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Ráð þat, If You Can!

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Abstract

Inscriptions with rune-like symbols continue to challenge the ingenuity of runologists. Such inscriptions may take the form of meaningless scribbles, complex bind-runes, or garbled texts with a hidden message. This article presents five almost identical inscriptions from such diverse places as Sigtuna, Skara, Oslo and Bergen. All five inscriptions consist of runes with added, apparently superfluous, features, and it is argued that these can be interpreted in a way that has not previously been considered.

Keywords: Viking Age, Middle Ages, bind-runes, cryptic runes, reading orientation, Skara, Sigtuna, Bryggen in Bergen, Oslo

The medieval runic corpus contains a large number of uninterpretable, or at least uninterpreted, inscriptions. Not infrequently, runologists have to put them aside and admit defeat. The reason is often that the inscriptions are damaged and the runes largely unreadable, or that the object bearing them is fragmentary such that only a few runes or sequences of runes are preserved. But equally often an inscription may be complete and as clear as day, and yet make no sense. In many examples of the latter type the trained eye will spot the hand of a total illiterate scribbling rune-like symbols, or an unsteady and untrained writer trying to copy a runic text without any understanding of what it says. The most difficult cases to give up on are those that yield no sense even though the runes are well executed and the carving apparently secure. In an attempt to find a solution the dedicated runologist will try everything, viewing the inscription from all conceivable angles. In the following I present five runic inscriptions made with precisely that purpose in mind: to compel us to look at them from different angles in order to arrive at an understanding of the texts.

The five objects bearing these almost identical sets of rune-like symbols are

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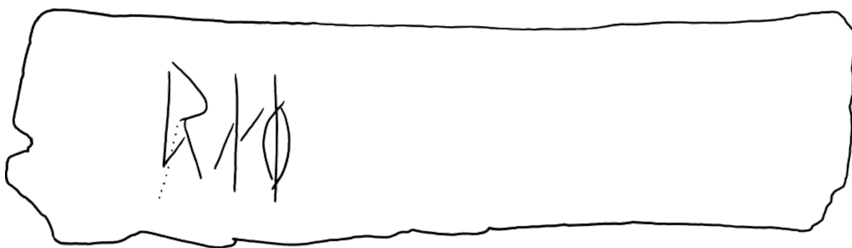


Fig. 1. Side a of the bone SI 89 (U NOR2000;32B) Sigtuna. Drawing by the author.

all archaeological finds (three of bone and two of wood), from excavations carried out at different urban sites in Scandinavia: Sigtuna, Skara, Oslo and Bryggen in Bergen. They are dated to the late Viking Age and High Middle Ages. Each of them contains a set of three rune-like graphs or complex bind-runes. On four of the objects other inscriptions occur as well. In all five cases the runes seem clear (although in one instance only partially preserved), and to have been made with a definite purpose in mind.

In 1999 excavators found a roughly 12.5 cm long rib-bone incised with runes in the area “Professorn 1” in Sigtuna. The bone has been given reference code SI 89 in the inventory of runic objects discovered in Sigtuna, and appears as U NOR2000;32B in the Scandinavian Runic Text Database. The bone has brief runic inscriptions on both of its broad faces, and its preliminary dating is to the early part of the 1100s (Gustavson 2001, 32 f.). In 2007 I was able to examine the bone. The drawing reproduced as figure 1, as well as the following account of the reading, is based on that examination.

On the convex side of the bone there are two apparently independent inscriptions. One consists of three or four runes. Conceivably these represent a hypocoristic name *Riki*, or nickname *Ruggi*, but the reading of the second character is too uncertain for any hard-and-fast conclusions to be drawn (Gustavson 2001, 33). The other inscription seems to be made up of two twig-runes—realisations of the *ættir*-cipher (based on the division of the futhark into three groups)—but the second lacks indication of the group to which it belongs: 1/5 0/3. Of greater interest for the current investigation is the inscription on the concave side of the bone. It is here we find the three complex rune-like symbols. The first character is clearly *r*. The knife appears to have slipped, however, as the writer, after carving the bow, directed it away from the vertical to start the tail: from this point a light scratch proceeds down to the left. Clearly deliberate on the other hand is a cut that runs up to the right from the base of the vertical. Helmer Gustavson considers this latter branch to be unintentional, although he admits the possibility that it

gives a malformed **b** (Gustavson 2001, 32). The next rune can be taken as a long-branch **a**, but if so, its branch has been cut in two separate sections, one on each side of the vertical. Gustavson notes that the section to the right does not quite meet the vertical, but fails to mention the clear difference of height between the two, which makes them appear independent of each other rather than as elements of one and the same diagonal line. The third and last character appears to be a double-sided **p**. The top of the left-hand bow overcuts the vertical as does the bottom of its right-hand counterpart.

The reading and interpretation of the three runes that immediately suggest themselves are **rap**, ON *ráð*, imperative of the verb *ráða*. (I use Old West Norse normalisation throughout, even though several of the inscriptions discussed are from Sweden.) In runic inscriptions the imperative form of this verb occurs almost entirely in the sense ‘read!’ or, more specifically, ‘interpret!’ (Dverstorp 2000). In the present case we might conclude that ‘interpret!’ is the intended meaning, since the deviant runes imply a challenge to the reader. The material from Sigtuna embraces several other inscriptions with the same kind of challenge. These are Sl 9 (U Fv1983;229) side b: ... *ráð þ[ú] rúnar!* written with twig- and bow-rune realisations of the *ættir*-cipher; Sl 74 (U NOR2000;25B) *[R]áð þú rúnar!* written with additional verticals placed between each rune; and Sl 91 (U NOR2000;34A) side a: *Ráð þú!* written in the *ættir*-cipher using short vertical lines to indicate the group and full length verticals (*íss*-runes) to mark position within the group. In our case, Sl 89, it would appear that *ráð!* refers to the challenge posed by the fact that the runes have apparently been made more complex through the addition of extra branches and bows. The disguising of runes through the use of seemingly meaningless additions is a feature runologists have identified in a number of inscriptions. Börje Westlund’s reading (1989) of the first nine runes on the Kvinneby copper plaque (Öl SAS1989;43) involves the exclusion of particular features which he deems superfluous. Similarly, Elena Melnikova’s understanding of the runes on the Gorodišče amulets (X RyMelnikova2001;181 and X RyMelnikova2001;189) assumes that certain graphic features have no phonetic value (Melnikova 1987, 165). Although this approach throws up obvious methodological problems, several interpretations based on it have achieved widespread acceptance (MacLeod 2002, 166–73). Viewing the Sigtuna inscription Sl 89 in the same light, one ought to be able to dismiss the superfluous branches and bow as features designed simply to make the reading more difficult — concealing the very exhortation *ráð!* ‘interpret!’.

We can, however, approach the inscription in a different way, and start with the presumption that the “superfluous” features are not after all super-

fluous, but in fact indicate sound values. Read as traditional bind-runes the characters appear to have little to offer. The branch rising from the base of **r** might perhaps be taken together with the tail and understood as **a**; the branch to the right of the second vertical could be assumed to indicate **k**, even though it does not extend to full height; and the third rune might with some reservation be read as two **ps**. This would give **raakþþ**, a reading that does not seem amenable to interpretation — or even convince as a runic text. If on the other hand we read the inscription — moving the whole time left to right — first one way, then turn the bone round 180° and read the same characters the opposite way, the graphic features which emerge all give good sense. With the one orientation we get **R1þ** and with the other **þ11**. This offers a wholly satisfactory reading and interpretation: **rap þat**, *rād þat!* ‘interpret that/this!’. Such a procedure is so far unknown in runic writing, and there is thus good reason to investigate the reading more thoroughly. If we look closely at the carving itself, we can find features that support the suggested change of orientation. The bow of **r** was clearly cut the expected way up. We can deduce this from the fact that the knife slipped downwards as the carver was completing this part of the character. We may further note that the bows of the final rune are both incised in the same way, but upside-down in relation to one another. The bow on the right does not connect with the vertical above, while it is mildly overcut below. Correspondingly, the bow on the left does not connect with the vertical below, but is overcut above. This indicates that the carver turned the bone before the left bow was cut. It also seems likely that the branches of **a** and **t** in **þat** were cut with the opposite orientation from **rap**. Evidence from the carving process thus supports the interpretation suggested here. Nor is the inscription on Sl 89 the only one of its type.

Side b of Vg Fv1992;172 Skara has an inscription almost identical to the one under discussion. This too is found on a rib-bone. The bone was discovered during excavations in the area “Rådhuset 30” in Skara and has been provisionally dated to some time before 1250 (Gustavson, Snædal and Åhlén 1992, 170, 172 f.). I have not had the opportunity of examining the object myself, but I reproduce the photograph on which my reading of side b is based in figure 2. Side a carries the inscription —**??stu·niþir·ok·rap·runur·si**, strongly reminiscent of B584 from Bryggen, Bergen, with its text: *Sezt niðr ok ráð rúnar, rís upp ok fíð!* ‘Sit down and interpret runes, stand up and fart!’. Based on the wording of the Bryggen inscription it is tempting to take the —**??stu** with which the Skara text commences as *Seztu* ... ‘Sit down ...’. The bone is damaged at the beginning, but Marit Åhlén thought to see the remains of a branch or bow, as of **b** or **þ**, at the top of the second

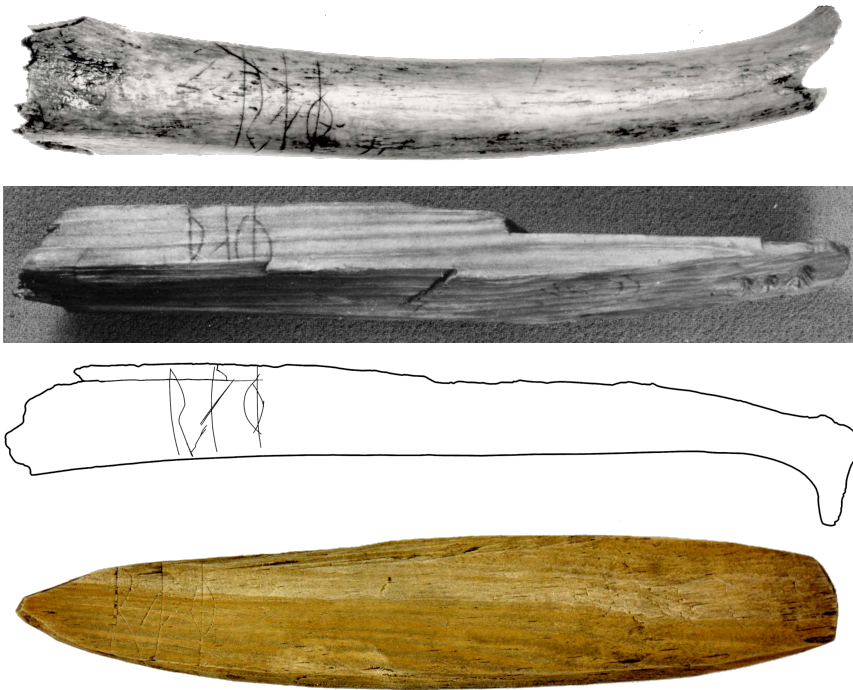


Fig. 2. Four *ráð þat* inscriptions. *Above*, Vg Fv1992;172 Skara (photo: Bengt A. Lundberg; © Swedish National Heritage Board, Stockholm); *upper middle*, A200 Gamlebyen, Oslo (drawing by the author); *lower middle*, B323 Bryggen, Bergen (photo: Aslak Liestøl; © Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo); *below*, B235 Bryggen, Bergen (photo: Kristel Zilmer).

unreadable rune, which, if she is right, could indicate a spelling **sipstu** for *Seztu* (Magnus Källström, Riksantikvarieämbetet, pers. com.). Side b exhibits several diagonal cuts which appear to have arisen by chance. The side b inscription itself differs from Sl 89 only in one respect: the branch of **t** in **þat** is placed at the base of **r**'s tail rather than on its vertical. The reason is probably lack of space between the vertical and the tail. There is, however, little doubt the inscription is to be read **rap þat**. Just as in the Sigtuna example, we see that there is a distinct difference of height between the two “branches of **a**”; they do not appear to be parts of a single crossing branch.

On yet another bone, this time from Oslo, the three “bind-runes” appear once more. The bone has inscriptions on two sides and was found during excavations in the area “Søndre felt” in “Gamlebyen”, the Old Town (A200; Liestøl and Nestor 1987, 426 f., illustration p. 424). The find is dated to 1050–1150 (cf. Sand 2010, appendix A). I have examined the object on several

occasions. It is broken at both ends, but neither of the inscriptions has thereby been damaged. A piece of the edge recently broke off taking with it the uppermost parts of the two initial runes on side b, but the piece has now been stuck on again. On side a we have **fro**, interpreted by Aslak Liestøl and Svein Nestor as *fró*, a word meaning ‘alleviation’, ‘help’ and ‘relief’. On side b they read **rap**. In their view the left bow of **p** could have been added later (Liestøl and Nestor 1987, 427). The branch on the right of **r**’s tail elicits no comment even though it is recorded in Liestøl’s drawing (preserved in the Oslo Runic Archives). The branch traverses an area where the bone seems to have been damaged by a knife or had a piece cut away. The uneven surface may explain why the line was carved in sections and has a rather jagged appearance. I certainly see no reason not to regard it as an intentional incision. The branch of the second rune consists of a continuous line rising from left to right and crossing the vertical (as of **† æ**), but it has been incised twice, at a slightly different angle on each occasion. The left bow of **p** is more carefully executed than the right; the latter has been carved in two stages and is placed clumsily on the vertical. In spite of various uncertainties pertaining to the Oslo inscription, I find its similarity to the Sigtuna and Skara examples so striking that I am convinced *rāð þat!* is the correct interpretation. In Norway we would by and large expect one-sided **as** (**†**) at this period, but the continuous crossing branch perhaps illustrates a form of rationalisation, showing that this particular way of inscribing *rāð þat!* may have been so well known in certain circles that it developed a fixed form, rendering the marking of every distinctive feature unnecessary.

With some hesitation I would add two inscriptions from Bryggen (the Old Wharf) in Bergen to this group. The rune-like symbols which constitute inscription B323 occur on a narrow face of a roughly 17 cm long piece of wood, dated to c. 1250 (James E. Knirk, pers. com.) and of uncertain function. Ornamental carvings and apparently unintended scratches can be found on other faces of the same piece of wood. I have not had the opportunity of examining the object myself, and I base my observations on the photograph reproduced in figure 2, together with close-up images held by the Oslo Runic Archives. The lower parts of the runes were cut away when the wood was trimmed at a later period, and a little more was lost when a splinter came off the lower edge of the narrow face. In his discussion of Sl 89, Helmer Gustavson draws a parallel with this inscription, suggesting it can be read **rap** (Gustavson 2001, 32). Of the first character only the upper part remains; this is quite possibly **r**, but **b** cannot be excluded. No sign of any “upside-down” branch of **t** has been preserved. If the second rune once

had a branch marking the **a** of **þat**, it must have been placed very high up (in the direction of reading) in order for it not to collide with the bow of the double **þ**. The other inscription from Bryggen, B235, was brought to my attention by James Knirk. The object is a boat shaped piece of wood, 10.2 cm long, dated to c. 1185 (James Knirk, pers. com.). The inscription is carved on the “deck” of the boat, near the “bow”. Kristel Zilmer, Bergen, has kindly examined the inscription for me in Bryggen’s Museum. I base the following on her reading and photographs. The three rune-like symbols are almost identical to those of the Sigtuna and Skara inscriptions discussed above but there is no branch that would give the **t** in **þat**. A weak diagonal trace, barely visible on the photos, descending towards the left from the topmost part of the vertical of **a** in **þat**, could perhaps have been taken as the **t**-branch of a bind-rune **at**, but it proves to be a natural crack in the wood connected to damage on the edge of this side of the stick. Notwithstanding the comparative weakness of the evidence, I would suggest that these two inscriptions can also be interpreted *ráð þat*!

Even though complex “bound” runes of this particular type have not up to now been documented, there do exist inscriptions, whose different parts have been written upside down and in opposite directions relative to one another. B3 from Bryggen, Bergen, occurs on the base of a wooden bowl that has been turned in a lathe. The inscription is made up of single runes, bind-runes and crosses. In 1956 Aslak Liestøl interpreted it as an abbreviated *Av[e] Ma[ria]* (in a letter to Asbjørn Herteig dated 6 January 1956, preserved in the Oslo Runic Archives). Liestøl’s reading and interpretation have since been confirmed and expanded by James Knirk (*NlyR*, 6: 235 f.). You begin in the middle, proceeding from left to right: **†au†** (in the inscription itself the second cross is upside-down in relation to the first); you then turn the object through 180° and start in the middle once again, still reading left to right: **†ma**. In this case it is not necessarily a desire to make the inscription difficult to read that has determined the form; more likely, perhaps, the carver wanted to create a compact monogram.

Both B3 and the five inscriptions that have been the subject of this article show that rune-carvers were not averse to the idea of turning the object on which they were writing through 180° and continuing upside-down in relation to the beginning of their text. Juggling the writing around in this way was clearly often done with playful intent, but it might have a serious purpose too. When we consider that there exist a good many meaningless inscriptions with rune-like symbols that resemble those discussed here, it clearly behoves us, in the light of the foregoing, to look at them from every possible angle before dismissing them as uninterpretable.

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