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Thor's Hammer

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## Thor's Hammer

by H. R. ELLIS DAVIDSON

EVEN in our sophisticated, urban civilization, we can still feel something of the terror and marvel of a thunder-storm. 'That is God's voice speaking', I was solemnly told by my grandmother when I was a small child. When the thunder breaks, as it seems, directly overhead, it is either an inspiring or an intimidating experience, according to temperament and upbringing: some go out to watch the lightning, others cower in the broom cupboard. God's voice or not, I can well remember a severe storm over the Mersey in childhood, and the vivid sense it brought of a menace to the secure and established world — the edge of the abyss opening. A passage in Tolstoi's novel *Anna Karenina*, which like so much in that book must have been based on a personal experience, sums up the sense of power and disorientation felt when a great tree was struck by lightning:<sup>1</sup>

. . . Suddenly there was a glare of light, the whole earth seemed on fire, and the vault of heaven cracked overhead. Opening his blinded eyes, to his horror the first thing Levin saw through a thick curtain of rain between him and the woods was the uncannily altered position of the green crest of a familiar oak in the middle of the copse. 'Can it have been struck?' The thought had barely time to cross his mind when, gathering speed, the oak disappeared behind the other trees and he heard the crash of the great tree falling on the others.

To people of an earlier civilization, living in vulnerable houses of wood or in tents and caves, such a sight as this must have been terrifying indeed.

It is not surprising then that thunder is visualized, in lands where storms are frequent, as the manifestation of divine power, and symbolized accordingly in the ancient world. My grandmother,

<sup>1</sup> *Anna Karenina*, VIII, 17; from Rosemary Edmund's translation, Penguin Books, p. 847.

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with her 'voice of God', was no doubt drawing on Hebrew Biblical tradition; since the Jews did not create visual images of the God of Heaven, thunder was to them the sound of his warning voice, as in Psalm 104:

The waters covered before thy rebuking word, fled away at thy voice of thunder.

This tradition incidentally has left a deep imprint on our drama from Elizabethan times onwards. Outside Israel however it was usual to represent the thunder by various visual images, such as a bird, a dragon, sharp arrows, or a sprung spear.<sup>2</sup>

I am concerned here with one of these images, that used in Northern Europe in the Migration and Viking periods, which was an axe or a hammer. These were familiar symbols of everyday use, at a time when most men did their own smithying and carpentering, but the hammer of the Thunder God was not in general depicted like the hammers which have been found in Viking graves.

For the Vikings the hammer of the thunder was the weapon of their god Thor. We know a good deal about him, because of the rich literature surviving in Scandinavia in the form both of poems and prose stories. Many accounts of his exploits have become schoolroom tales, like one telling how the great Thor was mocked at by a magician and hid in a giant's glove, or another relating how his hammer was stolen away, hidden many leagues under the earth, and only regained when Thor, disguised as the goddess Freyja and muffled in a bridal veil, went with Loki to the hall of the giant Thrym to get it into his own hands again. Most of these stories and poems were not written down until the thirteenth century or later, after belief in the god had been replaced by Christianity, and many of them appear to be told simply for entertainment, and show Thor as a semi-comic figure. On the other hand, Christianity came late to Scandinavia; it was not established in Iceland until A.D. 1000, while heathenism continued later still in parts of Norway and Sweden. So the memory of the Hammer God was likely to be reasonably fresh in men's minds, and even from the more frivolous tales it is possible to learn something of the kind of figure which he must have been in his prime.

Indeed he stands out most clearly perhaps of all the Old Norse

<sup>2</sup> A good account of such representations will be found in C. Blinkenberg, *The Thunderweapon in Religion and Folklore*, Cambridge, 1911.

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gods, a characteristic hero of the stormy Viking world. When he appears in the stories, he is described as a huge man with a red beard, with a great voice and terrible, fierce, burning eyes. Outspoken, indomitable, he strode through the Northern heavens, filled with vigour and gusto. He set his reliance in his strong right arm and in his simple weapon, the hammer *Mjöllnir*. With this he could overcome any giant or troll as long as physical might alone and not cunning magic was in question. Thor had no horse, like Odin and the other great gods, but he preferred to walk, or to ride in his chariot drawn by two goats, and he was accordingly known as *Öku-Þór*, Thor the Driver. Among the Lapps, who seem to have borrowed ideas about the Thunder God from the Scandinavians, he lived on as *Horagalles*, from Thor *karl*, or 'Old Man Thor'.

We hear a good deal in the literature about temples built in honour of Thor in Sweden, Norway and Iceland, in which his image stood either alone or flanked by those of the other gods. Two famous places where he was worshipped were Uppsala and Thrandheim, but there were many small shrines beside. A rich and famous temple stood in the Viking kingdom in Dublin, where a forest sacred to the god stood on the north bank of the River Liffey; this was not destroyed until 994, when the shrine was plundered by an Irish king.<sup>3</sup> Splendid images of the god stood in these temples, always armed with a hammer. We have one small example of what they may have been like from Iceland, where a little bronze amulet, the figure of a bearded man leaning on a hammer, was found near Akureyri in North Iceland, and is thought to date from about A.D. 1000.<sup>4</sup> In the temples however, according to the stories, the figures of Thor were life-size or larger; sometimes Thor was depicted in his chariot, and it was said that the image at Thrandheim was so made that the chariot could be pulled by a cord, imitating the noise of thunder as it rolled along.<sup>5</sup>

For Thor above all was the god of the thunder, and the protector of gods and men from the evil beings that menaced the secure world. If the thunder was the noise of his rolling chariot, the

<sup>3</sup> C. Marsbrander, 'Thor en Irlande,' *Revue Celtique*, 36, 1915-16, pp. 243 ff.

<sup>4</sup> In Reykjavík Museum. I am grateful to Kristján Eldjárn for information about this and the Thor's hammer mentioned below. Both are discussed in his book, *Kuml og haugfé úr heiðnum sið á Íslandi*, 1956.

<sup>5</sup> *Flateyjarbók* I, 268, pp. 319 ff.

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thunder-bolts were caused by the hurling of the terrible hammer Mjöllnir, 'Crusher', which flew through the air, rending rocks and slaughtering giants. Mjöllnir was hailed as the greatest treasure of the gods. The thirteenth-century antiquary and poet, Snorri Sturluson, who collected the old tales of the god and retold them for the benefit of young poets in the *Prose Edda*, tells in *Skáldskaparmál* 35 the story of how the hammer was made. According to him, Loki, the problem youth among the gods, one day cut off the golden hair of Thor's wife Sif, in a fit of mischief. The hot-tempered god would have killed him, if Loki had not found two skilful dwarfs to forge new tresses of real gold for the goddess, which would grow upon her head like natural hair. The dwarfs then went on to make two other marvellous treasures, Freyr's magic ship, and Odin's great spear, Gungnir. The gods were delighted, but Loki was not satisfied; he found two other wonderful dwarf-craftsmen, and set the two pairs to compete against each other, wagering his head that it was impossible for the second pair to outdo what the first had made. So they too began to forge; first they made for Freyr a wonderful boar with bristles of gold which would shine in the darkest night; then they made for Odin the gold ring Draupnir, from which nine other rings would be formed every ninth night; and last of all, they made Thor's hammer. Loki realized that he was going to lose his wager, so he turned himself into a fly to hamper the smiths at their work, and as one of them was stung in the eyelid and had to raise his hand from his work at a crucial moment, the hammer remained short in the handle. But in spite of this it was a superb treasure, which when thrown through the air would never miss its mark, and which would always return to the hand of the thrower. Knowing that such a weapon would render them safe from the giants, the gods proclaimed it the greatest of all the six treasures, and Loki was due to forfeit his head, only with his usual cunning he managed to survive after all.

This story need not be taken too seriously. But it tells us of the importance of the hammer, or its miraculous powers, and how it was apparently regarded as a missile hammer, to be thrown through the air. The shortness of the handle seems to be recognized in another myth, told by the twelfth-century antiquary of Denmark, Saxo Grammaticus, who relates that the end of the shaft was cut

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off in a battle between Hotherus and the gods.<sup>6</sup> The efficiency of the hammer is attested by many stories of Thor's prowess, and apparently in other myths referred to briefly in early poems, but now lost to us. In these tales Thor sometimes uses the hammer as a blunt instrument, to shatter the skulls of his opponents at close quarters, and sometimes throws it through the air, cleaving stones and rocks and killing giants and trolls unerringly. Thrym, the giant who stole the hammer, was knocked down with all his family once Thor got it back into his own hands; Hymir was sent flying into the sea; the giant Hrungnir was slain in a duel by the hammer thrown through the air, shattering the giant's weapon (a whetstone) on the way and breaking his skull in pieces. The Midgard Serpent, when it raised its terrible head from the waves on Thor's far-famed fishing expedition — the theme of many old poems — was thrust back by a hammer blow.

We cannot doubt that the hammer signified the thunder-bolt, the lightning flash that shatters trees and rocks and kills men. There are few thunder-storms in Iceland, and as a result we hear comparatively little about this side of Thor in Icelandic stories. The earlier poems however make it abundantly clear that the storm rages as Thor drives through the heavens:

The Son of Earth drove to the iron game, and the way of the moon resounded before him. . . . The holy places of the powers burned before Ull's kinsman; earth, ground of the deep, was beaten with hail as the goats drew the wagon-god forward for his meeting with Hrungnir . . . the rocks shook and the boulders were shattered; high heaven burned.

(from *Haustlong*, a ninth-century poem by Thjóðólfr ór Hvín).

Thor in fact bore his hammer as Jupiter carried his thunderbolt, and the god Zeus his axe, (which like Mjöllnir came back to him, carried by an eagle, after use), and the god of the Assyrians his three-pronged spear. The idea of a thunder-weapon flying through the air must have been much older than Thor, since there is evidence for it over most of Europe, much of western and central Asia, and part of Africa. Figures brandishing axes appear on some of the earliest rock carvings of the Neolithic period, although we cannot of course be certain that they depict a thunder god.

<sup>6</sup> Although here it is called a club, with which Thor was knocking down all his foes 'swinging it with marvellous might', until Hother 'hewed it off at the haft'. (Saxo Grammaticus, *Danish History*, trans. Elton, III, 73, p. 88.)

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The association of thunder with a weapon thus anticipated the cult of Thor in the North, and also long survived it. The use of small weapons as protection against lightning continued in Northern Europe up to our own time. Small prehistoric stone weapons, such as axe-heads or arrow-heads of flint, or stone fossils such as belemnites or fossilized sea-urchins, were long regarded as 'thunder-weapons'. The theory about them was that they fell during a storm, and sank deep into the earth — seven fathoms, it was sometimes said — and that in seven years time they would rise to the surface again. These charms against thunder were popular in Denmark at the close of the last century, when most homes had one or two carefully put away. In 1908, 1909 and 1910 Blinkenberg collected evidence about such stones,<sup>7</sup> and found instances of them being kept beside the hearth, above the built-in bed, in a drawer or cupboard, or perhaps hidden in the roof, wall, or floor; it was thought important that they should be in some place 'where no-one can set foot', and should be touched as little as possible. These little stone missiles were believed to preserve the house from lightning and fire; and many flatly refused to part with them or sell them to collectors. If she kept it, there was no need to have the house insured against fire, was one woman's comment — perhaps a joke, but she held on to her little stone all the same. They were not potent unless one found them for oneself. Some of those questioned remembered as children going out to search for them after a thunderstorm.

In Germany the larger prehistoric stone axe-heads with a hole bored through them were particularly valued. These of course were much harder to come by. The connection with Thor's thunder-weapon becomes closer when we find it recorded that in East Prussia it was customary to put a finger through the hole, swing the axe-head round three times, and hurl it against the door of the house during a storm, to protect it from being struck by lightning.<sup>8</sup> Such stones were believed to be impervious to fire, and could be tested by wrapping a string round them and throwing them into the fire, for if they were real thunder-weapons, it was said the string would not burn. The hoarding of such charms was not unknown in England. A Bronze Age perforated axe-head

<sup>7</sup> Blinkenberg, *op. cit.*, especially p. 68 f.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5; cf. G. F. Kunz, *Magic of Jewels and Charms*, 1915, pp. 108 ff.

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was found under the hearth of an Elizabethan house at Langham, Essex, and is now in Colchester Museum.<sup>9</sup> Lumps of iron pyrites were found in the plaster of some old cottages near Newbury,<sup>10</sup> while a mace-head of stone dredged up in the Blackwater was hung up 'for luck' in a boat-builder's yard, and he refused to part with it.<sup>11</sup> Other examples of such hoarding are recorded in early numbers of *Folklore*.<sup>12</sup>

It was customary to wear little models of the Thunder God's hammer as amulets in the tenth century, and these were usually fitted on to a ring, and sometimes on to a twisted chain as well. A carving of Thor's hammer on a Swedish gravestone from Stenkista, Södermanland shows it hanging on a kind of cord, which forms the border to the stone (Plate I). From such illustrations it seems possible that Thor's hammer was sometimes thought of as a missile weapon hanging on a string, and this might account for the idea that it could return to the hand of the thrower. It may be noted that most of the model hammers from Scandinavia have very short handles indeed, and this again is understandable if the hammer was thought of as something to be thrown rather than used as a tool. It seems possible too that we find an odd survival of an ancient ritual in a modern branch of athletics, the throwing of the hammer, popular at Highland Games and now established as a regular part of the Olympic contests. The Highland games have been denounced as bogus, quaint and Victorian in origin, and it is difficult to come across any evidence about them before the nineteenth century. On the other hand, a sledge-hammer and not an iron ball, as at present, was certainly used in the last century, and in England much earlier.<sup>13</sup> Dr Johnson in the eighteenth century speaks of the custom of throwing the hammer; Peachem in the seventeenth century, in his treatise on *The Complete Gentleman*, speaks of the hammer as an exercise proper for soldiers in camp or the amusement of the prince's guard; and a hammer was evidently used at the Cotswold Games in 1636, since it is shown in a contemporary illustration.<sup>14</sup> The author of the article on *Hammer-*

<sup>9</sup> *Folklore*, 49, 1938, p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 44, 1933, p. 236.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, 1938, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 1908, 298 ff.; 23, 1912, pp. 46 ff. and 40, 1929, pp. 37 ff.

<sup>13</sup> See W. M. Combie Smith, *Athletes and Athletic Sports of Scotland*, 1891, p. 31 and J. Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, new edition, edited by J. C. Cox, 1903, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> F. W. Hackwood, *Old English Sports*, 1903.

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*Throwing* in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (who unfortunately gives no references) states that the use of a smith's sledge-hammer instead of a stone came from Scotland into England about the time of King Edward II, in the early fourteenth century, and became a popular sport. Certainly Edward III forbade throwing of stone, wood and iron because this made men neglect the long-bow, but I have been unable so far to find any proof of a Scottish origin of the hammer.

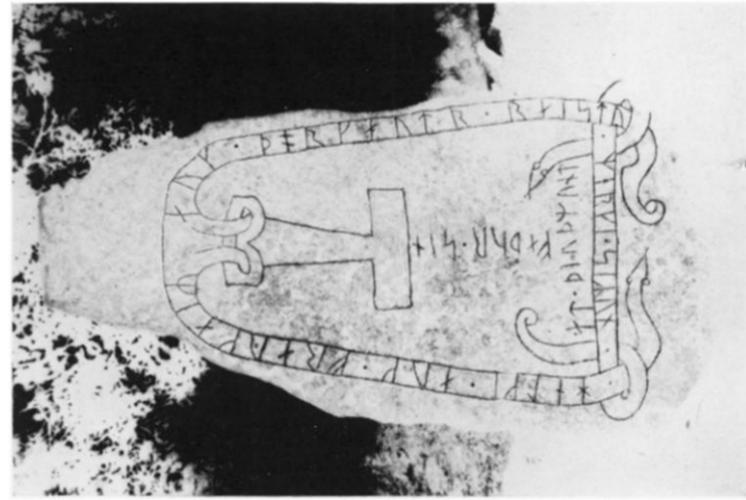
To describe the hammer of the Thunder God as a throwing weapon is not however to exhaust its potentialities. It could also be used to imitate the noise of thunder, if beaten against a resounding object. This action takes place in the smithy, when the hammer beats upon the anvil, and sparks, like lightning, are produced. The general pattern of myths about the storm god from various parts of the world is that he has a celestial weapon, specially forged for him by a celestial smith, to do battle against the monsters, and usually against one particular monster — serpent or dragon — menacing the world.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes the Thunder God is himself a smith, as in Tibet, but in the North, as we have seen, Thor had his hammer specially forged by the dwarfs. In accordance with the general pattern however, the act of forging is not forgotten, even in the late form of the myths.

The beating with the hammer to imitate thunder appears to have been carried out at one time in Thor's temples. Such at least is the implication in a passage in Saxo Grammaticus in the twelfth century, when he states that in 1125 — not very long before he was writing his book — Magnus Nilsson took away from Thor's temple in Sweden several models of Thor's hammer:

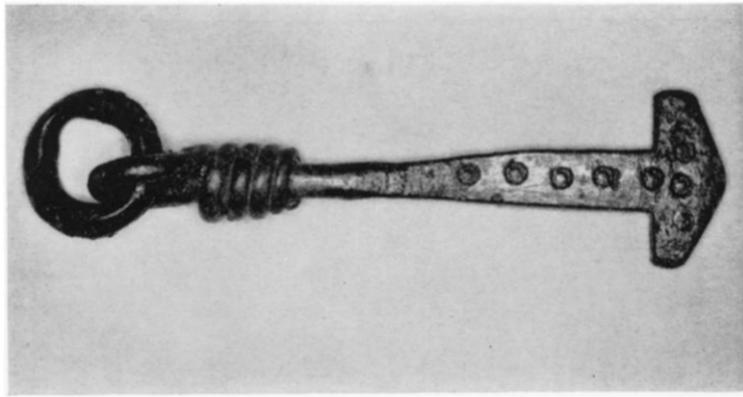
He took care to bring home certain hammers of unusual weight, which they call Jupiter's, used by the island men in their antique faith. For the men of old, desiring to comprehend the causes of thunder and lightning by means of the similitude of things, took hammers great and many of bronze, with which they believed the crashing of the sky might be made, thinking that great and violent noises might very well be imitated by the smith's toil, as it were. But Magnus, in his zeal for Christian teaching and dislike to paganism, determined to spoil the temple of its equipment and Jupiter of his tokens in the place of his sanctity. And even now the Swedes consider him guilty of sacrilege and a robber of spoil belonging to the gods. (*History*, XIII, 421; Elton's translation.)

<sup>15</sup> M. Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, 1962, pp. 29, 97.

PLATE I

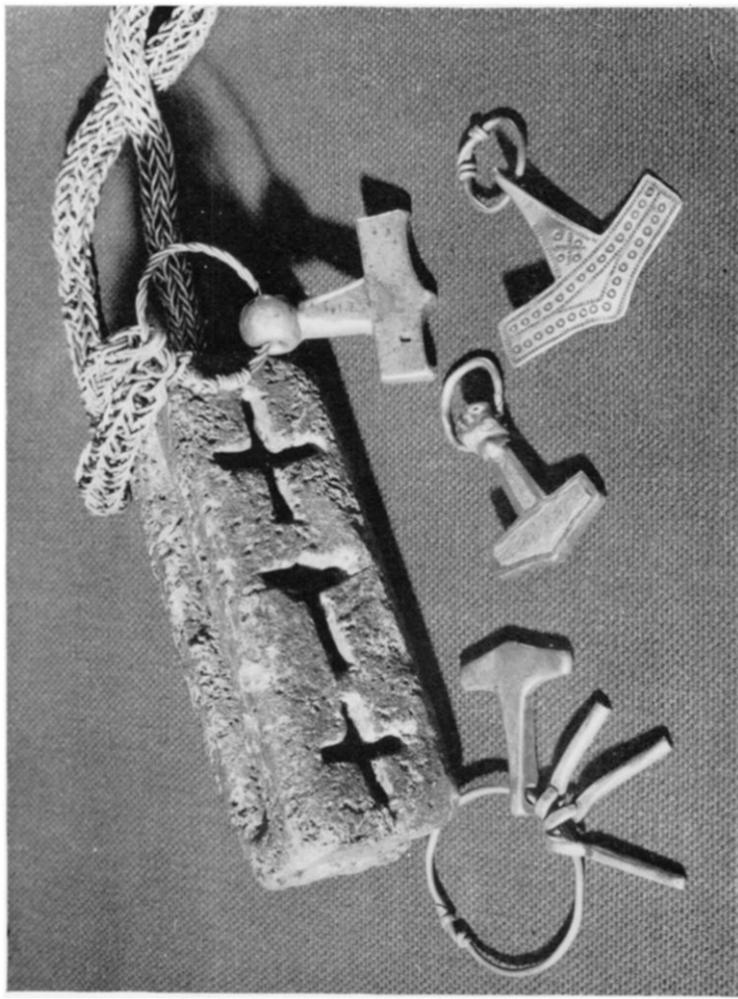


From Maniker, Die lappische Zaubertrommel  
STONE SHOWING THOR'S HAMMER AND RUNIC IN-  
SCRIPTION from Stenkvista, Södermanland, Sweden.



By permission of the City of Liverpool Museums  
HAMMER AMULET FROM ASH, KENT,  
found in Anglo-Saxon grave.

PLATE II



*By permission of the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen*

A MOULD FROM JUTLAND, now in the Danish National Museum, in which both crosses and Thor's hammers were made. Plates and decorated hammers from various parts of Denmark are shown.

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If Saxo is correct, it seems that the Swedes used their hammers to imitate the noise of thunder. It may be that the Lapps, who continued the worship of the thunder-god after he was forsaken in Scandinavia, had this in mind when they used a hammer to strike their magic drums. The god with a hammer was often depicted on the drums (which bore pictures of the realms of the gods, of the country of the dead, and many religious symbols), and the beating of the drums was a religious ceremony to assist the Lappish shaman to fall into an ecstatic trance. The hammers which the shamans used struck the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholars by their resemblance to Thor's hammer. Modern anthropologists have accounted for the resemblance by the use of reindeer antlers which often appear like a hammer in shape.<sup>16</sup> I think it possible however that the early scholars were at least partially right.

A folk-practice in which the noise of thunder was imitated by the whirling of a piece of wood through the air, in the manner of the bull-roarer, is recorded from Argyllshire in the last century. This was called the Thun'er Spell, and the object was made of wood, rounded at one end, with a hole for the cord pierced through it. It is said to have been swung during a thunder-storm to secure immunity from lightning.<sup>17</sup>

These various practices show that the weapon of destruction was used as a means of protection from the terrifying power of the thunder. Man, as it were, ranged himself behind the hammer, and by imitating the action of the god, was defended from his wrath. In the myths, the hammer of Thor stood between the gods and their enemies, and preserved both gods and men from the threat of chaos. Had Thor not recovered the stolen hammer, the gods were doomed, and had he not triumphed over the Serpent in his fishing expedition, the destruction of the world was imminent. The implication of these myths is clear, in spite of the comic treatment of the theme in late versions. It was natural that those who put their trust in Thor should wear the hammer as a sign of his protection. This became a popular practice in the tenth century in Scandinavia, possibly in emulation of the crucifixes worn by the Christians. The hammers were quite small and were worn either round the neck or on an armring. Some were plain, some decorated

<sup>16</sup> E. Manker, *Die lappische Zaubertrommel*, Stockholm, 1938, pp. 343-6.

<sup>17</sup> L. Spence, *Myth and Ritual in Dance, Game and Rhyme*, p. 84.

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by what may be symbolic markings, and suggest rain and lightning. Distribution of the hammers show that they were popular in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, but rare in Iceland (where thunder-storms are rare).<sup>18</sup> Two examples are known from England, one from the Cuerdale Hoard from Lancashire, probably in private possession,<sup>19</sup> and one from the Goldborough Hoard from Yorkshire.<sup>20</sup> The latter shows resemblance to the Christian cross, and may possibly have been used as a Christian symbol. In Denmark indeed a mould has been found in which both hammers and crosses were made side by side, by some enterprising ecclesiastical craftsman who liked to satisfy all types of customers<sup>21</sup> (see Plate II). The early crucifixes found in Denmark are very close in form to the hammer, and an equal-armed cross was already in use as a symbol in the heathen period, and seems to have been associated with Thor.

The chain on which the hammer was hung could also have had symbolic value, for it could symbolize Thor's great enemy, the World Serpent. The runic stone from Stenkista has serpents entwined with the band on which the hammer is hung, while some chains which have survived with hammer amulets end in animal heads. A small silver cross-hammer of a different style from Iceland has the head of a monster on one end.<sup>22</sup> An earlier fashion of wearing the hammer was with other amulets, or in a set of several hammers, on a metal ring. The Anglo-Saxons seem to have practised this custom much earlier, judging from some examples of tiny hammers from the Kentish cemeteries of Gilton and Ash (Plate I). With the hammers were tiny models of what appear to be spearheads and knives.<sup>23</sup>

It is significant that most of the hammers were not found in graves but on house sites (like some of the examples from Birka) and in hoards of coins and other valuables. Either the hammer was

<sup>18</sup> For a full list of finds, see P. Paulsen, *Axt und Kreuz in nord- und osteuropa*, Bonn, 1956, pp. 205 ff.

<sup>19</sup> *Archaeological Journal*, 4, 1847, p. 129.

<sup>20</sup> D. M. Wilson, *Antiq. Journal*, 36, 1957, p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> Found at Trendgaarden, Jutland, now in the Danish National Museum.

<sup>22</sup> Isolated find from Foss, South Iceland. See note 4 above.

<sup>23</sup> Six of these, from Gilton and Ash, are in Liverpool Museum, and I am most grateful to Miss Tankard for permission to examine them, and for supplying the photograph reproduced here. Their existence was first pointed out to me by Mrs Audrey Meaney.

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placed there to safeguard the hoard, or it may have been dedicated to the god when buried. There are too many examples of finds in hoards for this to be accidental, and the idea of the protective power of the hammer is well attested by folklore. The little stone axes in Denmark were not only relied on to keep away fire and lightning, but also trolls, witches and rats; they were believed to ward off disease, to keep milk from going sour, and to help the butter to come in the churn. Sometimes they were put into water, or some dust from them was filed off to make a medicine. They were hung round children's necks, and put into the cradle with the unchristened child, as well as in the stable to guard the horses from harm. Similarly in Viking times the sign of the hammer seems to have been put to many uses in the life of the community. It was made over the new-born child accepted into the community. It was used at weddings, to hallow the bride, and the purpose was no doubt to ensure fertility. This is the point of the story of Thor's recovery of his hammer; he was disguised as Freyja in a bridal veil, and was brought into Thrym's hall ostensibly to marry the giant. When after the bridal feast it was commanded that the hammer be brought in to hallow the bride, it was laid in Thor's lap, and so he was able to seize hold of it once more. The hammer or axe as a marriage symbol may be very old indeed, if the interpretation of one of the Bronze Age rock carvings in Scandinavia is correct; here a large phallic figure with what appears to be a hammer or axe held high in one hand confronts two smaller figures, and this is thought to represent a marriage ritual.<sup>24</sup> Again the idea of the hammer as the male symbol of the Sky God is found as part of the pattern of his worship in the Ancient world. The marriage between the Sky God and the Earth Goddess was symbolized by an axe placed in a deep cleft in the earth, or thrust into a pillar or tree-trunk, and such axes have been found in both Greece and Crete.<sup>25</sup> In certain parts of Norway and Sweden, it continued to be the custom for a bridegroom to bear an axe at the wedding long after Thor was forgotten; the weapon was said to give him the mastery, and also to ensure a fruitful union. Other echoes of the old belief can be noted in recorded folk customs. From Germany it is recorded that it was

<sup>24</sup> Shown O. Almgren, *Nordische Felszeichnungen als religiöse Urkunden*, 1934 (stone from Huitlijcke, Boholän, Sweden).

<sup>25</sup> M. Eliade. *The Fire and the Crucible*, 1962, p. 21.

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thought lucky for the bride if a thunder-storm took place during the wedding ceremony, while if at this time or during the first storm which takes place after her marriage she carries something heavy, she will be strong and healthy: which means, presumably, that she will bear healthy children.<sup>26</sup> It seems likely that the heavy object which she was supposed to carry was originally an axe or a hammer.

The fact that model hammers were fitted on to a ring in most cases may again be of significance, because the ring also was the symbol of the god Thor. It formed an essential part of the furnishing of his temple in late heathen times, and in the Icelandic sagas it is described as a heavy ring of gold or silver, sometimes large enough for the priest to wear on his arm. Such a ring was taken from Thor's temple in Dublin in 994, and in 876, when King Alfred made peace with the heathen Danes, they are said to have sworn oaths to him on their holy ring, which must have been the ring of Thor.<sup>27</sup> Oaths and compacts between men were under the protection of the god, and it was said that his wrath fell upon the oath-breaker. The Althing in Iceland, the court where the main law-cases were held, opened on Thor's day, Thursday, and his image stood in the Thing-place at Uppsala. It is possible that there is some connection here with the hammer of the auctioneer, and with the mallet used by chairman and president. It would be interesting to know more of their early history in England.

The protective sign of the hammer was worn by women, as we know from the fact that it has been found in women's graves. It seems to have been used by the warrior also, in the form of the swastika. This sign has had varying significance at different periods and in different parts of the world, but it has always been a meaningful sign, from early pre-historic times to modern Nazi Germany.<sup>28</sup> Primarily it appears to have had connection with light and fire, and to have been linked with the sun-wheel. It may have been on account of Thor's association with the lightning that this sign was used as an alternative to the hammer, for it is found on memorial stones in Scandinavia beside inscriptions to Thor. When

<sup>26</sup> *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglauben*, 'Donner', pp. 311 ff.

<sup>27</sup> F. P. Magoun, 'On the Old-Germanic Altar or Oath-Ring'. *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, 20, 1949, pp. 277 ff.

<sup>28</sup> J. Lechler, 'Kreuz, Hakenkreuz und Irminsul', *Mannus*, 27, 1935, pp. 345 ff.

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we find it placed on the pommel of a warrior's sword and on his sword-belt, the assumption is that the warrior was placing himself under the Thunder God's protection. The swastika has been found on swords of the seventh century in Anglo-Saxon England, and appears earlier on scabbards of the Migration period in Denmark.<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to note, in view of this, that the little thunder-stones were believed to give protection in battle. As late as 1870, soldiers in the German army were getting fossil stones from the chemist to protect them from bullets in the Franco-German war.

The sagas tell us that the sign of the hammer could be made with the hand, like the sign of the cross. Possibly this arose from imitation of the Christian practice. We have a story<sup>30</sup> of Hakon the Good, an early Christian king of Norway, who was forced by his heathen subjects to attend the autumn sacrifice; embarrassed and unhappy, he was observed to make the sign of the cross over the cup which was passed round in honour of the gods. One of his supporters however anticipated criticism by declaring:

The King acts like all those who trust in their strength and might; he made the mark of the hammer over it before he drank.

The T-shaped sign of the hammer could of course be easily suggested with the hand.

Finally the protection of the hammer of Thor was believed to extend beyond the grave. The hammer was clearly depicted upon Swedish gravestones (Plate II). The inscriptions accompanying the hammer-sign bear this out:<sup>31</sup> 'May Thor hallow this memorial,' the runes read, or 'May Thor hallow these runes,' or, most striking of all, 'May Thor, the Almighty God, take to himself the body which lies under this stone.' Sometimes the swastika replaces the hammer. Earlier still the swastika appears, and is given great prominence, on cremation urns of the heathen period in Anglo-Saxon England. There are some excellent examples from East Anglia, to be seen in the Cambridge Museum of Ethnology and Archaeology.

<sup>29</sup> H. R. Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, 1962, pp. 67, 78, 93.

<sup>30</sup> *Heimskringla, Hákonar S. góða*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Paulsen, *op. cit.*, p. 216: M. Olsen, 'Til Rök-indskriften', *Ark. f. nord. Filologi*, 37 (33), 1921, pp. 225 ff.

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The hammer-sign, in short, stood for the continuing protection of the god, and may indeed have signified the idea of continuing life after death. One myth at least carries this implication.<sup>32</sup> As Thor was journeying with his companion Loki, they stayed the night at a farm, and Thor provided them with supper by killing the goats who drew his chariot. When the meal was over, the bones were carefully placed together, and Thor raised his hammer over them, whereupon the goats stood up, restored to life. It was an unfortunate accident that one of the diners had broken a bone in an attempt to get out the marrow, with the result that one goat was left with a limp. This sardonic twist is typical of the Norse story-teller, but the implication behind the story is I think a serious one. More moving is the account of Balder's funeral as told by Snorri, when Thor is said to raise his hammer to hallow the pyre on which the body of the loved son of Odin was to be burned.

There is no doubt that in the sign of the hammer of the god Thor in heathen Scandinavia we have a symbol of many associations, rich in its effectiveness. The hammer/axe was prominent in prehistoric times in the North; little votive amulets were known from the Stone Age and throughout the Roman period. As we have seen, it continued to have meaning long after Thor was forgotten, and folk-custom has preserved it as an image of destruction and protection up to our own day. In the tenth century, when Scandinavia was being drawn into the Christian church, the hammer and the cross drew together, and at the same time the opposition sharpened between them. It was Thor who was viewed in the North as Christ's main opponent, challenging him to a duel, as Steinunn, an Icelandic poetess of the tenth century put it.<sup>33</sup> She would probably have visualized the conflict as between the hammer and the cross, which the participants would hurl against one another.

The Christian sign undoubtedly took over in its turn much of the old idea of defence and protection which had been afforded by the hammer symbol. For the hammer had extended its power over all that had to do with the life and well-being of the community, with birth, marriage and death, feasting and fighting, land-taking, travel and the making of oaths between men, and the keeping

<sup>32</sup> *Gylfaginning* 44, in Snorri Sturlusons *Prose Edda*.

<sup>33</sup> *Njáls Saga*, 102.

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secure of possessions. It stood for the defence of civilization and the community against darkness and chaos, for the defence of men's precarious little world, menaced by forces beyond their control, which they symbolized by the monsters and giants of their mythology. With the advent of the cross, the hammer gradually faded into the background, except for vague and scattered folk-beliefs and customs. But it would seem that one cannot keep a potent symbol down for long. Just as the swastika has reappeared in sinister form in our own lifetime, so now the hammer has become, with the sickle, the symbol of a new way of life, a defensive and offensive sign once again. The tool has in fact a longer chance of symbolic life than the weapon; while the sword is almost forgotten, the hammer, even in an industrial age, is still familiar to every man who works with his hands, while it is a symbol of power in the factory. So Thor's hammer has outlasted Thor in the end.