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On Tune’s *sijostez* Once Again: A Reply to Bernard Mees

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In a recent paper on the runic inscription on the Tune stone, published in this journal (Eythórsson 2013), I propose a new analysis of the text on side B. Along with Läffler (1892), I argue in favor of taking *sijostez* at face value, as being derived from a reflexive stem Proto-Indo-European *(e)wo-* in the archaic meaning ‘own, belonging to the family’ (actually, I analyze the form as *sījōstēz* rather than Läffler’s *sījōstēz*). I suggest that the phrase *sijostez arbijano* is an ancient legal term meaning ‘the closest of the family heirs’, comparable to early Latin *suus heres* ‘his own heir’, i.e. ‘family heir, self-successor’. I further argue that the form *dalidun* should be emended to *da(i)lidun* (to *"dailijana* ‘divide, share’), as was done by Bugge (1891, 27 f.), giving *þrijoz dohtriz da(i)lidun arbijja* ‘three daughters shared the inheritance’. I conclude that the three daughters (of Wōdurīdaz) shared the inheritance as the closest family heirs, while some other person (perhaps Wiwaz) erected the stone.

Against this analysis, Bernard Mees in this issue of the journal expresses his opinion that Marstrander’s (1930, 320 f.) reading *asijostez* should be upheld. This opinion appears to be based more on *argumentum ex auctoritate* than on solid facts. The form *āsijōstēz* would be the superlative of *āsijaz* ‘divine’, to *āsuz* (*"ansuz*) ‘god’. However, rather than assuming with Marstrander that the meaning of *āsijōstēz* is ‘closest to the god [som stod Åsen nærmest]’, Mees suggests that it means ‘most divine, i.e. the noblest’. The usage here would be that of a “eulogistic superlative”, characterizing the heirs mentioned in the inscription as ‘very noble’, allegedly in line with references to “divine ancestry typical of Old Germanic genealogical tradition”. Mees is critical of taking *sijostez* as derived from a reflexive (as per Läffler 1892) since “it assumes a derivation from a pronominal construction of a type which is otherwise unparalled”. Finally, Mees
finds the correspondence between the conjectured phrase *sījaz arbijan-
in Tune and Latin suus heres (brought for the first time into the discussion
of this passage in my paper) lacking in cogency because “a superlative
form of suus heres would make little sense from the perspective of Roman
law where the concept is absolute rather than gradational”.

As argued in considerable detail in my paper, the form sījōstēz is possible
from the point of view of Germanic historical word formation. Moreover,
the early Latin legal term suus heres, containing a specific combination
with the reflexive *s(e)wo- ‘own, belonging to the family’, should by no
means be dismissed lightly as a formal and semantic parallel to sijostez
arbijano ‘the closest of the family heirs’. After all, such correspondences
between related languages are the cornerstone of the comparative method
in historical linguistics.

While the formal aspects are certainly important, the main argument
for the reading sijostez is semantic and pragmatic in nature. As I discuss
at length in the paper, following my analysis, the context on side B is that
of three daughters as heirs sharing an inheritance (and not three daughters
preparing a funeral feast, as in most other accounts). There is now a
choice between two readings and interpretations of the text in question:
either as sijostez arbijano ‘the closest of the family heirs’, following my
analysis, or as asijostez arbijano ‘the very noble heirs’, as Mees would
have it. However, that the form arbijano is evidently a partitive genitive
suggests that there are more candidates for the inheritance than just the
three daughters. Given that there is a pool of possible heirs, the question
arises: which is the more pragmatically adequate statement: (a) the in-
heritance goes to the heirs who are next of kin, ‘the closest of the family
heirs’, or (b) the inheritance goes to the heirs who are ‘very noble’. In my
mind, there is no question that possibility (a) is the more adequate one.
The reason is simple: it would have been considered important to state
explicitly that the daughters were the ones among the heirs who were left
the inheritance, perhaps because they were women, and there were three
of them sharing the inheritance. This may also explain the “gradational”
use of the adjective in this connection, i.e. why a superlative form was
used; from the pool of family heirs, the sui heredes, the three daughters
were the closest ones.

The alternative account defended by Mees raises the question why it
would have been necessary to state that the daughters were ‘very noble’
heirs. This information appears entirely self-evident and therefore re-
dundant; it stands to reason that the Tune stone was erected in memory of
a powerful chieftain, and his daughters would thus certainly have been
noble. Moreover, the alleged “eulogistic superlative” āsijōstēz is not an exact formal match to Greek δῖα γυναικῶν ‘noblest of women’, mentioned by Mees, since the Greek expression never occurs with a superlative of the adjective.

In general terms, I argue that it is preferable to regard the text of the Tune inscription as a whole, rather than to focus on individual forms in isolation. Both sījōstēz and āsijōstēz are formally possible, but neither has much empirical support in comparative material. As stated above, the existence of the early Latin parallel suus heres is a crucial argument in favor of taking sijostez as sijōstēz, derived from a reflexive stem *s(e)wo-

‘own, belonging to the family’. The original meaning of the reflexive is well attested in a derived adjectival form in Germanic, manifested by for instance Gothic swēs ‘own; property’ and Old Norse sváss ‘dear, beloved’ (for further examples see Eythórsson 2013, 27).

The form āsijōstēz, however, is problematic for a number of reasons. One problem has to do with the word formation, which would be unusual in Germanic, where such secondary adjective formations are rare (cf. Grønvik 1981, 111 with further references, Bjorvand 2008, 4–6). This reading also requires the additional assumption that double vowels are written single, for which there is tenuous evidence in the older runic inscriptions (pace Mees and others). Still, granting for the sake of argument that the reading asijostez were better supported than sijostez, then we would be faced with a situation in which we had a more plausible explanation of one particular word, but a less likely explanation of the text as a whole. Conversely, assuming a meaning ‘the closest of the family heirs’ rather than ‘very noble heirs’, the interpretation of the statement in lines B2–3 as a whole appears contextually more plausible although an individual word may not necessarily be well supported empirically.

Mees further criticizes my reasons for preferring the analysis of dalidun as da(i)lidun (dailidun) ‘divided, shared’ (Bugge 1891) rather than dālidun ‘made (nice), prepared’ (Seip 1929), claiming that they negate my support for Läffler’s association of sijōstēz (my sijōstēz) with Old Frisian sia, representing the “logic” applied by Marstrander himself, “i.e. a conviction that interpretations of runic expressions should principally be made in terms of forms actually paralleled elsewhere in Germanic”. As a matter of principle, it is indeed a good thing if there are attested parallels elsewhere in Germanic to forms in runic inscriptions, but it is more important that such a word could have existed in early Germanic. However, the main objection against positing dalidun ‘made (nice), prepared’ is not the fact that it does not occur in Germanic; rather, in the context of the inscription
information about who prepared the funeral feast is less pragmatically relevant than information about who shared the inheritance. Similarly, the main objection against assuming a form āsijōstēz is not that it is unattested in Germanic, but that calling the heirs ‘very noble’ appears less relevant in the context of a statement on inheritance than specifying their relationship to the deceased and the nature of their legal inheritance rights.

In my opinion, one of the most important methodological goals of runic studies, as of any other epigraphic and philological discipline, is to establish, by all available means (including common sense), the most plausible pragmatic context of a particular text. In accordance with this, I strongly feel that the application of the Law of Jante (Janteloven) is out of place in runology, according to which every interpretation is considered equal and one particular interpretation cannot be accepted as being better than the others. Mees too is against “the overproduction of epigraphic interpretations” and surely also believes that it is our task to argue for what we consider to be the best interpretation. I am convinced that the Tune inscription reports on the sharing of the inheritance (after the deceased Wōdurīdaz), and not on the preparation of the funeral feast, although it was in all likelihood a magnificent affair; similarly I think that it was much more important to specify that the three daughters were ‘the closest of the family heirs’ than to declare that they were ‘very noble’, although they no doubt were.

Bibliography


