From *The Secret of the Catacomb*

(*Katakombens hemmelighet*)

By Tom Egeland

Published by Aschehoug, Oslo, 2013

Translated from the Norwegian by Megan Turney

Translated with support from NORLA

Agent: NORTHERN STORIES

Mira Mack Omdahl: mira@northernstories.no

**Chapter I**

**The Shrine**

**Borgund stave church**

Robert squinted up at the tar-black wooden church. With all its roofs and angles, Borgund stave church was staggering. Floor upon floor. Roof upon roof. Towers and spires. Dark, powerful and mysterious, the church towered above them, shielding the people below from the blinding summer sun. The dragon heads snarled up at the sky. Christian crosses and animals of Norse legend side by side. Ornaments and carvings. But no windows, no stained glass. Just this dark, black, enclosed building.

The summer day was hot and brimming with buzzing insects and pollen. The sun burned. A cloud of sand and dust from the excavation site coated the trees and the field around them. The stave church cast a clear-cut shadow over the archaeologists, all of whom were on their knees searching for traces of the past.

One of whom was Robert. A pretty ordinary guy. Average height, average appearance. Turned 14 a few months ago. Loves music. Exciting films. Video games. And his hamster, Burre. But at that moment in time, he found himself beside his mother at the Borgund stave church. She was an archaeologist. Robert had accompanied her to work every summer holiday for as long as he could remember. It suited him perfectly. He loved archaeology. Or treasure hunting, as he called it. It’s not treasure we’re looking for, his mother would always object. Robert didn’t care. For him it *was* a treasure hunt.

For that entire morning, he and his mother had been working inside a Viking grave that was over a thousand years old. Millimetre by millimetre, centimetre by centimetre, they had dug and brushed their way back in time.

Suddenly Robert’s mother broke the silence:

‘Bingo!’

Her voice a little too high. A little too shrill. She slowly got to her feet. The other archaeologists came running and gathered around her.

‘What is it, Mum?’ Robert asked.

His mother lifted something into the air.

A shrine.

A shrine made of copper.

A shrine from the Viking Age.

In one large huddle, the archaeologists returned to the work barracks, where they kept all of the brooches, combs, and arrowheads they had uncovered so far. First in the procession were Robert and his mother.

The manager of the excavation site, chief conservator Ingeborg Mykle from the University Museum of Antiquities, came out onto the terrace to see what they had found.

Robert’s mother was so elated that her hands were shaking as she placed the copper shrine on the workbench inside the barracks.

Three symbols were etched onto the shrine:

‘Unbelievable!’ the archaeologists muttered to each other. Some laughed. Some shook their heads in disbelief.

‘What’s unbelievable?’ Robert asked.

‘The first symbol is an *ankh,’* his mother explained.

‘A what?’

‘An *ankh,* it’s the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph or symbol for eternal life, for rebirth. The other is the Norse runic sign *ty,* which represents the Viking god of war Tyr. The third is the Christian cross, the symbol of Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection.’

‘So?’ Robert blurted out.

‘Three symbols as old and different as these do not belong together.’

‘So?’ Robert repeated.

‘Anything that turns up where you don’t expect it to be is exciting for us archaeologists.’

‘But the most exciting part is finding out what’s inside the shrine though, isn’t it?’ Robert answered?

That, his mother agreed with.

So carefully that it felt like it took an eternity, Robert’s mother picked away at the clay from the lid and pried open the shrine.

Several of them gasped.

In the shrine were four Roman coins and a hand-drawn map of Rome, on what looked like calfskin.

But what had made the archaeologists gasp was something else entirely: a piece of jewellery. An unbelievably​ beautiful piece of jewellery. A shiny triangle:



Even after a thousand years in a shrine inside a Viking grave, the item still seemed to sparkle and emit a warm glow.

*Almost magical*, Robert thought.

ROBERT’S FACTS ON HIEROGLYPHS AND RUNES

Hieroglyphs are a form of pictorial writing that were used in Egypt thousands of years ago. Completely incomprehensible! In our language, we use letters to put words and sentences together. Hieroglyphs, on the other hand, could symbolise many different things. The ‘Eye of Horus’, for example, symbolised protection, kingship and good health. The hieroglyphs could represent people and animals, birds and fish, plants and tools. The hieroglyphs were everywhere in Egypt – inside the pyramids, on the palace walls and statues – but over the years, the Egyptians forgot what they meant. Right up until 1822, nobody understood a dot. Not until a Frenchman, Jean-François Champollion, managed to decipher them. He did this by comparing the texts on the two-thousand-year-old Rosetta Stone, where the same text was written in Greek and two ancient Egyptian languages.

While the hieroglyphs are a symbolic pictorial script, the runes are letters that were used in Northern Europe in the centuries after Christ. The Vikings in particular are known to have written in (or shaken, as we say) such runes. But lots of people, not just the Vikings, wrote in runes. The runic alphabet is called Futhark, which were the first characters in the alphabet: F - U - Þ - A - R - K. There are two types of Futhark: Elder Futhark and Younger Futhark. The elder variant consisted of 24 runes. Through to the 8th century, Elder Futhark was replaced by the newer variant, which was a simplified version with only 16 runic signs. In Norway, runes went out of use in the 15th–16th centuries.

**CHAPTER II**

**The Catacomb**

***Rome - a few months later***

**I**

Honking car horns. Sirens. Squealing brakes. Afternoon traffic in Rome was at its worst when Robert and his mother arrived by taxi at the excavation site. They had come straight from the flat they were renting in the city centre – they hadn’t even taken the time to unpack after their flight.

The excavation manager was waiting for them at the entrance to the site. He lit up upon sight of them, waved them over and introduced himself as Umberto.

Amazing, Robert thought, Umberto is the first archaeologist I’ve met who doesn’t smell like dirt and sweat, although he does stink of aftershave.

Umberto kissed Robert’s mother on the hand and exclaimed *bell donna* in singsong Italian. *Beautiful woman*.

Umberto then turned and solemnly shook Robert’s hand.

ROBERT'S FACTS ON THE CATACOMBS

A catacomb is an underground passage that was used as a burial place. The tradition of burying the dead in caves can be traced back to prehistoric times, but in Rome it began around 1,900 years ago. Christians and Jews were permitted by the Roman authorities to construct underground burial grounds. Most of the catacombs in Rome were built by Christians. The Romans used to cremate – burn – their dead. But the Christians didn’t like that idea. They believed that the dead would come back to life and be resurrected when Jesus returned. Thus, the tradition of catacombs gained momentum among Christian Romans. The rich could afford to place their dead in sarcophagi (stone coffins). Others put the bodies straight into hollows in the walls. Some of the dead were martyrs – Christians who had been killed for their faith. But the vast majority died of natural causes. In the year 380, Christianity became the state religion for the Romans as well. Which is when the Christians began to bury their dead in cemeteries. Nowadays, many of the catacombs are popular tourist attractions.

‘Young man,’ Umberto said in English, ‘your encounter with this catacomb will be an experience you will remember for the rest of your life.’

Robert had tagged along to many an archaeological excavation. None of them had attracted much attention. But this one was different. The map inside the shrine his mother had found in Borgund turned out to lead them to an unknown catacomb in Rome. And an unknown catacomb in Rome was nothing less than a sensation. Given the fact that it was Robert’s mother who had found the map, she was allowed to participate in the excavation. Quite an honour, from what Robert understood. And Robert was allowed to help too. His mother had promised. Ah, how excited he was. He daydreamed about being the one to find something that amazed all of the other archaeologists.

One of the conditions for being allowed to take so much time off school was that he had to write a paper about the themes of his visit. About Rome. The catacombs. Early Christianity. The plan was to write down everything he learned, and compile a small encyclopaedia: *Robert’s facts on hieroglyphs and runes. Robert’s facts on the catacombs Robert’s facts on pretty much everything you need to know to become the world’s best archaeologist.*

ROBERT’S FACTS ON ROME

Rome is the capital of Italy. The city is also called ‘the eternal city’. It doesn’t look all that eternal if you ask me. Everything is old. Ancient. And incredibly hot! Ruins. Fountains. Steps. Catacombs. Traffic. Restaurants. Shops. Way, way back in the olden days, Rome was the centre of power for the Roman Empire. In our time, Rome is a popular travel destination – not least because of tourist attractions such as the gladiator arena known as the Colosseum, the ruins of the Roman Forum, the Capitoline Hill, otherwise known as the seat of the Roman Republic, the elaborate Spanish Steps and the huge Trevi Fountain. And of course, the catacombs. The Vatican – the headquarters of the Catholic Church – is located smack bang in the centre of Rome. The Vatican is actually the smallest country in the world.

*‘A catacomb,’* he had written before they left home, *‘is an underground passage that was used as a burial place.’*

Although, Robert found it strange that something so old and weird – *a two thousand year old mass grave!* – had taken newspapers and television news all over the world by storm. People were endlessly fascinated by the catacombs. And now Robert was part of the team going in to explore it. Alongside his mother and the world’s leading archaeologists, he was to reveal the burial ground’s ancient secrets.

And he could hardly wait.