

Essay Four — The Vikings
“Fish Talisman”

Russell J Lowke, December 18th, 2001.

The most significant accomplishments of the Vikings were their feats of maritime expedition, exploration and colonization. Between 800 and 1050, Norwegian Scandinavians from the bay of Vik (source of their name Viking, and now known as Skagerrak), set out on innumerable plundering expeditions. They raided and planted settlements in Ireland, Scotland, England, France, the Shetland Islands, the Orkney Islands, the Hebrides, the Isle of Man, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland.¹ There is evidence that expeditions reached as far as Newfoundland, what they called Vinland, on Canada's northeastern coast. The source of Viking success was the development and exploitation of the longboat. The elegant and nimble longboats drew very little water, were remarkably versatile, and were extremely hardy.² Piloting a longboat over vast distances required significant navigational seafaring skills, and an important aid in these seafaring skills was, and remains, the magnetic compass.

Edison Marshall, in his book, *The Viking* (1951), features a fish shaped compass talisman being used by the Vikings, some three or four hundred years before the adoption of the compass by European and Scandinavian seafarers. The workings of the compass seem magical to Marshall's characters, one of which, Sandpiper, describes them as such, "...wonder upon wonders, if a small piece of iron was formed in a shape of a fish, then treated according to their most strange and ancient art, and swung upon a cord, it would seek to swim to the North Star."³ What Sandpiper sees is plainly a description of a magnetized piece of iron, swinging freely on a string, so to point north, in the fashion of a compass. Sandpiper is an alchemist searching for the philosopher's stone, to turn metal into gold. Instead, he learns of magnetism, and for this he is silenced by having his tongue cut out, and his eardrums ruptured. Marshall uses the seemingly magical properties of the compass, and their mystery, to highlight the superstitious inclinations of the Vikings, and emphasize conflict between Norse and Christian beliefs.

¹ "Norway" Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

² Joseph Roquemore, *History goes to the Movies*, (New York: Broadway, 1999): 32.

³ Edison Marshall, *The Viking*, (U.S.A : H. Wolf, 1951):231.

Historically, Norse and Western European seafarers navigated primarily by way of the sun and the stars. Sandpiper does this too when he navigates the boat. By cutting images of star formations into a deerskin, he communicates to his captain, Ogier (the hero of the book), the importance of the stars to complete their journey. Ogier recognizes the drawings saying, “I perceived... the picture was of the group of stars that we called the Big Dipper... the new mark stood for the North Star, the one pilot star that a mariner may trust to his dying breath.”⁴ The magnetic compass, when introduced, was probably used merely to check the direction of the wind when clouds obscured the sky. Regardless, such an artifact would have been highly prized by the Norsemen. In the book, Ragnar, leader of the Vikings, expresses this sentiment as such, “I wish I’d had one [fish compass] like it, ...I could have struck at England across this very sea. I could fly from my hall to Humbermouth short of a fortnight. I could load my ships with warriors instead of stores. I’d have time to comb the whole country of its riches, instead of rifling a few ports and scampering homeward to dodge autumn gales.”⁵ When Ogier, the hero, does obtain a working compass, he profits greatly from it, making wagers about a ship’s facing and navigating the North Sea by it; indeed, it is almost as good as being able to turn metal into gold.

Despite their acknowledged value, early compasses were fragile, troublesome, and unreliable instruments, subject to mysterious disturbances, such as other magnetized objects. The variable nature of the compass is manipulated by Marshall to great effect, its properties are compared to the powers of the gods, and its magic causes much debate among the characters. The compass in Marshall’s story begins demagnetized, and when Sandpiper first reveals the compass, pulling it from his ragged garments, he is said to have, “no gods or goods,”⁶ in much the same way that the demagnetized compass has no power. The compass talisman is shaped in the form of a fish, a Christian symbol, implying that it is ruled by the Christian God, who therefore wields great power by virtue of the magic of the compass (magnetism). Ragnar suggests that a “good, strong sorceress

⁴ Edison Marshall:187.

⁵ Edison Marshall:188.

⁶ Edison Marshall:122.

could put the charm back in it [the compass],” and identifies it as “a Christian charm, so it would take a Christian witch... One or two of her strong prayers, the kind the Christians give in Latin, might do the trick.”⁷ The Christian Europeans did adopt the compass before the Scandinavians, and this supports Marshall’s hypothesis that the compass, with its strong magic, came via Christian origins. Great fear of the Christian God is thereby supported, and the Vikings exclaim that, “if he [Christian God] is as great as the Vikings fear — although they would cut out their tongues before they would confess it — he would lift a mountain on his hand and drop it on your head.”⁸

In contrast to the central role played by the magnet in the book, in Richard Fleischer’s movie, *The Vikings*, adapted from the book by Marshall, also features a magic fish talisman, but its role is greatly simplified and much less prominent. A witch presents the compass to Ogier, explaining it to be a “...strange metal that fell to earth from the North Star, grandfather brought it from far away. The price he paid was his ears and his tongue. No matter how you hold it, it always struggles to return homeward to the star from which it fell — it always points to the North.” The talisman is used to navigate through a fog, which hides Ogier and his comrades from their Viking adversaries. Note that the film oversimplifies, saying that it is the witch’s grandfather who paid for the compass by way of his ears and tongue, rather than Sandpiper, who nonetheless is still depicted as dumb and mute.

Marshall in his book uses the fish talisman not only as a means of great gain for his hero Ogier, but to also effectively intertwine and present conflicts between Nordic and Christian beliefs, simultaneously placing these in stark contrast to modern knowledge of magnetism held by his reader. The effect is to create a world where the belief in the possibility of magic and the power of the various gods becomes more plausible and real in light of the mysterious workings of the compass. Fleischer follows Marshall’s example, keeping the compass in his film, but removing much of its plot complexity. As the Vikings were a sea-faring people, deriving their success from

⁷ Edison Marshall:188.

⁸ Edison Marshall:130.

their voyages, the discovery of a strange and magical metal that always points north is incredibly desirable. As such, the compass is a focal point for Marshall, who uses it to converge themes of culture, power, religion and money.

Bibliography

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