

A RUNIC PRAYER

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ABSTRACT. Contrary to modern view of the runes as symbols and bearers of pagan traditions, the mediaeval runic inscriptions found in Scandinavia bear witness of making use of the indigenous alphabet to serve the new religion, Christianity. In this paper a number of inscriptions are analyzed with respect to the prayer formula that typically is a part of a text commemorating the dead. Different runic masters are found to have been more or less theologically educated in the tenets of the new religion. The prayer formulas show a changing society, reorienting from the pagan traditions towards the christian ones.

The Latin alphabet which, with small modifications, is used in Scandinavia today has been brought there with Christianity, alongside a number of other cultural and civilisational feats, although it took several hundred years for it to become the standard writing system. At the time when the first missionaries arrived to Denmark and Sweden, about 800 AD, the Scandinavians had already had a writing system common to only the North Germanic people, so-called *fupark*, the runic alphabet. It was a close relation of the Latin one (and possibly inspired by Greek and even Etruscan varieties), but different in its organisation of the symbols (hence the name *fupark*, not 'alphabet'), their number and names. The shape of the runic letters, with their sharp corners and long straight lines, made them ideal for writing on wood and carving on stone. The Latin script was mainly used for writing on a softer material, parchment at first, and later paper.

It is interesting to see how the two alphabets are used in Scandinavia between the 9th and 13th century, when they are both in frequent use. A complementary use seems to have developed, with runes used for writing on the traditional wood and stone, and Latin letters on parchment, with different scopes of use as well. The situation may possibly be termed biliteracy (in analogy to bilingualism) – although literacy as such is certainly limited. Runes

are the daily writing, used for short messages scribbled on small pieces of wood (thousands of such messages have been discovered in Bergen in Norway and in Novgorod in Russia), the texts written in the Nordic languages of the time. Latin letters are used to write official documents, longer texts of both religious and artistic value, to begin with only in Latin. They are first adapted for the Scandinavian languages in 11th and 12th century (e.g. in *Äldre Västgötalagen*, the legal codex of the Swedish province of Västergötaland, written down in ca 1225 AD).

While the two systems exist alongside for a number of years, their parallel existence is not without consequences, nor are their scopes of use entirely different. Especially the fuþark is much changed in the new reality, brought on by contact with other cultures and with the new religion, Christianity.

From the original 24 runes, only 16 remain in the so-called younger fuþark, developed in the 9th century. The exact reasons for this reduction (which not always seems to have been practical, since one letter has now to represent more than one sound) are unknown, but the contact with another writing system as well as generally the time of radical social and cultural changes are named (e.g. Düwel 2001, Maciejewski et al. 2011). Apart from changes in the fuþark, a new practice of using the script is formed, mainly in Sweden, of raising stones with runic inscriptions to commemorate the dead.

Stone-raising was not unusual in the earlier times, there are e.g. the famous Stenotoften and Blekinge stones. However, their contents remain largely a mystery, they seem to either document important feasts (like the Stenotoften one, in which a sacrifice in Uppsala is named) or contain some pagan evocations and curses.

niu hAborumz niu hagestumz hAþuwolAfz gAf j

with nine bocks with nine horses, HapuwolafR gave (good) year
(DR 357, Stenotoften)

With the advent of the new, reduced fuþark, a new custom becomes popular, particularly in the Swedish province of Uppland – of raising stones to remember the dead members of one’s family. Their purpose was probably twofold. On the one side it was a practical way of establishing one’s right to inheritance (e.g. Sawyer 2000), as both the deceased and those left mourning him or her are mentioned by name in the inscriptions. It makes them different from a typical headstone at a cemetery today, whose sole purpose is to state the name of the one who lies buried under it, there is only seldom any mention of the relatives left.

On the other hand, the inscriptions found in Uppland are overwhelmingly Christian in nature, they usually end with an invocation to a higher power and are decorated with Christian ornaments, a variety of crosses. They can therefore be seen as proclamations of the new faith.

These new monuments are found in large numbers in Sweden (and some in Denmark), and are raised by the noble and the rich – those who had to claim and means to do so. As an example may serve the inscriptions from Denmark, known as the Jellinge stones. To all intents and purposes they fulfill both functions mentioned above. For the first they confirm the legality of the rule of king Harald, who is the heir of his father, Gorm. As Gorm gained rule over Denmark and Norway, so shall his son continue to rule over these lands.

**haraltr kunukR þaþ kaurua kubl þausi aft kurm faþur sin auk aft þourui
muþur sina sa haraltr ias soR uan tanmaurk**

Harald king asked carve monument this after Gorm father his and after Þyrvé,
mother his, this Harald which himself won Denmark

ala auk nuruiak

all and Norway

On the other hand, the new religion is also firmly established: not only has Gorm extended his rule over these lands, his son has also brought Christianity to the Danes.

auk tani karþi kristno

and Danes made Christian
(DR 42)

The Christian nature of this particular inscription is further strengthened by an illustration: the image of a man holding his arms widely spread as if he was hanging on a cross. The carving is placed exactly over the last line of the inscription, as if to point out the tenets of the new faith.

The tradition to raise the stones to the memory of the dead is documented in Scandinavia at least since the Rök stone, where a father remembers his slain son. It is one of the last inscriptions of the older fuþark, and simultaneously one of the first of the younger. The runes are both old and new, with many attempts at masking the text behind codes and riddles. The inscription is only partly interpreted, but some new attempts are being made at giving it meaning (Ralph 2007).

However, it is first in the 10th and 11th century that the custom to raise the stones becomes so popular as to leave us today with about 1200 inscriptions in Uppland alone (incidentally, the area of the most potent pagan cult, with its sacrifice, described in the chronicle of Adam of Bremen and alluded in the Stenotoften inscription).

The inscriptions to the memory of the dead are formulaic in character and usually consist of at least two of the following elements:

- the name of the person on whose initiative the inscription was carved (or, in some cases, who him- or herself carved the runes)

- the name of the deceased to be thus commemorated (although the two can also be identical, as in the Jarlabanki stones)
- a prayer for the soul of the deceased.

Other elements may also appear, the deceased and his/her life or some important events in it may also be presented, the rune carver may sign his inscription, the prayer may be directed at the passers-by.

The most typical inscriptions are those raised by widows after their husbands or by children after their parent.

humfriþr lit ris- stn þinsa ifa-- haur bunta sin kuþ hialbi i ot hans

Holmfriðr let raise stone this after Haur, husband hers. God may help spirit his.

(U 25)

However, some inscriptions bear witness to what undoubtedly was a family tragedy, like the death of a child.

sloþi rahnfriþ þaun litu hakua stain iftiR ihulbiarn sun sin hialbi kristr ant has

Slóði, Ragnfriðr, they let carve stone after Ígulbjörn, son theirs. May help Christ spirit his.

(Sö 2)

Although it is typically members of the deceased's family who raise the stone (thus possibly ensuring the inheritance), it may also be some otherwise connected to him or her, as in the following example:

frisa ki... .. þesar eftR alþoþ felaha sloþa kristr hia helgi hinbi ant hans þurbiun risti

The Frisian guild-(brothers had this stone raised) in memory of Porkell, their guild-brother. May God help his spirit. Þorbjörn carved.

(U 391)

It is also possible for a person to remember themselves, which is a strong indication of the function of the inscriptions as documents confirming legal matters.

iarlabaki lit raisa stain þisa atsik kuikuan aukbru þisa karþi furont sina aukainati alan tabu kuphialbionthans

Jarlabanki let raise stone this for self living and bridge this carve for spirit his and he owned all Täby. God may help spirit his.

(U 164)

Although each inscription follows more or less the same formula, there are great discrepancies between them as to how advanced (theologically) the prayer formulas are and how rich the ornamentation. Some simple message may be lavishly decorated, as in Åsmund Kåressons production, where a stunning ornamentation is accompanied by a simple and concise text.

**fastbiurn uk þurun litu rita ... bru kiruaabtiR inkifa-... ...(u)anta sin kuþ hialbi hont
osmunrt risti runoR**

Fastbjörn and Torunn let raise (stone and) make bridge after Inge(fast), her man. God may help spirit. Ásmund carved runes.

U 859

Meanwhile, some deeply theological information may be hidden among very unassuming ornaments, like the so-called Gunnar stones.

**iystin auk iuruntr auk biurn þiR byryþr risþu stin trums faþur sin kuþ ihlbi ons ont
auk selu fur kifi onum sakaR auk sutiR hi (..)**

Östen and Jorund and Björn, these brothers raised (this stone after) their father. May God help spirit his and soul, forgive him sins.

(U 323)

Here we can see that the focus has been changed from the earthly worries (also about the due course of inheritance) to the heavenly future and the afterlife. The concept of sin and retribution that awaits every sinner in the life after death is foreign for the pagan Scandinavians. The orientation of the believers was towards today and not tomorrow, it was today that they expected the grace of gods (which is clearly seen in the sacrifices and their purpose, as documented on the Stenotoften stone). For a Christian, however, it is the future that is important, even at the cost of a modest earthly life.

The runic masters differ in their prayer formulas. Forgiveness and grace seem to be a strong motive in Gunnar's inscriptions:

**tiarfR uki urika uk uiki uk iukiR uk kiRialmR þiR bryþr aliR litu risa
stin þina iftiR suin bruþur sin saR uarþ tuþr a iut(l)ati on skulti
fara til iklanþs kuþ ialbi (o)ns at uk salu uk kus muþiR betr þan an karþi ti**

Djärv and Orökja and Vige and Jager and Gerhjälrm,
all these brothers let raise this stone after Sven, brother their.

He was killed on Jylland. He should travel to England.

God and God's mother may help his spirit and soul
better than he deserved.

(U 539)

The notion of grace being larger than sins, and necessarily so for the salvation, is here further strengthened with an appeal not only to God but also to Mary. A very clear division into body and soul is also given in this short text, where it is only the spirit that lingers on after the physical death.

An unsigned inscription (possibly by Livsten, S.B.F. Jansson 1984) further develops the notion of the Christian afterlife, again with the stress on the necessity of grace.

akyti lit rita st n þino yfti tumoistr lati kumo ot tumo i lus yk baratisi yk i þon em besta kristnum

Agne let raise this stone after (for) Tumme (...). Christ may let Tummes soul come into light and paradise and the best world for Christians.
(U 719)

Naturally, a claim that the earthly struggles should be oriented towards afterlife needed some support in the glorius pictures of what that afterlife would be. A new term is imported for the occasion, *paradise*, which underlines the fact that nothing like it has ever been known before. But this best world has its limitations, it is only best for Christian, others have no place in it.

The old gods are no longer appealed to, their place has been taken by one God, the Lord.

klintr auk blikr ristur stin þinsi iftiR kunu(i)þ faður sin han foR bort miþ (i)kuari kuþ trutin hialbi ont ra kristina þuriR troni risti

Klettr and Bleikr raised stone this after Gunnvið, father theirs. He went away with Ingvari. God the lord may help spirit (of) all Christians. Þórir Trani carved.
(U 1143)

Although God is much appealed to, the one even more often addressed is Jesus Christ, who is sometimes described as ‘the holy Christ’.

ketilfas let reisa tsein eftiR bryniulf faður sin guþan hialmbi in heilhi kristr hanssal

Ketilfastr let raise stone after Brynjulf, father his good. May help the holy Christ his soul.
(Sö 125)

However, the concept of one God only is a new notion and the politeistic void should be filled somehow. Alongside Jesus (and God) the Virgin Mary may be appealed to for help and mercy.

-mekr lakþi stin þ(a)nsi RftiR stinbiurn s... .. halbi ut hans auk su hlka sata maria

[He]mingr layed stone this after Steinbjörn, s[on ... God] may help spirit his and the holy Saint Mary.
(Vg 105)

Another popular protector of the souls is St. Michael.

estriþ let reisa s(t)ein þensa eftiR iuar bota sin auk ikuar auk ikifastr eftiR faður sin mihel kati at hans

Ástríðr let raise stone this after Jóar/Ívar, husband hers, and Ingvarr and Ingifastr after father their. Mikael may protect spirit his.
(U 478)

eskil sulka sun let res(a) sten þena eft sialfan sik (..)
kristr hialbi siol hans aok santa migael
 Eskil Sulke's son let raise stone this after self his.
 Christ may help soul his and saint Michael
 (DR 212)

There were apparently times where extra protection was necessary and (just like in DR 212 above) more than one protector was appealed to, as in the following example, where the author seems to be making sure everybody is on his side.

broþir auk eimotr þeir litu reisa stein þana eftir sikmut faþur sin kristr hialbi sialu hans auk sata mikel auk sata maria
 Bróðir and Eimund they let raise stone this after Sigmund, father their. Christ may help soul his and saint Michael and saint Mary.
 (DR 398)

As the inscriptions became more numerous, the formulas were so familiar that a certain amount of ellipsis was not uncommon, as in the following text, which is short to the point of being pithy.

forkuþr auk fuluki litu rista runa iftir hiluka faþur isin kristr hialbin irinfastr risti
 Forkunnr and Fullugi let carve runes after Illuga, father theirs. Christ may help. Erinfastr carved.
 (U 41)

There is, however, also an opposite trend, where the prayers become more lengthy and ornamental.

ehr ligr brutte a ihmastatum ok kiløh biþhum uara batr noster þeras hal til ro ok til naþa ok allum kristn...m shallum
 Here lie Broddi in Heimistôð and Gillaug. Let us pray our Pater noster their souls to rest and for grace and for all Christian souls.
 (Ög 39)

It is striking that the notions of an afterlife crave new terms, earlier unknown in the Nordic languages, therefore borrowed from Latin (alongside with some other natural loans for the concepts relating to the religion like *biskop*). We have already seen the word *paradise*. The notion of individual salvation and individual soul seems so different from the original Nordic view as to import two new terms for it: *sial* and *ande*, both describing the inner being, the part of self that is to survive the demise of flesh.

själ (*sial*) – ags. *sáwol* (soul) got. *saiwala*, possibly connected with slav. *sila* (power) or Greek *aiólos* moving
ande: (breathe), lat. *anima* (breath)

The creation of new terms for the concept of the immortal part of a human being is not due to the fact that such concepts were wholly foreign to the Germanic peoples before their christianisation. Rather, the correspondence between them and the christian view of soul was rather weak. The terms they had at their disposal were closer to the concept of 'mind' rather.

hugher (= mind) origin unknown, also used as 'memory'
fylgia, impression, also used to denote a spiritual being following every human, unique to this human (~ guardian angel)

The terms *ande* and *sial*, denoting the same concept, are used interchangeably, sometimes however the writer makes use of both, reinforcing the solemnity of prayer.

auk staina raisa eftiR ofaih sun sin hialbi kristr ant hans auk selu hans
 and stone raised after Ófeig, son his. May help Christ spirit his and soul his.
 Sö 134

This more individualistic view of a person is a part of a wider conceptual change in the view of the society. The social order of the time was built on clans - a person was always seen as part of a family, the approach was collective. Any disruption of the order resulted in revenge – a picture well-known from the Icelandic sagas. The death or loss of a person was the matter of the collective, the clan, not just his individual tragedy.

Interestingly enough, revenge is also pledged on christian runic stones. However, there is a new factor in the revenge.

**roþvisl auk roþalf þau litu raisa staina eftir sy-... .. þria þina eftir roþfos han siku
 blakumen i utfaru kuþ hialbin sial roþfoaR kuþ suiki þa aR han suiu**
 Rodvisl and Rodälv they let raise the stones after their three sons. This stone after Rodfos.
 He was betrayed while he was travelling. May God help Rodfas soul. May God betray
 those who betrayed him.
 (G 134)

It is no longer up to one's family to right a wrong, but rather it is left in the hands of God who deals out justice.

Another novelty in the old collective thinking is the individual aspect of salvation. The prayers are for the souls of individuals, not the welfare of the collective (again, compare any of 'Christian' inscriptions with the Stentoftene one). On the other hand, a new collective is being formed, wider than the family, namely the Church, the Christian community. This can be seen in the prayers that apart from taking up the individual cases are also given for all the Christian people (not just the deceased and his or her family).

suarthofpi let reisa stein þentsa effiR onut sun sin kuþ hialbi at hans auk alum kristnum

Svarthövde (Black-headed) let raise stone this after Anund son his. God may help spirit his and all Christians
(U 457)

The new collective is perhaps more pronounced in still later inscriptions found in churches, as the one from Gotland given below:

gesus krist naþi haluia sil unggana husbraya anguasmis dotr hu(l)ls hier huer sum asir biþi patanostu firi haluia sial magistas (g)efs gerþi mik botuiþr smiþr lit gera mik (a)...m (i)... naþi us sihþaþ hans husbryia sum ... bi(þ)...

Jesus Christ may grace Hallvéar soul (..) Who sees it may pray paternoster for Hallvéar soul. (...)
(G 115)

In it, the passer-by is encouraged to give prayers for the soul of the deceased, an assumption is made that whoever passes the inscriptions shares the new faith. The Latin name of the Lord's prayer given is not unusual in the runic material, inscriptions entirely in Latin, e.g. of the *Ave Maria*, sometimes combined with the fuþark inscription, are abundant in the Middle Ages, many such have been found in Bergen (Norway).

Another declaration of the collectivity of the Christian faith is the following text (also from Gotland), inscribed on a headstone, which seems to directly address those who go by:

fargair lit mik gieara yfer sin faþur uk moþor botfrir ok ruþui ok auþuatr ok mik kristr maiu sun naþi alum sum hiear huilas uair uk aLum krisnum sialum

Fargeirr let me make over his father and mother Bótfreðr and Hróðvé, and Auðhvatr/Auðvaldr. Christ, Mary's son, may pity all who rest under (me) and all Christian souls.
(G 63)

The Christian runic inscriptions continue the tradition of raising monuments in memory of the deceased, although within the new religious order. They are short and formulaic texts, yet they convey a lot of the theology of their time, the new religion gaining hold in Scandinavia.

REFERENCES

References to inscriptions follow the convention adopted in Runsvenska databasen (Runic Swedish database), which is available from <http://www.uu.se>. The letters refer to the name of the province where the inscription was found (or, in the case of the now Swedish, but earlier Danish provinces, they just state DR, Denmark).

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