

*On the discovery of the Gildenheim Rune
Forge,*

*including notes on the subsequent examination
of the structures*

Prepared for the Minister for Historical Research by Peter of Hintown



The initial investigation

Following the announcement by the Minister for Historical Research, I was made lead investigator on the matter of the Gildenheim rune forge. This was partly due to my familiarity with the region, and partly because on my work studying and cataloguing ruined structures in the north-western Empire. My superiors in the department felt that if anyone was capable of locating a mythical forge, it would be me. I accepted the task with good grace, but I confess I secretly believed it was a wild goose chase.

I was unable to track the rumours of the rune forge to their source, and quickly determined that attempting to do so would be a waste of time. I must confess, I also spent a certain amount of time jumping at shadows. I had only a small team, and the tragic deaths of my colleagues that drenched the early part of the year in blood were just beginning to gather momentum.

In the end, we simply went to Gildenheim and started speaking to the survivors of the occupation. This was initially frustrating – people were busy with rebuilding their lives and their town and had little time or dwelling on what had happened. The Steinr I spoke to were especially unhelpful; they seemed eager to put the recent past behind them and focus on the future.

Gundret the Cruel

I did manage to locate some survivors, and it was while interviewing them that I first began to suspect this was more than a fool's errand. Once I had convinced them that I was there on legitimate business, they spoke of the Thule warlock Gundret.

She was the orc responsible for overseeing Gildenheim, and orchestrating much of the scouring of southern Skarsind for resources. By all accounts, she was a cruel and merciless tyrant. One witness spoke of the time when an accident at one of the orichalcum mines brought work there to a standstill for nearly a week. After the mine was opened, she instructed the Thule overseers to gather all the miners together and have them draw lots. The losers of this lottery were then stoned to death by their fellows – who were informed that if they did not cooperate then their families would be put to death in place of their colleagues. As a final twist of cruelty, she made the miners use hunks of orichalcum bearing ore to perform the deed ... then made them collect the blood smeared rocks up again and deliver them to the smelters.

A monster in the form of an orc, truly. Even some of the other Thule were said to fear and despise her – she did not limit her cruelties to enslaved humans by all accounts – but she was one of the most powerful orcs during the occupation. She was not accounted for during the liberation – her personal guard fought to the last drop of blood to secure her escape and it is believed that she made it safely back to the mountains of Urdur.

In between her atrocities – and there were more that I cannot bear to record here – she was responsible for scouring the southern regions of Skarsind for resources to send to her masters in the north. Her remit covered Gildermark, Solvihill, and Southpine. She organised repeated raids, and two invasion attempts, into Summersend in Hercynia – reports say she was extremely jealous of the domination of Treji by her counter-part in the north, the warlock Uffgis of the Blue Ice.

Relations between the two warlocks were very poor, apparently. Gundret wanted Navarr resources of her own to exploit, while Uffgis seethed every time a shipment of white granite from the Brilliant Shore passed through “his” domain.

Details are scant, but both warlocks apparently reported directly to a Thule Dragon named Caridis. All the reports agree that while the Thule invaded Skarsind in a united fashion, the Dragon responsible for exploiting the conquered territories was this “Caridis”. Both warlocks were regularly accompanied by the pitiful creatures called “hollows” who spoke with Caridis' voice. It is believed both hollows died during the liberation.

The majority of the resources Gundret collected were sent north into Otkodov, of course. The conquered population were ruthlessly exploited, forced to work until they dropped, and cruelly punished for even the mildest infraction. Yet as I continued my investigations, another detail began to emerge.

Gundret brought with her a small cadre of enslaved orcs as her personal attendants, of course, but she also picked out a number of Winterfolk for her personal attentions. In every case, these poor people were rune smiths or scholars of rune magic. Many later

turned up dead, and of the remainder the majority were sent north. Some, however, were unaccounted for ... and there were always rumours that among these humans that Gundret kept as personal slaves were several Navarri, as well as Winterfolk.

Further investigation was made easier thanks to the hard work of Galen of Treji and the orc scholar Takkat. Correspondence with these two, who had been collecting reports of the Thule occupation of north-eastern Hercynia, confirmed rumours that several Navarr smiths and rune scholars had been sent east, rather than north, apparently at the command of the Dragon itself. Among these was Ryv Ironbones (an unfortunate name, in my opinion), who was easily recognisable by the remarkable metal gauntlet he had crafted to support and strengthen a withered limb resulting from childhood illness.

Examination of the remains discovered in the forge chamber (more on this below) confirmed that what had previously been taken for damage caused in the collapse was consistent with a withered limb – although there was no sign of the tragic gauntlet.

So ... with this circumstantial evidence in hand, we engaged in a discussion with several local groups and a discreet project of exploration regarding the places that Gundret the Cruel was known to have frequented. Her interest in the ice-cave under Gildenheim was not a secret, but we had no reason to believe it was anything more than the usual Thule greed for magical knowledge ... until Ana Barrand and her four companions literally fell into the cave containing the rune forge.

The structure

The new construction is adequate but uninspired. That's the Thule work. The original work, though, that is ... it's flawless. Almost perfect in every way. I think we would be hard pressed to match the precision. I have no idea how they shaped the white granite, as I could not find any sign of tool marks anywhere on the surface. The mithril involved is absolutely flawless – perfect quality – there's impurities in Imperial wains of mithril, but they are fairly insignificant. This is without doubt completely pure mithril – except where it has been alloyed with orichalcum or weltsilver and again, the alloys themselves are breathtaking in the purity of the materials used. The rune smith who examined them kept repeating “No you don;t understand – they're perfect. Impossibly perfect.” I thought she was drunk, but then I realised she was just struggling to express how incredible she found the material.

All the weirwood elements – the supports and similar – are ruined. That gives some idea of how old the structure is. I've seen weirwood supports in ruins reliably dated to 700 years. Obviously, they were not in the best shape, but they were still doing their job. It's possible that something destroyed the weirwood – but if it was a fire it was very hot indeed, and there is no damage to the rest of the structure to suggest such an event. It is possible the Thule cleared the weirwood but I do not think that makes sense – the other pieces of the rune

forge have been stored in the cavern itself with great care. Fragments of stone no larger than my thumb have been collected in sacks – it would be odd if the Thule took such care with the metal, stone, and pottery pieces and then threw away what must have amounted to tons of hardwood.

The Thule have done a workmanlike job of replacing parts of the rune forge, although it is hardly inspired. Of possible interest, however, is that they have not replaced any of the wooden parts. They've replaced one of the larger pillars, and at least made a start on the metal and the mithril-inlaid runes, but none of the weirwood.

This fits with some suggestions that the Thule are starved of wood – but have reasonable supplies of white granite and mithril. That said, after some examination, I think the replacement pillar is made with stone quarried at the Brilliant Shore during the occupation.

My theory was confirmed by a pair of stonemasons I spoke to who were involved with some of the early work on Hengesthal in the Skogei Glens; the stone bears identical impurities to much of the stone used there. I also spoke to some of the workers at the quarry, showing them a sample of the stone, and they likewise agreed it had most likely come from the mountains above Gildenheim.

This corresponds with the accounts of survivors of the Thule occupation of Gildenheim. The Thule brought in wagonloads of white granite each season, but the eyewitness accounts agree

that some of the white granite never left Gildenheim. They believed the orders came from Gundret herself.

Tragically, the pair of survivors I spoke to could not confirm how much granite had been diverted by Gundret. She was in the habit of killing the workers responsible for transporting the white granite roughly every six months – no doubt as part of the larger effort to conceal the presence of the rune forge. The two I spoke to were lucky enough to survive when the Thule executioners came for them in the final days of the siege of Gildenheim by hiding under a pile of bodies. Their eight companions were not so fortunate.

Further investigation, and consultation with architects, miners, and runesmiths resulted in the report I sent to the Castle of Thorns about the potential for the Empire to renovate the structure. It would be impossible to move, of course – any work would need to take place on site. Taking this into account, and working on an estimate of how expensive it would be to clear and shore-up the access tunnels so that workers and materials could be brought in safely, the Senate will need to spend a minimum of 50 Thrones on the project. This will also cover skilled labour – there are a number of volunteers prepared to offer their time for minimum wages for the chance to work on this remarkable relic of a bygone age, but even the most committed stonemason or mistress of the runes needs to eat!

Sixty wains of weirwood will be required – as I mentioned above, there are no wooden elements still in existence. We did discover a number of Thule sketches and plans, however, that indicate where they thought the various joists and beams would need to go – our own architects agree with their assessment.

Most of the mithril fittings will need replacing – the Thule had barely started on this part of the project. The material should be of the highest quality, and we will need to be able to shape it very precisely (accounted for in the costs above). Fifty wains of mithril will be sufficient.

Finally, the damaged pillars will need replacing. The Thule had already made some headway on this project but I would still recommend forty wains of white granite be employed.

The good news is that the work will not be time consuming – it will take no longer than six months to complete the repairs to the stage where the forge can become operational again.

The Runes themselves

The heart of the rune forge is the runes. The name itself explains this – this is a place where one creates by combining the power of the runes. Their essence is focused and refined by the structure, and every element of it's construction is carved or engraved with these potent symbols. Even the walls and floor are engraved in this fashion – being in the cavern is like standing inside the very substance of rune working itself.

Everything the eye falls on is runed. One of my colleagues – a naga gentleman named Erich – found the experience at once engrossing and unnerving. Every time he touched something, he said, every time he glanced around in the gloom, he was bombarded with runic information. On several occasions he had to retire early to get some sleep, complaining of crushing migraine headaches brought on by constant sensory activity (although – and I must point out that Erich is a valuable member of the team and an excellent researcher – I think his upbringing among the actors of Sarvos has left him somewhat prone to indulge in dramatic behaviour).

All twenty-six runes are repeated over-and-over across the structure. In places, there are repeating groups of five, seven, or even eleven runes. The large pillars in particular are fascinating – they are carved from top to bottom with repeating sequences of runes. In each case, the order of the runes in each twenty-six rune sequence appears unique, not repeated anywhere else on the pillar.

The only rune that does not appear to be present is the twenty-seventh, the unnamed. However, one of the Kallavesi runeweaver we spoke to disagreed and said that the twenty-seventh was everywhere – and indeed, it had to be.

This agreed with one of the Thule scraps we uncovered in the ruins – although the unnamed writer referred to “the dho-hna of the chamber” which is not a word I was familiar with.

A consultation with scholars found an obscure reference to a book written during the reign of Empress Richilde which recounted in excruciating detail a sequence of interviews with a Thule warlock. There is mention of “the dho-hna” as “a force which defines; lends significance to its receptacle as with the hand in the glove; the wind in the trees; the guest or the trespasser crossing a threshold and giving it meaning.”

I pondered on this a little, and late one morning after a long night arguing about the significance of the runes in the rune forge, and whether the absence of the twenty-seventh meant that it played no role in the work of the forge, I had a sudden insight. I considered leaving it out, given it might be no more than a mead-induced foolishness but in the end, in the sake of completeness, I left it in.

The twenty-seventh is included in the placement of the structures within the chamber. It is infused in all the spaces between the pillars, and the body of the forge; between the walls and the floor. As soon as the rune smith enters, they are

moving through a space full with the potential of the twenty-seventh. And in doing so, they become an integral part of the rune forge's working – a rune in and of themselves composed of their spirit and body, whose interaction with the other runes allows the forge to do it's work.

Possibly this is all ox shit crazy theorising brought on by too much mead, too little sleep, and too much time indoors, and I might simply need a few months in Madruga to relax once this is all over. However ... the main reason I included it is that meditation on the nature of the rune forge reminded me that one of the purposes it serves is *inspiration*. As Erich's experiences, as the experiences of several others studying the structure, as my own odd ideas demonstrate, the forge helps to draw out the mind and by saturating the environment so thoroughly with the raw tools of creation, it helps the mortal mind conceive of ways to create items that have never been created before.

Indeed, Erich von Sarvos claims to have been inspired to create a radical new system of organising books and scrolls in libraries as a result of working in the rune forge. Again, I must remind the reader that my naga colleague is brilliant but does like to be the centre of attention.

The Inscription

One sequence of runes is of special interest, and does not appear to be part of the structure of the forge itself. I have spent so much time studying this sequence that it haunts my dreams. I observed Erich von Sarvos spend five straight hours just staring at it during the later stage of our investigation of the physical structure – in the end he did not respond to my polite queries as to whether he was going to do any work until I physically shook him, and he appeared amazed that so much time had passed.

I would have dismissed this as his usual theatricality had not the same thing happened to me a day later. Our Suaq friend, against my objections, insisted after that in covering the rune sequence with a stout rowanwood board after that. Her contention was that the runes spelled out a message, and that regardless of what else it was it was bad luck, and a bad idea, to spend too much time dwelling on them.

She refers of course to the common superstition about the use of runes as a cipher. In short, the belief is that the runes are magical even when used for mundane purposes, and that a message could easily contain a sequence of runes that focused bad magic or misfortune into itself, and anyone who reads it.

The inscription is found on the wall directly opposite the rune forge structure. The runes themselves are each eleven inches high – making them the largest individual runes in the

entire chamber. After some thought I have copied the runes down as they were written, and included them here. We have not been able to secure a translation, however – assuming as the Suaq believes they are a message and not simply a part of the rune forge's operation we have not yet been able to fathom out.

I've studied the runes on paper several times now, and they have had no negative effects on me. In sequence, they are:

gralm-aesh-lann-lann-ull-naeve-rhyv-hirmok-yoorn-wyr-bravash-evrom-tykonus-hirmok

pallas-evrom-rhyv-feresh-feresh-aesh-irremais-tykonus-hirmok-feresh-ophis-diras-ophis-lann-irremais

mawrig-evrom-wyr-naeve-bravash-yoorn-diras

aesh-mawrig-hirmok-evrom-rhyv-feresh-feresh-aesh-irremais-tykonus-hirmok

I cannot even begin to guess at what they might mean, but I am in no doubt that there is meaning. Erich and I both came out of our odd obsessive experiences feeling ... sad. Gloomy. It took a visit to the Hall of the White Ravens and a chat with one of the stormcrows before I could muster up the enthusiasm to continue my investigations, and Erich took to his bed for three days after his encounter with them. So perhaps the Suaq reaction was not disproportionate after all.

The human remains

One skeleton was recovered when the chamber was first opened, partially buried in the collapsed entrance tunnel. I paid for a Kallavesi mystic to perform a divinatory ritual used to discover the identity of dead bodies, and learnt he was called Ryv Ironbones. Surprised to find a dead Navarri, I made enquiries and this led me to the information that Ryv was one of the smiths of Treji who had not been accounted for.

A physick examined the remains and agreed that he had probably died in an accident – consistent with being crushed in a fall and then partially buried under fallen masonry.

Two more skeletons were uncovered when we began clearing rubble out of the main chamber. In the same pile beneath as Ryv were a human woman, and an orc. Their names were divined to be Hetta Wulframsdottir and Thargit.

If you have read this far you will not be surprised to discover that Hette Wulframsdottir was in life a steinr runesmith, born in Skogei Glens, and captured during the fall of Gildenheim. Her family have been informed, and her remains returned to them so she may receive a proper funeral.

We have not been able to place Thargit however; neither the Summer Storm nor the Winter Sun have been able to find records of such an orc, and this leads me to tentatively suggest that he was a Thule orc. His clothing suggests a warrior rather than a slave – and from this I have constructed a possible

sequence of events.

The Thule collapsed the tunnels leading to the rune forge, obviously intending to return. Prior to this, they had at least two human slaves, both with intimate familiarity with the runes, working in the main chamber, most likely as part of their renovation project.

Due to some circumstance, Ryv and Hetta were among the last to leave, and along with one of the guards responsible for keeping the slaves in line, were caught in the collapsing tunnel.

One additional clue came when our physick examined the bodies – she believes the orc warrior had been stabbed in the back shortly before his death. While no weapon was found among the bodies, there was a viciously sharp knife in the main chamber itself, and examination suggests that it had been used.

I surmise then that either Hetta or Ryv had smuggled a weapon into the chamber with them and in the confusion surrounding the decision to seal off the tunnels, had attempted to arrange an escape.

The orc did not die during their ambush, and there must have been a terrible, desperate struggle in the dark. The details of their plan will probably never be known, but I hope it is some comfort to their spirits to know that they managed to take at least one of their oppressors with them into death, may their passage through the Labyrinth be swift.

The age and provenance of the structure

The rune forge is old. Very, very old. I have studied structures across the Empire and I will say with confidence that this is one of the oldest I have ever encountered. I am tempted to say “at least a thousand years” but that would be incredibly trite of me to do so. Once things reach a certain age it is simply very hard to do more than guess how old they are. I think it might be of similar vintage to the ice-cave that it rests deep beneath but again, that would be merely conjecture. Informed conjecture – but conjecture none-the-less.

It is certainly one of the oldest ruins in Wintermark; which is not to say with certainty that it pre-dates the Kallavesi and the Suaq however. Due to the nature of their tradition, there are comparatively few ruins that date back to the time before the arrival of the Steinr in Wintermark. The early Kallavesi built in wood, and most of their oldest structures were in Kallavesa. The Suaq were prone to nomadism, and structures incorporating a lot of leather and canvas are even less durable. Regardless, I think that this structure is older than Wintermark recorded history.

I do not believe it is a Terunael artefact, either. Firstly, I agree with the studies that have suggested that the Suaq and Kallavesi civilisation in Wintermark is older than that of Terunael, at least in some form. Secondly, it has none of the hallmarks of the Terunael ruins I have examined – they generally do not incorporate any runes at all and this is

literally made of runes.

With these two facts in mind I will suggest that it is either not of human construction; or was constructed by humans about whom we know nothing; or it was constructed by a remarkably advanced orc tribe about whom we also know nothing.

I am of the mind that the first of these three explanations are correct. Once I have completed this report, I intend to travel to Ikka to western Sermersuaq (assuming that is possible given the situation of the Jotun) in pursuit of proof for my theory; that this structure was constructed by the trolls.

There is no coherent, consistent description of the trolls, nor of their civilisation. Indeed, many Winterfolk scholars deny that they had any civilisation at all and characterise them as being little more than great beasts. I find this description inconsistent – there are plenty of stories in which human heroes speak to the trolls – usually before engaging in an epic battle.

*The stories of the foundation of Wintermark as the home of the Three Peoples. The *History of the Three Peoples*, one of the better sources for pre-Imperial Wintermark history, says:*

“For hundreds of years the peoples of the extreme north, the Suaq and Kallavesi, were isolated from the rest of humanity by a troll kingdom that held sway over the

mountain passes of Hahnmark. The trolls warred with the humans and forced them further and further into the cold, bringing them to the desperate brink of extinction."

Beasts do not make kingdoms, and they do not make war. The text also speaks of "troll armies" – and again, beasts do not form armies.

My reason for looking to Sermersuaq for confirmation is three-fold (perhaps appropriately).

First, the best preserved troll ruins in the Empire are in Sermersuaq. While I am unlikely to be able to access the Stonefield Ice Caves, it is my hope that the Jotun will continue to focus their attention in the south following their resounding defeat during their recent raiding efforts. As such, I may be able to explore the Face of Ikka.

Secondly, we managed to recover a few scraps of parchment while scouring the chamber for clues. Obvious attempts had been made to completely destroy these writings, but a few tiny scraps remain. On one of them, the words "Ikka, where" can plainly be made out.

Finally, it is my understanding that during the Autumn Equinox last year (378YE), the Thule sent a significant force and one of their war beasts to recover something from the Face of Ikka, leading to the fateful engagement known as the *Battle of Ikka's Tears*. The Imperial heroes took heavy losses, and were unable to prevent a Thule victory – and as such

details of what they recovered from the glacier are unknown. Yet I feel that there is a connection between their interest in this place, and their interests in northern Sermersuaq.

After all – if I may be allowed me to speculate – if one or all of the Thule dragons were aware somehow of the presence of this rune forge then it is not impossible that part of the motivation for their invasion of Skarsind was to secure it. They have certainly evidenced a great deal of interest in rune smiths and rune scholars, of whom perhaps as many as a hundred Winterfolk and Navarri are completely unaccounted for. They have also demonstrated a great deal of interest in troll ruins in the north of Sermersuaq. I think there is a connection here that is worth exploring.

Assuming I can secure sufficient funding for warm clothing, expedition supplies, and obviously guards and guides, and assuming that the Suaq Wastes remain free of Jotun incursions, I will attempt to gather proof for my theory and prepare a suitable report.

