franks Casket and the nature of Fastitocalon in the Exeter Book poem *The Whale* suggest that early medieval ideas about the behaviour of this terrible giant *fisc* in its natural habitat may have played a part in shaping this box of bone. Drawing on the Physiologus tradition, *The Whale* describes how:

> Is þæs hiw gelic hreofum stane,
> swylce worie bi wædes ofre,
> sondbeorgum ymbseald, særinca mæst,
> swa þæt wenaþ wægliþende
> þæt hy on ealond sum eagum wliten,
> ond þonne gehydað heahstefn scipu
> to þam unlonde oncyrrapum,
> setlaþ sæmearas sundes æt ende,
> ond þonne in þæt eglond up gewitað
> collenferþe. Ceolas stondað
> bi staþe fæste, streame biwunden.
> Ðonne gewiciað werigferðe,
> faroðlacende, frecnes ne wenað,
> on þam ealonde æled weccað,
> heahfyr ælað; hæleþ beoþ on wynnum,
> reonigmode, ræste geliste.
> Þonne gefeleð facnes cræftig
> þæt him þa ferend on fæste wuniaþ,
> wic weardiað wedres on luste,
> ðonne semninga on sealtne wæg
> mid þa noþe niþer gewiteþ
> garsecges gæst, grund geseceð,
> ond þonne in deaðsele drence bifæsteð
> scipu mid scealcum. (8–31a)

> [Its hue is like rough stone, as if worn down all over by water, sealed around by sandbanks, many reed beds, so that the wave travellers believe that they look on some island with their eyes, and then moor high-prowed ships to that un-land with anchor ropes, settle the sea-horses at the water's edge, and then go up onto that island, proud-hearted. Keels stand fast by the shore, encircled by currents. Worn

> out, the seafarers set up camp, unaware of the dangers, and awaken fire on the island, kindle high flames; the heroes are in happiness, weary in spirit, wishing for rest. When, skilful in evil, it feels that the travellers are safely settled on it, guarding their dwelling and delighting in weather, then suddenly the ocean-guest dives downwards with the loot into the salt sea wave, seeking the sea-ground, and confines them in the death-hall by drowning, the sailors with their ships.]

Like the Franks Casket, the whale known as Fastitocalon has a surface layer with the power to mislead the ignorant into misinterpreting its depths for something other than the truth. What we see (an island) is not necessarily what we get (a monstrous whale). Such mistakes can be dangerous, if not fatal. Where the lid of the casket issues a stark warning about what lies beneath, Fastitocalon feels the unwary seafarers (*frecnes ne wenað*) on its back and drags them down into darkness. Once below the surface, there is no way out. The sailors are confined in the watery *deaðsele*.

The devilish craft of the whale (*facnes cræftig*) might have been understood as enduring in its whalebone, the material of the casket. Both the poet of *The Whale* and the maker of the Franks Casket attempt to alleviate this threat and exert verbal power over the monstrous (or even satanic) whale by bestowing a name on it: Fastitocalon in the poem; Gasric on the casket.[70] But, as we have seen in relation to riddles, speaking the right name can be tricky. The runes that name the whale as 'Gasric' on the Franks Casket read retrograde, implying a transformation from the fearsome king of terror (*gasric*) to whale's bone (*hronæsban*). So the whale has (or had) a named identity but the relationship between the name spoken and the thing named changes as the *fisc* shifts between living creature in the sea and bone on the shingle. 'Fastitocalon' is also an unstable kind of name, quite possibly a mistake, a Middle Irish corruption of the Greek 'Aspidochelone', which originally referred to a giant sea turtle, not a whale,[71] suggesting a Babel-like confusion of tongues. Moreover, in *The Whale*, speech and the mouth are associated with trickery, deceit and ultimately entrapment. *The Whale* links the jaws of this sea monster to a devilish allure, an outer temptation which draws mortals into an inescapable inner darkness:

> He hafað oþre gecynd,
> wæterþisa wlonc, wrætlicran gien.
> Þonne hine on holme hungor bysgað
> ond þone aglæcan ætes lysteþ,

ðonne se mereweard muð ontyneð,
wide weleras; cymeð wynsum stenc
of his innoþe, þætte oþre þurh þone,
sæfisca cynn, beswicen weorðaþ,
swimmað sundhwate þær se sweta stenc
ut gewitað. Hi þær in farað
unware weorude, oþþæt se wida ceafl
gefylled bið; þonne færinga
ymbe þa herehuþe hlemmeð togædre
grimme goman. (49b–62)

[He has another nature, the proud water-rusher, yet more wondrous. When hunger troubles him in the water and the fierce-fighter lusts after food, then the sea-warden opens his mouth, his wide lips; a pleasant stench comes out from his innards, so that other kinds of fish become seduced, swim swiftly to where the sweet stink wafts out. They fare inside there, the unwary throng, until the wide maw is full; then suddenly, the grim jaws crash together around that loot.]

Thus, the poet explains, Satan himself ensnares sinners with false desires. Then hell's gates close like the jaws of the whale. And human souls are confined in darkness, like the inside of a closed casket. It is worth recalling here that the Franks Casket is constructed from a whale's jawbone. Surely the association between hellmouth and the whale's maw would not have escaped the maker of the casket. Yet a casket can open as well as lock up, release as well as contain, reveal as well as conceal. The Anglo-Saxons knew the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale, a prefiguring of the Resurrection of Christ, which suggests that a great gift might emerge from the darkness:

For as Jonas was in the whale's belly three days and three nights: so shall the Son of man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. (Matthew 12:40)

All of the lore that accrues around whales illuminates aspects of the Franks Casket and shows how matter can constrain meaning. I use the word 'constrain' in a positive sense, however. For the Franks Casket would not be the enigmatic, intriguing, irritating thing it is today had it not been made from whalebone.

This bone not only moulds meaning into a distinct whole but holds it together over time. In addition to having a former life, the Franks Casket also has an afterlife, spanning the centuries since its construction. It is a transtemporal artefact. The marks and scars it carries speak to us; they show how the artefact was

used and reused across the years. An example of such reuse may have occurred within the medieval period. James Robinson of the British Museum believes that while the casket 'was made not as a reliquary but possibly as a box to store a holy text such as a Gospel or the Psalms' it 'appears that it may have been converted into a reliquary in the later Middle Ages when it was linked to the cult of St Julian at Brioude in the Auvergne'. This again comes back to the materiality of the thing since 'its adaptation into a reliquary would have been determined by the fact that, although made of whale bone, it resembles ivory' and ivory, like the flesh of the saints, was 'considered to be incorruptible'.[72]

Reuse of, damage to and disassembly of the casket continued beyond the Middle Ages. As we have it today, the casket is broken and incomplete, from a missing lock and handle to a fragmented lid and an absence of silver fittings and hinges. Some of these wounds are talkative. O. M. Dalton, for instance, examined the structure of the casket and concluded that the removal of the silver fittings would not have led to its disintegration; someone had torn it apart forcibly.[73] When combined with the letter written by Augustus Franks, detailing his discovery of the artefact, the marks and absences start to tell shadowy half-stories. Who used the Franks Casket as a sewing box and why? And what about the young man who tore off its silver fittings to buy a ring? These enigmatic, evocative yet ultimately frustrating legends are in keeping with the overall tone of the casket, which never really tells us everything we wish to know but at the same time refuses to stay silent.

It is indeed a talkative thing: a thing that talks, a thing to talk about, a thing to talk with. Yet the reason that the Franks Casket says so much, both about its former life and its afterlife; the reason that it has been reused and misused again and again; the reason that it has accrued so many names, stories, legends; has attracted so much debate, excited so much speculation, misled us so many times, is precisely because it still speaks, in a very real, a very physical and three-dimensional way, of that unique environment in which it assembled itself …

> Once circumscribed and concretized, the new thing becomes a magnet for intense interest, a paradox incarnate. It is richly evocative; it is eloquent. Only when the paradox becomes prosaic do things that talk subside into speechlessness.[74]

The Franks Casket is showing no signs of lapsing into silence, not yet. It remains meaningful. It still matters.

Notes

1 See Leslie Webster, 'The Iconographic Programme of the Franks Casket', in Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills (eds), *Northumbria's Golden Age* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1999), pp. 227–46, at 227; and Ian Wood, 'Ripon, Francia and the Franks Casket in the Early Middle Ages', *Northern History*, 26 (1990), 1–19, at 1.

2 For a general overview, see James Paz, 'Franks Casket', in Siân Echard and Robert Rouse (eds), *the Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopaedia of British Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming).

3 Wood, 'Ripon, Francia and the Franks Casket in the Early Middle Ages'.

4 Daston (ed.), *Things That Talk*, p. 24.

5 Michel Serres, *Statues: Le Second Livre de Fondations* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), p. 211. The translation into English is by Steven Connor, available online at www.stevenconnor.com/feelingthings/.

6 This anecdote is recounted in Leslie Webster, *The Franks Casket: British Museum Objects in Focus* (London: British Museum Press, 2012), p. 5. Borges's simultaneous closeness to and distance from Anglo-Saxon literature is evoked by his poem 'To a Saxon Poet', in *Selected Poems*, ed. Coleman, pp. 242–3.

7 Page, *Introduction to English Runes*, p. 173.

8 Ibid., pp. 177–8.

9 Amy L. Vandersall, 'The Date and Provenance of the Franks Casket', *Gesta*, 11:2 (1972), 9–26, at 9.

10 Ibid., pp. 9–12.

11 Ibid., p. 15.

12 Alfred Becker, 'Franks Casket Revisited', *Asterisk*, 12:2 (2003), 84–128, at 84.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., pp. 86, 124.

15 Marijane Osborn,'The Lid as Conclusion of the Syncretic Theme of the Franks Casket', in A. Bammesberger (ed.), *Old English Runes and their Continental Background* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1991), pp. 249–68, at 250.

16 Osborn offers a very useful examination of the meaning of the word *ægili*, linking it to 'trouble' or even 'terror'; I will return to this matter later on.

17 Webster, 'Iconographic Programme', p. 227. Although I have selected this essay as the most suitable, Webster has written extensively on the casket: e.g. Webster, 'Stylistic Aspects of the Franks Casket', in R. Farrell (ed.), *The Vikings* (London: Phillimore, 1982), pp. 20–31; Webster, 'The Franks Casket', in Leslie Webster and Janet Backhouse (eds), *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture, AD 600–900* (London: British Museum Press, 1991), pp. 101–3. Her 2012 publication for the British Museum's *Objects in Focus* series is written for a more general audience.

18 Ibid., pp. 229–30.

19 Ibid., p. 235.
20 See ibid., pp. 245–6.
21 See Webster, 'Iconographic Programme', pp. 231, 234, 237, 240, 242.
22 Becker, 'Franks Casket Revisited', pp. 85–6.
23 Webster, 'Iconographic Programme', p. 246.
24 Webster, 'Iconographic Programme', p. 241; cf. Vandersall, 'Date and Provenance of the Franks Casket', p. 14.
25 See, for instance, R. W. V. Elliott, *Runes: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2nd edn, 1989), pp. 131–3.
26 Page, *Introduction to English Runes*, p. 179.
27 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 151.
28 Austin Simmons, *The Cipherment of the Franks Casket* (Homeric Society of Texas, 2010), pp. 5, 12, 13, 14. This article has been made available to the public via Oxford University's Woruldhord Project: http://poppy.nsms.ox.ac.uk/woruldhord/contributions/144.
29 Osborn, 'Syncretic Theme of the Franks Casket', pp. 256–8.
30 Carol Neuman de Vegvar, 'The Travelling Twins: Romulus and Remus in Anglo-Saxon England', in Hawkes and Mills (eds), *Northumbria's Golden Age*, pp. 256–67, at 256.
31 Becker, 'Franks Casket Revisited', p. 100.
32 Webster, 'Iconographic Programme', p. 239.
33 Simmons, *Cipherment of the Franks Casket*, p. 10.
34 Ibid.
35 Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, p. 11.
36 Ibid.
37 See further Page, *Introduction to English Runes*, p. 176.
38 Webster, 'Iconographic Programme', p. 239.
39 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 150.
40 Simmons, *Cipherment of the Franks Casket*, pp. 57–8.
41 Osborn proposes Egil, Abbot of Fulda (817–822) as a candidate, pp. 264–5.
42 See Simmons, *Cipherment of the Franks Casket*, p. 48.
43 Osborn, 'Syncretic Theme of the Franks Casket', pp. 262–4.
44 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 147.
45 Even referring to the object in the British Museum as 'the thing itself' is misleading. The item on display is fragmented and broken, the right end panel represented by a replica. Furthermore, I have seen the casket in two different contexts within the BM: first, within Europe AD 300–1100 (Room 41); second, within the *Treasures of Heaven* exhibition (23 June to 9 October 2011) where it was surrounded by an array of medieval relics and reliquaries.
46 See Page, *Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 25, 31; Webster, 'Stylistic Aspects of the Franks Casket', pp. 28–30.
47 Wood, 'Franks Casket in the Early Middle Ages', pp. 5–6.

48 Stephen of Ripon, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927).
49 Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 357.
50 Ibid., p. 360.
51 See Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfrid*, chapter 5.
52 Michelle Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe* (London: The British Library, 2003), p. 32.
53 For instance: Vandersall, 'Date and Provenance of the Franks Casket', p. 16; Wood, 'Franks Casket in the Early Middle Ages', pp. 7–8.
54 Webster, 'Iconographic Programme', p. 228.
55 Vandersall, 'Date and Provenance of the Franks Casket', p. 16.
56 Wood, 'Franks Casket in the Early Middle Ages', p. 7.
57 Daston (ed.), *Things That Talk*, p. 24.
58 Page, *Introduction to English Runes*, p. 175.
59 Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing look at how the mystery of the Mass and the mystery of the riddle converge in *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), pp. 98–100.
60 Arthur MacGregor, *Bone, Antler, Ivory, and Horn: The Technology of Skeletal Materials since the Roman Period* (London: Barnes and Noble, 1985), pp. 202–3.
61 In addition to MacGregor, see Webster, 'The Franks Casket', in Webster and Backhouse (eds), *The Making of England*, p. 101.
62 See www.regia.org/life/bonework.htm.
63 Page, *Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 40–1.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., p. 41.
66 Vandersall, 'Date and Provenance of the Franks Casket', p. 13.
67 Text based on Ælfric's *Colloquy*, ed. G. N. Garmonsway (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, rev. edn, 1991). Translation is mine.
68 Vicki Ellen Szabo, 'Bad to the Bone? The Unnatural History of Monstrous Medieval Whales', in *The Heroic Age, A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe*, 8 (June 2005). Available online at www.heroicage.org/issues/8/szabo.html.
69 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 149.
70 'Gasric' has conventionally been translated as 'king of terror' but Gaby Waxenberger has proposed that the name means 'the one strong in life or power' (unpublished paper delivered at the thirteenth conference of the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists, July 2009). Quoted in Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 148–9.
71 Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 62. See also Michelle C. Hoek, 'Anglo-Saxon Innovation and

the Use of the Senses in the Old English Physiologus Poems', *Studia Neophilologica*, 69:1 (1997), 1–10, at 3.

72 James Robinson, *Finer than Gold: Saints and Relics in the Middle Ages* (London: British Museum Press, 2011), p. 105.

73 O. M. Dalton, *Catalogue of the Ivory Carvings of the Christian Era in the British Museum* (London: British Museum Press, 1909), pp. 27–32.

74 Daston (ed.), *Things That Talk*, p. 24.