

Portfolio:

The Franks Casket

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Figure 1:Franks Casket, maker unknown, early 8th century. Whalebone, 13 × 23 × 19 cm. Found/acquired: France: Auvergne: Haute-Loire: Auzon. The British Museum, London (1867,0120.1). Image: The British Museum.

Introduction

The Franks Casket is a small, intricately carved whalebone box from 8th-century Northumbria. Its panels juxtapose scenes from Roman, Jewish, Christian, Germanic, and classical mythology with runic inscriptions in both Latin and Old English. I chose to write my portfolio on The Franks Casket because I find it fascinating how narratives from different cultures and religions are portrayed in one object. The Franks Casket is relevant not only as a masterpiece of early medieval craftsmanship but also because it communicates a glimpse of the cultural hybridity of early medieval Europe. This analysis will historicize the casket through multiple frameworks: culture, technology, power, ideology, economy, transfers, and postmodernism. By viewing this object through these various lenses, I hope to find out more about this artwork and learn about the ways cultural exchange and hybrid identities shaped the medieval world.

1. Culture

This section historicizes the Franks Casket using multiple frameworks for cultural analysis. Firstly, following the tradition of cultural history described by Burke, one could attempt to use the casket as a key object to gather insight and define the zeitgeist (or “spirit of age”) of the 8th-century Anglo-Saxon world.¹ This framework would treat the casket as a result of a collective mentality. The analysis would seek to identify the “clarifying” connections between its contrasting elements. For example, Abels analyzes how the depiction of the Magi relates to the legend of Weland the Smith.² Another question we can ask ourselves to understand the cultural context of this object is to question whether we can speak of a unifying Germanic spirit or a syncretic Christian ethos that binds them. This approach would aim to construct a “portrait of the age” from this single artifact, positing it as a direct expression of a unified Anglo-Saxon worldview.

In direct contrast to the first approach, a methodology rooted in material culture would sidestep the search for a collective spirit and instead ask concrete questions about the casket’s production, circulation, and consumption. The focus leads to questions such as: Was the commissioner a member of a royal court, a monastery, or a wealthy secular individual? Within this framework, the choice and combination of imagery are best understood as a curated projection of that specific social group’s values and self-conception, education, or political aspirations. This leads to a critical debate regarding the primary cultural function of the object: Was it a tool for religious conversion, a display of wealth, or a political statement? In conclusion, this method focuses on the object as an individual product of material conditions and social structures.

A notable point to consider when historicizing through the lens of cultural history is Popper’s and Gombrich’s contribution to the field. Popper argued that it is impossible to observe nature without having a hypothesis to test, which always results in a self-reinforcing pattern.³ He criticized historicism, the idea that history follows predetermined laws or that artistic styles are expressions of a “spirit of the age”.⁴ Popper argued that such approaches are not only unscientific but also politically dangerous, as they can justify totalitarian ideologies.⁵ Gombrich applies Popper’s situational logic and zero method to art history, suggesting that we should study artistic change through the logic of social situations and individual choices, rather than through grand historical narratives.⁶

The Franks Casket can be historicized culturally through different frameworks: as a reflection of an Anglo-Saxon worldview or as a material object shaped by social context and patronage. Ultimately, all approaches to historicizing the Franks Casket are shaped and inevitably limited by the historian’s own questions and presuppositions.

¹ Burke, *Cultural history*, 7.

² Abels “What has Weland to do with Christ” 551.

³ Burke, *Cultural History*, 12.

⁴ Gombrich, “Vanity Fair,” 60-62.

⁵ Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 7-8.

⁶ Gombrich, “Vanity Fair,” 86-87.

2. Technology

The use of whalebone is significant in several ways. Whaling was a major business in the early modern era and dates back to prehistoric rock carvings, so eighth-century technology was likely sufficient to hunt whales in the open North Sea.⁷ We can also speculate that this material was sourced from a stranded whale, as it relates to the inscription on the front panel.⁸ The casket reads a riddle concerning the material of the box. When translated it reads: "*The flood lifted up the fish on to the cliff-bank; the terror-king became sad, where he swam on the shingle. Whale's bone.*"⁹ The text literally describes a fish being swept onto land by a flood, which validates the assumption of the whale being stranded.¹⁰ Whalebone was a valuable material precisely because of its rarity, which established it as a precious medium and a fitting substitute for the even more exclusive elephant ivory.^{11 12}

The sculptural style of the casket serves as a key to its historical context, revealing a synthesis of the period's workshop practices with artistic models drawn from different regions. The casket represents a mastery of organic materials. Vandersall argues that the stylistic and iconographic conventions of the casket are not in line with the canonical Northumbrian art around the year 700.¹³ Most academics acknowledge that the casket's inspiration was drawn from a broader geographical and cultural sphere.^{14 15 16} For Abels, the object shows a clear relation to earlier models, such as the fifth-century Brescia casket, in its design, construction, and iconography. (Figure 3)¹⁷ Webster upholds this theory of Italian influence by drawing a detailed comparison with the Brescia casket. She recognizes it as a plausible example, pointing out that the two items are similar in terms of formatting as well as material, proportions, and construction (figures 2 & 3).¹⁸ In both objects, the ornamentation frames the primary images, not merely decorative but iconographically integrated, creating a visual conversation between the center and outer border.¹⁹ On the other hand, Abels notes that stylistically, the artifact is defined by an abstract and linear aesthetic that stands in contrast to the more sculptural, modelled tradition exemplified by Italian models like the Brescia Casket.²⁰

⁷ Hennius, "Whaling" 2.

⁸ Bray "Anglo-Saxon Synthesis" 252.

⁹ Abels "What has Weland to do with Christ" 560.

¹⁰ Bray "Anglo-Saxon Synthesis" 252.

¹¹ Webster, "Franks Casket" 248.

¹² Abels "What has Weland to do with Christ" 560.

¹³ Vandersall, "date and provenance," 9.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Abels "What has Weland to do with Christ," 552.

¹⁶ Webster, "Franks Casket," 234.

¹⁷ Abels "What has Weland to do with Christ" 552.

¹⁸ Webster, "Franks Casket", 234.

¹⁹ Webster, "Franks Casket," 234.

²⁰ Abels "What has Weland to do with Christ," 553



Figure 2: Franks Casket (front panel), maker unknown, early 8th century. Whalebone. The British Museum, London (1867,0120.1). Image: The British Museum.



Figure 3: The Brescia Casket (Lipsanoteca), late 4th century. Ivory and wood. Museo di Santa Giulia, Brescia. Photo: Museo di Santa Giulia, Brescia.

The comparative observations of Abels and Webster reveal that the Franks Caskets' distinctive style finds its closest affinities not in a single location, but across a network of Anglo-Saxon sites, ranging from Pictish Scotland to Mercia and Northumbria, they see a fusion: the composition and narrative framing are Italian (as Webster says), but the execution and linear aesthetic are distinctly Anglo-Saxon (as Abels notes), resulting in a hybrid style.^{21 22}

When historicizing the Franks Casket, it is crucial to remember that it is part of a fragmented artistic record. The Anglo-Saxon narratives on the casket may have originated from a native tradition of wood carving, a medium that is now lost but is still partially visible in metalwork and ivory.²³ Therefore, it is possible that the depicted narratives originate from an indigenous and largely lost tradition of storytelling.²⁴ However, the scenes, while possibly drawing on native storytelling traditions, are framed within a distinctly late Roman and Italian artistic language. As Webster notes, their composition and the style of narrative are directly indebted to early Christian Italian models.²⁵

²¹ Abels "What has Weland to do with Christ," 553.

²² Webster, "Franks Casket" 234, 241-242, 245.

²³ Webster, "Franks Casket," 234.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

3. Power, ideology, or economy

One way to historicize the object through the lenses of ideology and power is to analyze its iconography. The Franks Casket's iconography is anchored in the ideology of sovereignty.²⁶ Scholar Richard Abels, for instance, interprets the way of depicting Christ on the casket as representing the highest, absolute sovereign power.²⁷ This perspective reflects the social logic of its time and place: eighth-century Anglo-Saxon society was structured around a code of mutual obligation and loyalty.²⁸ This is seen in the feudal system, where a lord provided protection and land in exchange for his warriors' loyalty and service. Furthermore, the battle-oriented ethos of the Old Testament, which values lordly fidelity, gift exchange, and vengeance, resonated deeply with the heroic warrior culture celebrated in Old English poetry.²⁹ The casket's imagery cleverly bridges this system with the new Christian worldview. For example, the panel depicting the Germanic legend of Wayland the Smith, a story of capture and brutal vengeance, directly echoes the battle-oriented ethos found in Old Testament tales, which similarly value lordly loyalty, gift exchange, and righteous retribution.³⁰ This interaction explains the casket's unique blend of Christianity with (pre-Christian) Anglo-Saxon culture.

Consequently, the Franks Casket can be historicized as an ideological instrument within its political economy when looking at how power is organized and maintained through art. The casket itself is a product of this economy: crafted from rare whalebone, its creation demanded access to exotic materials and highly skilled, likely monastic, artisans, all under the patronage of a powerful elite. Its imagery synthesizes Old English heroism and Christian lordship into a cultural dominant that still legitimized the authority of an 8th-century Anglo-Saxon elite, framing their rule within the timeless divine order argued by the Old Testament.³¹

While the specific commissioner and audience remain uncertain, the precious material signifies an object of immense value, likely made for a king or a high-ranking churchman.³² It thus possesses significant "cult value" in Walter Benjamin's terms, originating from its ritualistic or elite ceremonial origins.³³ Yet, its function was hardly private; the intricate, narrative-driven panels on all sides demand to be seen, read, and interpreted in a social setting. This gives the object a powerful "exhibition value."³⁵ It was designed for display, to be decoded by a courtly audience, thereby performing its ideological work publicly. Whether used as a reliquary, a treasury for sacred texts, or a diplomatic gift, one of its primary roles was to communicate power. It visually demonstrated the owner's wealth, sophistication, and mastery over both native tradition and divine authority, consolidating social status through a fusion of art, faith, and politics.

²⁶ Abels "What has Weland to do with Christ," 576.

²⁷ Abels "What has Weland to do with Christ," 550.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Abels "What has Weland to do with Christ," 579.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Abels "What has Weland to do with Christ," 560.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproduction," 7.

³⁵ Ibid.

4. Transfers

When historicizing the casket through cultural transfers, we can attempt to trace the origin and journey of its materials and techniques. While briefly discussing this in *technology*, I will now elaborate further on the transfer of images and material. Art historians often frame the casket as a Germanic adaptation of external (Italian and Christian) models, a narrative that can marginalize its northern aspects.³⁶ While researching the transfers regarding the casket, one needs to take into account the casket's possible interdisciplinarity, and it might be studied in relation to stone carving, metalwork, manuscript decoration, and even toolmaking, crossing traditional disciplinary and cultural borders. In *histoire croisée*, Zimmermann advocates for a relational approach that studies the intercrossings between societies and cultures.³⁷ So, when historicizing through transfers, the casket is a point of intersection where Roman, Germanic, and Christian technologies of representation meet and transform each other.³⁸ But, we might ask: how did Anglo-Saxon craftspeople assert their own technical identity through this object, rather than just receiving influence?

The intended destination of the object after its creation is another highly relevant transfer to research, as it could reveal the original motives behind its creation. Fitzgerald argues that the casket was intended as a gift. In particular, she proposes that the recipient was (or was intended to be) the Frankish Benedictine monk, Eigil, and that his name is encrypted on the lid. Webster thinks the casket could have been a gift for a Frankish church.³⁹ Abels argues that gift-giving is the central theme of the casket.⁴⁰ He draws his evidence from the casket's narratives, which explicitly concern gift-giving.⁴¹ Furthermore, the front panel's imagery and runic inscription suggest that this artifact was meant to be a present to the commissioner's lord.⁴² Abels explains in great detail how the motifs on the front of the Franks Casket make direct references to gift-giving and kingship.⁴³ Thus, while the purpose, origin, and intended audience cannot be concluded with any certainty, the casket's overall story theme and material, in combination with the inscription and the fact that the whalebone was a highly valuable material, make it very probable that it was made as a gift.⁴⁴

Beyond their social, economic, and peacemaking functions, gifts served primarily as political tools, through which aristocrats competed for power and prestige.⁴⁵ In this context, the casket's value as a prestigious object and its thematic focus on gift-giving strongly suggest it was created not merely as a generous offering, but as a calculated political statement, a symbol of loyalty, a bid for favor, or a claim to a place within the hierarchies of its time.

³⁶ Abels, "What has Weland to do with Christ," 580.

³⁷ Zimmermann, *histoire croisée*.

³⁸ Bray "Anglo-Saxon Synthesis," 255.

³⁹ Webster, "Franks Casket", 246. As cited in Fitzgerald, "The Lid of the Franks Casket," 360.

⁴⁰ Abels, "What has Weland to do with Christ," 550

⁴¹ Abels, "What has Weland to do with Christ," 560.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Abels, "What has Weland to do with Christ," 561.

⁴⁵ Curta, "Gift Giving," 698-699.

5. A Postmodern Perspective

While historicizing the object, we must take the fragmentary nature of our evidence into account. Only a fraction of the material culture from the 8th century survives for us to analyze. Therefore, suggesting definitive connections between the objects we possess, within an incomplete field from which countless other works are lost, risks constructing an incomplete or even inaccurate view of the time period.

Given the organic nature of the wood used to create most Anglo-Saxon artworks, many of these pieces have deteriorated over time and are now lost to us.⁴⁶ The objects we do have represent an archive shaped by what survived in physical form, what elites chose to commission, and what later collectors deemed valuable. It silences non-elite and deteriorated objects, such as wood carvings and other items composed of less durable materials. Historicizing must begin by acknowledging this foundational bias in the historical record itself. Because we know of so few objects, it is irresponsible to suggest hard conclusions.

A postmodern perspective challenges the historian's ability to form a singular, definitive 'portrait of an age', which was discussed in *culture*. Naturally historians feel the need to divide an object like the Franks Casket into a singular, coherent view, but this approach might lead to false generalizing conclusions. Rather than attempting to isolate supposedly "pure" Germanic or Roman-Christian elements, which is a characteristically modernist approach, we should analyze the casket as an artwork where different contradictory and compatible cultural codes are layered.

Instead of a modern approach, which searches for a universal objective quality, a postmodern approach, according to Thomas McEvelley, should research the fusion of cultural elements.⁴⁷ If so, what is represented could instead be analyzed as a strategic pastiche expressing a complex, hybrid identity.

What I analyze here is an elite, exceptionally durable object that once formed only a small part of a large material world, most of which has not survived. Accordingly, any conclusions drawn cannot stand for the Anglo-Saxons as a whole, but must instead be understood as reflections of this specific, singular, fragmentary, and privileged artifact.

⁴⁶ Webster, "Franks Casket," 234.

⁴⁷ McEvelley, "History, quality, globalism," 124, 129, 130-131.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis has historicized the Franks Casket through multiple, intersecting frameworks. The first section contrasts two major approaches to historicizing the Franks Casket: a traditional framework that seeks to read it as an expression of an overarching Anglo-Saxon “spirit of the age,” and a more material framework that instead examines its production, patrons, and social functions. Drawing on critiques by Popper and Gombrich, it highlights the limits of grand narratives and emphasizes that any interpretation is shaped by the historian’s own assumptions, methods, and questions.

Moving from method to form, the casket’s varied stylistic sources reveal an intentional fusion of Italian compositional models with a distinct Anglo-Saxon linear aesthetic. Together, these stylistic features show the Franks Casket as a hybrid product of cultural exchange.

The Franks Casket’s iconography blends Old English heroic culture with Christian notions of divine sovereignty, reflecting an eighth-century political world structured by loyalty, lordship, and ideologies of power. Crafted from a rare material and designed for public display, it functioned as an ideological instrument communicating status, authority, and cultural mastery within its political economy.

When historicized through transfers, the Franks Casket emerges as an interdisciplinary intersection of Roman, Germanic, and Christian representational technologies, raising questions about how Anglo-Saxon craftspeople shaped their own technical identity; and although its exact purpose and intended recipient remain uncertain, the convergence of its narrative themes, inscriptions, valuable whalebone material, and scholarly arguments strongly indicates that it was created as a prestigious gift functioning as a calculated political statement.

In light of the fragmentary survival of early medieval material culture, with the Franks Casket as one of the few surviving objects, any interpretation must resist definitive claims and instead approach the object as a culturally layered, hybrid pastiche whose meaning reflects its singular, privileged position rather than the totality of Anglo-Saxon society.

Ultimately, writing this paper has taught me that a single artefact can raise an infinite number of questions. Every analytical framework I applied uncovered new dimensions and complexities, challenging my initial assumptions. The most significant takeaway from this course is the understanding that definitive conclusions are troubled, particularly for early medieval objects. A part of their history and context remains unknown, necessitating an interpretative approach that is open-ended and mindful of its own limits.

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