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THE VIKING WORLD

Edited by

Stefan Brink
in collaboration with
Neil Price

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RUNES

—♦—
Henrik Williams

In the church of Forsa in the province of Hälsingland in north-eastern Sweden there has hung from ancient times a ring of iron, a foot in diameter and covered with some 200 runic characters that have been impressed into the metal by means of a chisel. The inscription has been interpreted as dealing with fines to the bishop when divine services had been illicitly cancelled. The word *staff* was taken to imply the bishop and the sequence **lirþiR** to be *lærðir* 'learned men', hence the Christian context and a dating of the ring to the twelfth century.

In 1979 the great Norwegian runologist Aslak Liestøl published a new reading of a single rune in the text, the **r** in **lirþiR**. By comparing it to all other **r**'s and **u**'s, he could prove that in fact we are dealing with a **u**-rune and the word **liuþiR** *ljóðir* 'people'. All Christian connections disappear and, instead, we have the first Scandinavian legal act in writing, dated (now in consistency with the language used) to the early Viking Age (Brink 1996, 2002).

Herein lie the value and importance of the scholarship devoted to the runes. The correct reading of a single character can change the entire meaning of a runic text and make it older by several hundred years. The runic evidence in itself is of unsurpassed value to our knowledge of life in the Viking Age. Runestone texts and other runic inscriptions constitute the only original sources to this period. Through the first stages of Old Danish, Old Norwegian and Old Swedish we hear a faint echo of the voices of the Vikings, and their documents give us unique insight into intellectual culture, mentalities and society. Runic writing provides evidence of legal practices, naming patterns including the aspect of social history, religious faiths and influence, burial customs, rules for inheritance, and literary tastes. Also as sources to settlement history, gender studies and the early Scandinavian languages the runic data is irreplaceable.

RUNES AND RUNIC ORTHOGRAPHY

Yet, all of this knowledge is derived from one of the least sophisticated writing systems in the world. The sixteen runes of the Viking Age are insufficient to represent all of the phonemes (speech sounds) used. Thus many runes had to serve more than one purpose. These sixteen runes were arranged in three groups (called *attir* 'families') and in a

deviant, yet unexplained order. This writing system is called the *Futhark* after the initial six runes and it exists in two main variants, the long-branch runes (also called normal or Danish runes) and the short-twig runes (also called Swedo-Norwegian runes), plus one unusual variant, the staveless runes (also called the Swedish or Hälsinge runes). The latter lack the main staff (except for the i-rune) and always had to be written within a text band, since height placement was crucial (Peterson 1994a). This variant has been derived from short-twig runes, but recently a case has been made for the long-branch runes being the origin (Fridell 2000).

The runes are commonly 'transliterated', that is, printed with bold type Latin letters, which tells you little about the actual pronunciation (cf. Thompson 1981). Runes, transliterations, Old Icelandic designation ('rune name') and *ætt*, and the most important pronunciation variants of each rune are listed in Table 21.1.

Some comments are needed. Most runes had minor or major variants, such as **h** **s** and **ƿ** **m**. They could also be reversed (Sw *vändrunor*) or inverted (Sw *stufurunor*): **ƿ** ~ **ᚖ** and **ƿ** ~ **ᚔ**, respectively, and they could be ligatured (Sw *bindrunor*): **ᚔ** + **ᚖ** = **ᚖ**, sometimes many on a common staff (see comprehensive treatment by MacLeod 2002).

The runic designations are nouns which start, or in one case ends, with the sound that the rune was primarily used for (cf. Bauer 2003: 7). The *ætt* division is ancient and of unexplained origin, but constituted a handy way of creating ciphers based on placement in respective *ætt* (the order of which also could be reversed). Thus the s-rune would be designated 2:5 in some manner (for example by 2 long and 5 short strokes, the so-called *isrúna*-system). A few of the phonetic symbols perhaps need an explanation (Table 21.2).

Table 21.1 The three Viking Age variants of the runic script

Number	Long-branch	Short-twig	Staveless	Designation	Transliteration	Common sound values	Ætt
1	ᚠ	ᚠ	ᚠ	<i>fē</i>	f	<i>ff f w</i>	Freyr's
2	ᚢ	ᚢ	ᚢ	<i>úrr</i>	u	<i>u y o ø au ø y w</i>	
3	ᚦ	ᚦ	ᚦ	<i>þurs</i>	þ	<i>θ ð</i>	
4	ᚨ	ᚨ	ᚨ?	<i>óss, áss</i>	o a	<i>o ā</i>	
5	ᚱ	ᚱ	ᚱ	<i>reid</i>	r	<i>r r R RR</i>	
6	ᚴ	ᚴ	ᚴ	<i>kaun</i>	k	<i>k kk g gg nk ng</i>	
7	ᚷ	ᚷ	ᚷ	<i>hagall</i>	h	<i>h γ</i>	Hagall's
8	ᚹ	ᚹ	ᚹ	<i>naud</i>	n	<i>n nn</i>	
9	ᚻ	ᚻ	ᚻ	<i>iss</i>	i	<i>i æ e æi</i>	
10	ᚽ	ᚽ	ᚽ	<i>ár</i>	a	<i>a æ e æi</i>	
11	ᚿ	ᚿ	ᚿ	<i>sól</i>	s	<i>s ss</i>	
12	ᚢ	ᚢ	ᚢ	<i>týr</i>	t	<i>t tt d dd nt nd</i>	Tyr's
13	ᚦ	ᚦ	ᚦ	<i>bjarkan</i>	b	<i>b bb p pp mb mp</i>	
14	ᚱ	ᚱ	ᚱ	<i>maðr</i>	m	<i>m mm</i>	
15	ᚴ	ᚴ	ᚴ	<i>lög</i>	l	<i>l ll</i>	
16	ᚨ	ᚨ	ᚨ	<i>ýr</i> from <i>ýr</i>	R	<i>R RR y æ</i>	

Table 21.2 Phonetic symbols

Symbol	Pronounced as
y	Germ. <i>Tür</i> , Fre. <i>lune</i>
ø	Eng. <i>bird</i> , Fre. <i>peu</i>
θ	Eng. <i>thin</i>
ð	Eng. <i>other</i>
ɔ	Eng. <i>tall</i>
ā	Fre. <i>blanc</i> (cf. Williams 1990: 28–34)
r	Scott. <i>red</i>
R	Eng. <i>red?</i> (Larsson 2002b: 28–33)
γ	Dan. <i>bog</i> (a fricative g)
æ	Eng. <i>man</i>

Spacing of words was not mandatory. Runes were not always doubled if the same character happened to occur at the end of one word and initially in the following, nor were they doubled when representing long phonemes. If /n/ or /m/ preceded a similar consonant no representation was necessary (Williams 1994). This parsimonious system sometimes leads to texts that are difficult to interpret. A modern parallel would be if we wrote the sequence **buliftusitunilusuks** to express the (admittedly somewhat unexpected) sentence 'Pull left to send down Nelly's socks!' If we add the complications of a thousand-year-old language and an imperfect knowledge of the contents to be expected in a Viking Age runic text, it stands to reason that interpretation of an inscription can be quite a formidable exercise.

The rune carvers were, however, conscious of this difficulty and had ways to make it easier on the reader. First of all, most inscriptions do separate at least some individual words by using word dividers in the form of (double) points, (double) crosses, or other punctuation marks. Secondly, already in the tenth century there appeared dots on three of the most common runes to mark that these were not used in their usual manner. The **u**-, **k**- and **i**-runes were dotted to create **ø** (**y**), **g** (**g**), and **e** (**e**), respectively.

READING RUNESTONE INSCRIPTIONS

But the best help to the reader then as well as now when deciphering a runic text was that almost all of the ones occurring on stone memorials followed an established pattern. Since runestones constitute the great majority of extant runic markers, most inscriptions are therefore not that difficult to understand.

The runestone formula may be summarised in the following way: 'X (and Y) raised this stone in memory of Z, their relative.' Each part of the formula may vary, but the pattern is very regular. In addition to this memorial formula up to three additional elements may occur: obituaries, prayers, and signatures (Hübler 1996: 38–41), usually in that order but seldom all three present simultaneously. On the runestone from Söderby in the province of Gästrikland (Gs 13), however, the three additional elements are found:

Brúsi lét rétta stein þenna eptir Egil, bróður sinn. En hann varð dauðr á Tafeistalandi, þá Brúsi færði langlenz(?) eptir bróður sinn. Hann fór meðr Freygeiri. Guð hjalpi hans sálu ok Guðs móðir. Sveinn ok Ásmundr þeir mörkuðu.

Brúsi had this stone erected in memory of Egill, his brother. And he died in Tafeistaland, when Brúsi carried long-lance after his brother. He travelled with Freygeirr. May God and God's mother help his soul. Sveinn and Ásmundr, they marked (=carved).

Tafeistaland is part of present-day Finland and this is where Egill met his fate. His brother, who also commissioned the runestone, presumably took over the job as *merkis-maðr* ('carrier of the battle banner') after Egill died (Williams MS).

By knowing and expecting this formulaic content, the reader of an inscription was well equipped to decode inscriptions with even the most challenging orthography. For example, an inscription such as the one on the runestone at Eckersholm in the province of Småland (Sm 55) reads:

hakR:kulkR:aukR:kupkurR:rip:itRn:pan:isunR:auti:Rtinf

By applying strictly logical arguments based on the expected formula, Evert Salberger (2001: 101–2) finally managed to 'crack the code' of this apparent gibberish and propose an interpretation which may be summarised:

Haki, Kolki, Auki, mæðgur rei(s)t(u) (s)tein þenn(a), syni(r), epti(r) Stein f(ö)ður.

Haki, Kolki, Auki (and) mother and daughter(s) erected this stone, the sons after Steinn, (their) father.

Except for the word *mæðgur* this is a very convincing suggestion. The 'formulaic words' of this inscription are frequently abbreviated or written in a deviant fashion, whereas the personal names are less aberrant, as indeed they had to be. Through the established formula, the reader knew which words were names and which were not. For the latter, only a suggestion has to be made through orthographic means in order for the reader to understand which word is implied. For the former, however, stricter spelling is necessary if the reader is to know exactly which personal name is intended (Salberger 2001: 67, 83).

But the formula alone serves the purpose in the vast majority of cases, without the need for intricate analysis. What is of interest is the distribution and contents of the runic texts when decoded.

NUMBER AND DISTRIBUTION OF RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS

We know of almost 3,000 Scandinavian runic inscriptions from the Viking Age. In the most recent inventory of the Scandinavian runic-text database (accessed 26 August 2004), these inscriptions are distributed in the following manner within the borders of present-day countries: Sweden 2,270, Denmark 400, Norway 138, the Faroes 2,

Great Britain and Eire 76. But more are being added continuously due to new finds and updated sources.¹

It must be stressed, however, that both the period and the material itself are problematic (cf. Palm 1992). The 'Viking Age' to runologists ends as late as 1130, and indeed a third of this type of runestones are now dated to the period after 1050. Also, hundreds of inscriptions are found on, for example, grave slabs and coins, artefacts usually associated with the Middle Ages. It is evident, therefore, that the runic material should rather be divided into two parts, the split occurring around the year 1000. Before this date the Danish runestones command the scene although there are also small amounts of monuments in Norway and Sweden, as well as some runic inscription on other artefacts. After the shift of the millennium, the runestone tradition of Sweden really gains ground and inscriptions with a Christian content and/or ornamentation begin to dominate. From this point on the runic medium is used for other purposes, as well, but the fashion of 'proper runestones' does not lose its popularity for more than a century, at least not in the central part of Sweden where the Christian Church is slowest to establish itself in more formal respects. Once the building of (public) church buildings is widespread in an area, runic memorials take the form of standing or lying grave markers in or outside the temple.

The method of dating runestones based on their ornamentation is a recent discovery, developed by Anne-Sofie Gräslund (2003 with references). (For a deeper discussion of this problem, see Gräslund and Lager, ch. 46, below.) Earlier, linguistic methods have proved unreliable (Williams 1990: 183; Lagman 1990: 157), although linguistic variation with a typological chronology may in the future become important as a supplementary means of dating.

Just as the runestones are unevenly spread in time, they are unsymmetrically distributed within the Scandinavian countries. In Norway there are no concentrations to talk of, runestones occurring throughout inhabited areas. In Denmark there are centres in north-eastern Jutland and southern Skåne, as well as on Bornholm. On Swedish soil the majority of memorials are erected in the provinces around Lake Mälaren in central Sweden, although Östergötland, Västergötland, Småland, Öland and Gotland also evidence about a hundred or more stones. For the most recent distribution maps, see Sawyer (2000: 12–13). Runic practices did vary regionally to some extent, usually depending on variation in the dialect spoken (Williams 1996 with references).

CONTENTS OF RUNIC TEXTS

Contents, finally, vary as much as do other factors, although the memorial formula is always present. The reason for this could be purely commemorative. But it has been suggested that 'almost *all* inscriptions reflect inheritance and property rights' (Sawyer 2000: 47). This implies that literacy had become more formalised in Scandinavian eleventh-century society than previously thought, an intriguing possibility, but fraught with problems. It has also been proposed that almost all missionary-period inscriptions had a Christian purpose, even the 'neutral' ones without cross or prayer (Williams 1999). Since I am responsible for the latter idea, it behoves me to admit that I now consider all absolute positions too extreme. Runestone production obviously has its roots in the memorial tradition. In the later part of the Viking Age, the medium was expanded to include other aspects of commemoration such as obituaries, but also for adding

other types of material. Hereditary information was deemed interesting, whether it was 'useful' in a legal sense or not. (Obituaries certainly are not.) The Church could not fail to see the worth of the runestone medium, used as it was to written documents. The concluding prayer *Einn er Guð* 'God is one' on the Galteland stone (N 184) reached a wide audience. The combination of a traditional memorial inscription and ornamentation with a Christian prayer and incorporated cross was a powerful means of demonstrating your adherence to a presumably fashionable faith, as well as a method of spreading the religion. Runestone raising was, we must remember, almost exclusively restricted to the landed class of society. If this group accepted the new creed, others could be influenced or coerced to embrace it.

But runic texts do not only deal with the mundane and the religious exclusively. There are also literary aspects: commemorative poetry occurs regularly, especially in the Swedish province of Södermanland (Hübler 1996: 167–8). The earliest attested *dróttkvætt* stanza occurs on the Karlevi stone (Öl 1), as well as the first stanza of *fornyrðislag* on the Rök stone (Ög 136). Runic poetry fits in well with the rest of the Old Norse corpus, and should not be forgotten when discussing it. The material is presented fully in Larsson (2005).

The memorial formula varies little, but it nevertheless provides crucial information about Viking Age society. The sex of the commemorator(s) and the deceased and the family structure are data that have been used for important studies (Sawyer 2000), although not all are equally convincing (see Jesch 1994).

As important are the personal names prolific in the inscriptions, some 1,400 separate names in all, 75 per cent of which denote men (Peterson 2002: 3). Only approximately half a per cent of all names are of non-Scandinavian origin, the exceptions stemming from names 'borrowed' from Christian saints or royal families (Larsson 2002a: 50, 53–4 with references). Most of the names are made up of two parts, for example *Guðlaug* and *Þorsteinn* to choose the most common ones of either sex. In the Viking Age this type of name no longer had any 'meaning' but was simply handed down through the generations or made up from randomly combined elements, resulting in unique combinations.

More interesting, perhaps, are appellations which are only secondary as names, that is, the bynames (nicknames) so commonly found in medieval sources, for example *Haraldr hinn hárfagri* 'fair-haired'. In the runic inscriptions names of this type usually stand alone, as the only name of a person. These 'absolute bynames' constitute a unique source to the social history and mentality of Viking Age Scandinavians. Many common names were probably bynames originally, such as *Dóttir* 'daughter' and *Gás* 'goose'. Others are of a more obvious byname character: *Spjúti* 'he with a spear', *Kárr* 'curly hair' and *Fundinn* 'foundling'. Many phenomena could inspire a byname, for example characteristics of the human body such as the colour of hair (*Hvíthöfði* 'white head = hair') and beard (*Kanpr* 'moustache'), or shape of parts of the body like the forehead (*Ennibrattr* 'steep forehead'), nose (*Eikinefr* 'oaken nose'), lips (*Varrfeitr* 'fat lips') and feet (*Fótr*). Distinctive speech (*Dragmáll* 'drawling speech'), abilities (*Spár* 'prophetic') or behaviour (*Stýrr* 'tumult') could also lead to the coining of a nickname.

Names which certainly stimulate our imagination are the ones that start with the negative prefix Ó- 'un-', such as *Ófeigr* 'undying', *Órækja* 'uncaring' and *Ópvegin* 'unwashed' (Williams 1993). The type is old, but seems especially popular in the Old Scandinavian society, perhaps because these superficially negative names had become

favourites among the Viking warriors, where hurtful actions and bad behaviour were not always frowned upon. Successful Vikings bearing names of this type probably passed them on to later generations.

RUNIC RESEARCH: ISSUES AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

Most of the runic inscriptions are now published in scholarly editions, and almost all are available in some form (see note 1). But the work for runologists is far from over. It is now time to utilise the material, which has so far mostly been inventoried, at least from the linguistic point of view. Historians of all creeds have already, as I have shown, begun to mine the runic texts, but there is so much more to be learned. Runology as a discipline, however, is primarily philological (Peterson 1995). Until an inscription is properly published and its meaning firmly established, the text cannot be utilised by other scholars. And there is much to be done in this field. Many passages are still unclear, due to damages or misunderstandings. Since the material is not that large, even a few inscriptions can make a lot of difference. Many names are misinterpreted or yet remain wholly uninterpreted. Behind these are often found the more uncommon types of bynames, the very material that tells us the most about naming patterns. Personal names have been erroneously analysed regarding the sex of their bearers, which can lead historians to the wrong conclusions.

We also have a poor understanding of the communicative situation of the runic texts: who and how many could read and write runes? What were the mental tools used to decode an inscription and what were the orthographical rules more precisely? Since the runes are ambiguous, we have to spend extra care in determining which interpretations are at all possible and which one is obviously the correct one, or at least the most likely. What role did the 'nonsense' inscriptions play in the corpus (cf. Meijer 1997)? Why would anyone carve a runic text or a part of one that does not make sense, and are these inscriptions and passages really meaningless? The first steps towards the understanding of these complex issues have been taken (Lagman 1989), but much remains to be done.

As for the linguistic issues, there is a word index to the Rune-Swedish inscriptions (Peterson 1994b), which is currently being translated into English (<http://runic.dictionaries.nottingham.ac.uk/>). There are also book-length studies of some runic orthographic/phonological phenomena (Williams 1990; Lagman 1990; Larsson 2002b) and much material on Old Scandinavian languages to be found in Bandle *et al.* (2003). But there is no proper dictionary of Viking Age language, no grammar dealing with its phonology, morphology and syntax (Peterson 1996: 23), nor is there any handbook of runology (stepping-stones are laid in Thompson 1975 and Barnes 1994). All of these works need to be written, not least because many reinterpretations are likely to result from such work.

Another major runological research effort must be directed towards the runographers, the artists carving the runestone inscriptions and sometimes signing with their names. Many runographers have received some attention and a couple, Asmundr Kárasen and Ópir, full-length treatments (Thompson 1975 and Áhlén 1997, respectively). One monograph has been published on all the carvers in a region (Stille 1999) and one on the technical aspects of rune carving (Kitzler 2002). But we are still far from understanding all the important circumstances relating to the runographers (cf. Williams 2000): did several usually cooperate and, if so, is there a pattern to who was responsible for (what

parts of) the runic inscription and who for the ornamental parts? Why are only certain inscriptions signed, and does the signature always indicate who actually carried out the work? Were there carvers' schools with masters and pupils? Is the orthography of the runographer influenced by her or his dialect, region, colleagues or customers?

CONCLUSION

The study of runology is old, but still in its beginnings. Viking Age runestones have received much attention but have much more to contribute to our knowledge of contemporary society and language. Other inscriptions, for example on so-called runic amulets, are only beginning to be studied as a group. The runic material may not be large, but it is of extraordinary richness, variety and value.

NOTE

- ¹ The runic inscriptions of the various countries are published as follows. Britain: Barnes and Page (2006), Holman (1996), Page (1995); Denmark (including Skåne, Halland and Blekinge): DR and Moltke (1985); Gotland: SRI 11–12, Snædal (2002); Ireland: Barnes *et al.* (1997); Norway (including Bohuslän and Jämtland): Nyr and Spurkland (2001); Sweden: SRI and Jansson (1987). New finds are published in *Nytt om runer*, now also available on the Internet. The entire corpus, including unpublished texts, is available through *Scandinavian runic-text data base*, now also available in English, along with updated readings and interpretations in addition to translations of (virtually) all texts.

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