

JESSICA COOKE

Prow

(British Museum M&LA 1938, 2-2, 1)

Adzed I was from oak's white heart,
Split and smoothed to serpent form,
Blessed by entrails smoked on pyres
Of witches sacrificing southern slaves;
Rumbling bellied Thunder God ate them,
Bade me steer straight, to battle or trade.

I've heaved across the iron seas,
Following whale roads, geese in flight,
Glimpsed the stars through misty calm
As the chief's cracked voice entreated wind.
Salt spray blackened, warped my boughs,
Lashed by the straining warriors' oars;

My beak and teeth grew knives of ice,
Glittered bright when all lay still
But Eyvindr, who stepped into the dark,
Crazed by the desolate sea-wife's call,
By northern lights pale tentacles rose,
Dragged four men sleeping down to death

Before we neared the western isles.
Then high round towers blazed ashore,
Red-haired girls were raped and bound,
Dragged aboard with the jewelled hoard,
While tonsured men besought their gods
In vain, were slaughtered, died like dogs.

At summer's end I foundered.
In a quiet inlet rippling with eels
We ran aground; villagers shot arrows
Into the warriors wading ashore. I lie
On soft fronds, nibbled by curious fish,
And watch the boats scudding above.