

“This is testament to the astonishing wealth of cultural and historical influences circulating in England”

🕒 Franks Casket

Created by: unknown craftsman, early eighth century

Now at: British Museum, London

Chosen by: **Eleanor Barraclough**

This extraordinary object, also known as the Auzon Casket, is an intricately carved little box made in Anglo-Saxon England – possibly Northumbria – in the early eighth century. Its whale-bone panels are inscribed with scenes from Germanic, Christian, Roman and Jewish tradition. The front panel features two very different stories. On the left-hand side is Weyland, master blacksmith of Germanic legend, surrounded by the tools of his trade. He appears in poems, sagas and runestones from the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic world, and is famous for taking terrible vengeance on his captor, King Niðhad. Look closely at the panel and you can see the headless corpse of the king's

son; Weyland has made a goblet from his skull. On the right-hand side of the same panel is a cheerier scene: the three Magi bowing before baby Jesus as the Star of Bethlehem hangs in the sky above.

The back panel of the casket hums with menace and panic, busy with little human figures. It depicts the attack on Jerusalem during the First Jewish-Roman War in AD 70. At the top left corner the Romans storm the city, swarming over the domed building in the middle of the panel. In the top right-hand corner the city's inhabitants flee from the invaders, possessions hidden under their cloaks, casting worried glances behind them.

The smaller left panel depicts Romulus and Remus, mythological founders of Rome, being suckled by a wolf.

The right panel on the opposite side (the original of which is in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence) is harder to interpret. It features cloaked human figures, a horse, and a warrior decked out in helmet and shield, possibly depicting the legend of Sigurd (of dragon-slaying

fame). The images on the lid are similarly mysterious, and parts of this piece are missing. We know the hero of the scene is called Ægilli, because his name is written in runes. Perhaps he is Weyland's brother Egil, famed as a master archer.

Egil's name is far from the only writing on the casket. It bustles with inscriptions in Old English and Latin, written in both runes and the Roman alphabet. This is a truly multidimensional work – the words crawl all over the casket, some written back to front or upside down. My favourite inscription, running around the front panel, translates as: “The flood cast up the fish on the mountain cliff, the terror king became sad where he swam on the shingle. Whale bone.” The last two words are the answer to this ‘meta’ riddle – because the casket itself is fashioned from whale's bone.

I love this casket because it's a beautiful piece of art, but also rather like a cartoon strip. Every time I visit it, I find new details to admire. At the same time, it is testament to the astonishing wealth of cultural and historical influences that were circulating in England during this period – ancient myths and tales, Biblical scenes, historic clashes. Yet it still holds its mysteries, preserving traces of once-famous stories now lost to the mists of time. 🌐



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