



***Ráði saR kunni*: REMARKS ON THE ROLE OF RUNICITY**

***Ráði saR kunni*: OBSERVACIONES SOBRE EL PAPEL DE LA RUNICIDAD**

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Abstract: Runic inscriptions have often been interpreted both from the internal information they provide or from the intention of the one that produced it. In the present article, the approach would be by reconstructing the stage of runicity, and the role that interpreters of runes provided for a community given the presence of runic inscriptions. The focus will be set on the most public displays of runicity as an interaction that demands a reader and interpreter that translates the runic information from its literary reality, to a population that is imbued in an oral culture.

Keywords: Runes, Poetry, Literacy, Oral Culture.

Resumen: Las Inscripciones rúnicas han sido interpretadas usualmente desde dos posiciones: la información que nos proveen o desde la intencionalidad de aquel que produce la inscripción. En el presente artículo, la aproximación será basada en reconstruir el estadio de la runicidad y el papel que los intérpretes de runas proveían para una comunidad, habida cuenta de la presencia de inscripciones rúnicas. El punto focal será establecido en las demostraciones más públicas de runicidad como una interacción que demanda un lector e intérprete que traduzca la información rúnica desde su realidad literaria, a una población que está inmersa en una cultura oral.

Palabras Clave: Runas, Poesía, Alfabetismo, Cultura Oral.

Introduction

Sö 213 in Nybble, Sweden, is a runestone dated to c. 1050–1080 based both on its artistic and linguistic features. The stone celebrates a husband and father that lived in Kili near Mälaren, and ends with what seems to be a challenge: *R†Þ|:†††:†††|: rap̃i : saR : kuni : ráði saR kunni* “interpret whoever is able.” The final statement in a way, begs the question of what was the

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role of people that were literate on runes in Viking Age Scandinavia. This sort of literacy has been called runicity (Wicker and Williams, 2012, p. 183).

The challenge presented by Sö 213 is not exclusive to it, and hints at the role that runic literate people (runicate) played in society. The fact that Scandinavian society was an oral culture means that knowledge and interpretation was not stored nor produced in textual devices, but in oral environments, rituals, actions, and ceremonies (Stock, 1983, p. 14–15, 528–531), but it was also an oral society that had a tradition of storing information on visual devices, that required cultured individuals that could approach the intricacies of such devices in order to make sense of them.



Fig 1. Sö 213: The Nybble stone in Nybble, Södermannland, Sweden, c. 1050–1080. Photo taken from <https://www.arild-hauge.com/raa-se/Soe-213-Nybble-gaard.htm> the 04-10-2021.

Thus, the relation between runes and being cultured was produced from a corpus of oral, ritual, and ceremonial elements. Poetry encompasses the dimensions of oral culture already established while it functions as both a highly elaborated intellectual production, and



as a powerful mnemotechnic device. The power of poetry as a mnemotechnic support for knowledge production has been known in most societies and, as Peter Watson mentions in his discussion of ninth century Islamic education, before the introduction of paper, memory was the principal tool of learning and memorization, and people were able to achieve incredible mnemotechnic feats (Watson, 2013, p. 436). Ludo Rocher investigates why Indians keep on memorizing ancient laws, poems and stories in an oral tradition, and highlights that for Indian oral culture, the recognition of the lexicographical, metrical, and thematic is linked and stored through sound, being in many cases taught solely phonetically (Rocher, 1994, p. 9-18). It has also been recognized that in Scandinavian Society the vocabulary of both poetry and runic inscriptions has a profound relation, and Judith Jesch has written about the naval vocabulary and its presence in both Skaldic poetry and runic inscriptions, and highlights the habits of commemoration that are manifested mutually in runestones and poetry in late Viking Age Scandinavia (Jesch, 2001, p. 1-6).

Now that it is established that the relation between runicity and being cultured was through both rituals such as the institution of runestones honouring the deceased, and poetic forms, two important questions, that have already been tangentially mentioned, arise: is it possible to maintain a corpus of stable knowledge through an oral culture? And, what set of circumstances are necessary for individuals to keep circulating certain information from generation to generation? The questions are complex since we not only have oral mnemotechnics as poetry, but the same runes and other visual aids that will be discussed further later, that create a mnemotechnic network that supports the intellectual corpus internalized by cultured people. Some scholars seem dubious of the possibility that stories, poems or historical information could be remembered in a significant way on an oral culture, and a simplification between those that reject the possibility of oral tradition being faithful for three hundred years, and the naïve faith placed in it by others, still casts a shadow over the debate (Sigurðsson, 2008, p. 19-21).

In order to answer the first question, we must analyze, which circumstances have to arise in order to keep oral tradition and its information relevant enough through long periods of time. As Jan Assmann reminds us “The system of communication therefore has to develop



an external area where communications and information – of cultural importance – can be processed through forms of coding, storage and retrieval.” (Assmann, 2011, p. 7–8) showing us how information central to a culture can only survive by being implemented and distributed beyond its textual narrative, and that its reiteration in the way of action and reenactment is the ultimate reality where the information communicated, actually exists. The actualization of information in the way of everyday reenactment can have many expressions (research, ethical action, artistic, etc.) but always implies an interplay with an axiological order that guides behaviour and dictates what is valued and what is not. So the axiological scheme that maintains the information that circulates as valuable, must be relatively stable during the period of question, and at the same time, the information must be relevant and meaningful during the same period, so that innovations and the influx of external influences reinforces the meaning of the information and does not challenge it in such a way that it renders the information meaningless nor transgressive to the new order.

The first question then becomes answerable. If the axiology that assesses that certain information is still relevant, then the problem of divulging information only needs a set of individuals that are cultured in such a way that they can keep the information circulating, create, interpret and teach it to uncultured people and new generations. Liestøl mentions the everyday use of runes since the early Viking Age and says:

Their use in memorial inscriptions and the like is secondary – first and foremost they were employed in practical, everyday life. Indeed this should be self-evident. I find it difficult to conceive of someone learning to write simply in order to carve tomb-stones, but even if there were such people, their work would be in vain – unless others were prepared to learn to read, simply in order to decipher those same tomb-stone inscriptions! [...] Finally, the earliest runic stones of the Viking Age have a form clearly inspired by the faceted wooden stick, the *rúnakefli*, which must have been their model. [...] I think we are bound to conclude that the majority of Viking Age Scandinavians – at least those of any standing, and those intent on making their way in life – were able to read and write. Their system of writing was in constant use, and the inscriptions extant today are merely the pitiful remains of the wealth of documents written by them. (Liestøl, 1969, p. 75–76).

As such, I will investigate the role of this people through a concept that Brian Stock explored for medieval Europa at the turn of the millennium, the concept of *Textual Communities*, that he explains thus: “What was essential to a textual community was not a written version of a text, although that was sometimes present, but an individual, who, having mastered it, then



utilized it for reforming a group's thought and action." (Stock, 1983, p. 90). I intend to demonstrate that without the role of these individuals that guide textual communities, the information of runes and poems is rendered useless.

Poetics as memory and interpretation

Völuspá starts with an acknowledgment of the hermeneutic role of memory in Viking Age and early Medieval Scandinavian culture:

[...] vildu at ek, Valföðr,
 vel fram telja
 forn spjöll fira,
 þau er fremst um man.
 2 Ek man jötna
 ár um borna,
 þá er forðum mik
 fædda höfðu;
 níu man ek heima,
 níu íviðjur,
 mjötvið mæran
 fyr mold neðan. (Kristjánsson and Ólason I, 2014, p. 292).²

The *völva* that speaks on the poem highlights the role of her knowledge and diction as an oral stock that is transmitted, and the poem unites the memory with cosmological, eschatological and mystical knowledge. As Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason say in their commentary about *Völuspá*, the information on cosmological and eschatological elements from the poem come from sources, "margra þekkra úr öðrum heimildum en annarra ekki; einhverjir þættir í heimsmýnd og heimssögu kvæðsins kunna að vera hugsmíð skáldsins sjálfs." (Kristjánsson and Ólason I, 2014, p. 98-99).³

² "You want me Slain-father, / that well reckon forth/ old tales of men, / those which furthest back I can remember./ I remember giants/ early born,/ those who had formerly/ brought me up;/ nine realms I remember,/ nine between branches,/ famous measure-wood/ beneath ground." My translation unless otherwise indicated. All translation will be given in footnotes, except for runic inscriptions that will be kept on the text along the normalization.

³ "many known from other sources but others not; some aspects of the cosmological vision and cosmological history of the poem may be the poet's own construction." I would argue as well, that every interpretation and reproduction create elements that are always the construction of the one that creates a narrative.



But other elements also stress the didactical role of the poem, as can be exemplified by “Ask veit ek standa [...] stendr æ yfir grœnn/ Urðarbrunni.” in reference to Yggdrasil; “Veit hon Heimdalar/ hljóð um folgit” (Kristjánsson and Ólason I, 2014, p. 295, 297)⁴ and a similar allusion to Óðinn’s eye that associates the role of the völvu as one disclosing both ancient lore and future events, and the poem’s intention of teaching the eschatological dimension of Old Norse religion. The poetic authority of the völvu secures her as the one able to teach Óðinn and the audience and she stresses her role saying “Vituð ér enn- eða hvat?” and presenting herself as the one that reveals well-known mythological events, as in “Ek sá Baldrí” (Kristjánsson and Ólason I, 2014, p. 298–299).⁵ This poetic diction not only reinforces the gnomic knowledge of the poem’s didactic intention, but also enumerates elements – “nú man ek heima/ nú íviðjur” – that help to create an hermeneutical network, allowing the exegesis and the learning of the poem by connecting the allusions to other poems and known events.

A similar set of mnemotechnic devices is displayed on the *NRP*⁶ dated close to the 13th century although preserved only through late manuscripts (Szöke, 2018, p. 6), and on the *IRP*. Clearly the didactic and mnemotechnic aspects of the stanzas are the main function of the rune poems, but the poetic structure of alliterative verse is just an aspect of the tools that the poems use to preserve the structure, name and order of the *fupark*; the names of the *ættir* and the runes is preserved, and the numeric aspect of the *fupark* is highlighted not only by its arrangement on the stanzas and inscriptions, but by the presence of ciphered runes even as far back as Rök stone. Finally, the use of *kenningar* relates deeply the act of deciphering a stanza and an inscription (both named *ráða* in Old Norse). A good example is the first stanza of *NRP*: “Fé vældr frænda róge;/ fœðesk ulfr í skóge.” (Dickins, 1915, p. 23)⁷ that reveals the meaning of the rune \mathfrak{F} presented in a verse which simultaneously provides well known facts and common sense, and a poetical tool that allows anyone who knows the couplet to recall the rune, its phonetic sound and its meaning. Compared with the *IRP* the *NRP* is simple, the structure of

⁴ “An ash-tree I know to stand... evergreen stands over/ Urðr’s well.” “She knows about Heimdallr’s/ concealed hearing”.

⁵ “you all know already- or what?” “I saw about Baldr”.

⁶ The Norwegian Rune Poem, the Icelandic Rune Poem and the First Grammatical Treatise will be quoted using only the standard acronyms: *NRP*, *IRP* and *1GT*.

⁷ “Money causes strife of kinsmen;/ wolf feeds in the forest.”



the *IRP* consisting of “three groups of periphrases or kennings defining, or alluding to, the rune-name” (Page, 1999, p. 1). The kenningar that define the rune are an important feature of the *IRP*. Let us examine it further: the stanza starts with the rune thus “[fé] er frænðar rog ok flæðar viti ok g[ra]fseids gata/ Aurum fy<l>ker” (Page, 1999, p. 5).⁸ the name of the rune fé, is not given in the text, rather it is explained by a doublet of kenningar – as a beacon in water and as the bed of the dragons – just after the thematic description of riches as a source of fights in families shared with the *NRP*, it ends with the Latin translation and a heiti for king that starts with the phoneme as both the kenningar and the thematic description of riches. The *NRP* just highlights the phonemic meaning through the word *føðask*.

As R.I. Page stresses on his study about the different manuscripts on which the *IRP* is preserved “indeed there was no ‘definitive text’ of this ‘rune-poem’ material.” (Page, 1999, p. 18). Nevertheless, the use of poetry goes beyond this iconographic and phonemic relation with runes. Poems such as *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál* in the mythological poems, and *Fáfnismál* among the heroic lays, explain the universe in gnomic way, while teaching important aspects of the cultural, political and ethical life as can be exemplified in each accordingly:

18., Vígríðr heitir vøllr
er finnask vígi at
Surtr ok in svásu goð;
hundrað rasta
hann er á hverjan veg,
sá er þeim vøllr vitaðr.” (Kristjánsson and Ólason I, 2014, p. 359).⁹

This kind of gnomic knowledge is evident in *Grímnismál*:

20. Huginn ok Muninn
fljúga hverjan dag
jormungrund yfir;
óumk ek of Hugin
at hann aptr né komit,
þó sjámk meirr um Muninn.” (Kristjánsson and Ólason I, 2014, p. 372).¹⁰

⁸ “Treasure is quarrel to a kinsman and flood’s fire and grave-fish’s path/ gold chief.”

⁹ “Vígríðr is called the field/ where meet to battle/ Surtr and the trustful gods;/ five-hundred miles/ it is on each side,/ that field is to them marked.”

¹⁰ “Huginn and Muninn/ fly every day/ over the enormous-land;/ I fear for Huginn/ that he does not return,/ though watch more for Muninn.”



While *Fáfnismál*:

13., „Sundrbornar mjök
hygg ek at nornir sé,
eigut þær ætt saman;
sumar eru áskunngar,
sumar álfkunngar,
sumar dætr Dvalins.“

[...]

30., „Hugr er betri
en sé hjørs megin,
hvars vreiðir skulu vega,
þvíat hvatan mann
ek sé harðliga vega

með slævu sverði sigr. (Kristjánsson and Ólason II, 2014, p. 305, 309).¹¹

Apart from the immediate ethical or mythological meaning, the poems contain elements that inform about vocabulary and expressions. The kenning in *IRP flæðar viti* explains gold as the fire of the flood, an expression that links gold to the current of rivers as well as mythological elements. But poems such as *Alvíssmál* inform the public about vocabulary; after Þórr asks *Alvíss* for the names of the sun, the dwarf answers: “*Sól* heitir með mönnum/ en sunna með goðum” (Kristjánsson and Ólason I, 2014, p. 440)¹² and continues the description of terms, with that and other subjects. This is similar to something Ludo Rocher found in India:

The vocabulary of Sanskrit is extremely rich, and that the great Sanskrit poets love to use that vocabulary to the fullest possible extent, introducing words which one would not normally encounter in less elevated Sanskrit texts, or using words with some of their rather unusual meanings. I remember a day in India when I was puzzled by one word in a complicated stanza. I took the sentence to my pandit. He was silent for a while, but, all of a sudden, he recited a verse in which the problematic word not only occurred but which also provided the meaning we were looking for. (Rocher, 1994, p. 15–16).

The poetics throughout the Viking Age and early Scandinavian Middle Ages, provided a powerful lexicon that allowed the runic literate people to provide their community and themselves with graphemic tools (*IRP and NRP*), mythological, and gnomic information, as well as a set of definitions that allow to disclose the meaning of words, traditions and ethical

¹¹ “13. Very different/ I think the Norns to be,/ they do not own the same kin;/ some are æsir-kin,/ some elven-kin,/ some daughters of Dvalinn... 30. Courage is better/ than a powerful blade,/ where wrathful men should fight,/ because a brave man/ I see fighting strongly/ with a blunt sword to victory.”

¹² “Sol is called among men/ but sun among gods”



guidelines, and as it is illustrated in the couplets quoted by the *1GT*, also phonetic understanding: “Rętt kann ręði flita/ręfis heRR or verri.” (Benediktsson, 1972, p. 222).¹³ In that regard the early medieval testimony of Ari’s *Íslendingabók* is relevant, where Ari introduces his oral sources as conveyed by well-regarded authorities, including law-speaker Ulfheðinn Gunnarssonr (Ari Þorgilsson, 1986, p. 4, 12), and his use of the well-known *dróttkvętt* couplet that enhances the authority of poetry “vil ek eigi goð geyja;/ grey þykki mér Freyja.” (Ari Þorgilsson, 1986, p. 15).¹⁴

And we must not forget that Snorri Sturluson portrays the ancient divinities, and specially Óðinn, in the following manner in *Heimskringla*: “Męlti hann allt hendingum, svá sem nú er þat kveðit, er skáldskapr heitir.” (Snorri Sturluson, 1941, p. 17.).¹⁵

Visual aspects of being cultured

On the 21st of April of 2021 Frederikssund Museum published, that a silver button was found in 2019 at Selsø in Hornsherred, Denmark, that seems to depict the Norse god Týr as his arm is bitten by Fenrir (Sjøbeck, 2021, p. 1). The importance of such imagery on an oral society is hard to overestimate. Viking Age art trends suggest similitudes with the oral tradition and are reflected in runestone styles. The find in Selsø draws attention to the long oral traditions in Scandinavia. Scholars such as Sue Brunning think there is a relation between the intricate patterns of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian Art, and poetry (Brunning, 2015, p. 53–55), and the riddle-like patterns reiterate the taste for riddles in poetry and speech, that distorts and defamiliarizes both the intricate patterns of ornate arts, and of poetry (Vésteinn Ólason, 2006, p. 29).

Like most societies, the plastic arts reflect aspects of the greater culture, and the Ramsund stone is an interesting evidence of the complex relation between image on runestones, the text, and the role that cultured individuals must display in reading the narrative images that relate events of the life of Sigurðr, such as the killing of the dragon and Regin (Roesdahl, 1998, p. 171). The relation between the inscription and the imagery displayed

¹³ “The chief’s men can pull/ straight oars out of the sea”. (Hreinn Benediktsson, 1972, p. 223)

¹⁴ “I don’t want to scoff at the gods;/ seems to me a bitch Freyja.”

¹⁵ “He spoke everything rhyming, as it is now composed, which is called poetry.”



is tenuous, since the inscription commemorates the building of a bridge for the soul of Holmgeirr, father of Sigrøðr. The inscription is then Christian in spirit, and specific about the individual that is commemorated. But the imagery portrays central elements of the life of Sigurðr that seem completely unrelated to the inscription, and its Christian ethos. Nevertheless, it has been proposed that the name Sigrøðr suggested a simile to the story of Sigurðr, while making the boulder of rock on which it is inscribed, more attractive (Sawyer, 2000, p. 113–126).

This would be a common display of the ways that the cultured people on Viking Age Scandinavia were able to connect different elements to convey the meaning and teach essential elements of a monument such as the Ramsund stone. The name Sigrøðr is etymologically a variant of Siegfried and thus the link between the two requires a deeply learned understanding of the legend and its manifold manifestations; if the testament from the fragment called *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* and *Frá dauða Sigurðar* in the Poetic Edda is evidence for earlier times, as I believe, Icelanders and other Scandinavians would have been aware of the different versions present in Germany in the late Viking Age, since the fragment says: “En þýðverskir menn segja svá at þeir dræpi hann úti í skógi.” (Kristjánsson and Ólason II, 2014, p. 328).¹⁶ This relation with the image of Sigurðr and the name Sigrøðr suggests that the commemoration was to be read following that knowledge to understand that the commemorated was an honourable man and a good Christian.

The relation between picture stones and fragments of poems, mythological descriptions and heroic tales is well known, as can be shown by the descriptions of Valhöll and the pictures on the Tjängvide stone, that portrait Sleipnir and probably Valhöll and Óðinn. The picture stone, dated between c. 700–900, contains an inscription with a *fubark* and an incomplete celebration for a brother. A person reading the inscription is faced directly by the spectacular set of religious images. A cultured person would have explained the imagery in a similar fashion to the instances of *Ragnarsdrápa* and *Húsdrápa*. To disclose the way textual communities were addressed, it might be useful to discuss those two poems and *Haustlǫng* in

¹⁶ “But German men say that they killed him out in the forrest.”



short, since the poems address images, two about a different shield, and the other on the carvings or wood-paintings of an Icelandic house.

Ragnasdrápa is an ekphrasis on a painted shield that Bragi *inn gamli* Boddason composed addressing the present his patron gave him. According to Snorri Sturluson, “Bragi hiN gamli orti vm fall Særla ok Hamþiz idrapv þeiri, er hann orti vm Ragnar loðbrok”. (Snorri Sturluson, 1931, p. 134.)¹⁷ This means that the poem was composed between c. 850–870, given that the historical Ragnar loðbrók would have been active between those dates. (Clunies Ross, 2017, p. 26). The *drápa* describes the object through kenningar:

1. Vilið, Hrafnketill, heyra,
 hvé hreingróit steini
 Þrúðar skalk ok þengil
 Þjófs ilja blað leyfa? (Clunies Ross, 2017, p. 28–29).¹⁸

Here, the kenningar *blað ilja þjófs Þrúðar* can be disclosed by following Snorri that explains that “Skildir erv kallaþir ok kenndir við herskip sol eþa tvngl e(ða) laf [...] skioldr er [...] kent til fota Hrvngnís, er hann stoð askialdi.” (Snorri Sturluson, 1931, p. 134.)¹⁹ Here we see the two elements that conform the kenningar come together in Snorri’s explanation. Furthermore, elements like *hreingróit steini* create an image of the object that plays with the idea of the jötunn it names as grown from stone despite the fact that here *steinn* means dye.

Ragnasdrápa continues with the description of the images painted on the shield, relating the death of Jormunrekkr by Hamðir and Sørli just before the brothers were stoned by Jormunrekkr’s lot; the myth of the Hjaðningavíg; and possibly Þórr’s fishing expedition against Jormungandr as well as Gefjun’s plowing. Bragi relates this story while stressing elements of the painting and both teaching and elaborating on the subjects painted on the shield. (Clunies Ross, 2017, p. 31–56). It is of greater interest to return to the first stanza, where Bragi asks Hrafnketill if he wants to hear how the poet prizes the gift given by Ragnar. The

¹⁷ “Bragi the old composed about the fall of Sørli and Hamðir in that *drápa*, which he composed over Ragnar loðbrók”

¹⁸ “Do you wish, Hrafnketill, to hear how I shall praise {the leaf of the footsoles {of the thief of Þrúðr <goddess>}} [= Hrungrnir > SHIELD], bright-planted with colour, and the prince?” (Clunies Ross, 2017, p.28–29)

¹⁹ “Shields are called or described as warship’s sun or moon or leaf... a shield is... described by the feet of Hrungrnir, for he stood on a shield.”



skald is clearly deciphering the images and explaining them to an audience. This practice is related to the exercise of relating stories in the halls as entertainment, but also as education. *Íslendinga þáttur sögufróða* presents us with an Icelander that entertains the men of King Haraldr hárdráði by telling them stories. On Yule, at the urging of the king, the Icelander relates the king's voyages while in exile to Miklagarðr and back to Norway; at the end of the tale, the king is pleased with the story and confirms its authenticity after asking the Icelander his sources, which he provides. (Smiley, 2000, p. 723–724). As Lönnroth has pointed out, this kind of performances belong to the chieftain class and were conveyed in the context of mead halls (Lönnroth, 1971, p. 5).

Þjóðólfr ór Hvini presents in *Haustlǫng* a shield received from Þorleifr inn spaki. He relates the kidnapping of Iðunn and Þórr's fight against Hrungnir in a similar fashion as Bragi in *Ragnarsdrápa*:

20. áðr ór hneigihliðum
hárs ǫl-Gefjun sára
reiði-Týs it rauða
ryðs hœlibǫl gœli.
Gǫrta lítk á Geitis
garði þær of farðir.
Baugr þák bifum fáða
bifkleif at Þorleifi. (Clunies Ross, 2017, p. 431–461).²⁰

And Úlfr Uggason describes the wood carvings on Hjarðarholt illustrating a quarrel between Heimdallr and Loki, Þórr's fishing expedition and Baldr's cremation:

6. Fullǫflugr lét fellir
fjall-Gauts hnefa skjalla
ramt mein vas þat reyni
reyrar leggs við eyra.
Viðgymnir laust Vimrar
vaðs af frõnum naðri
hlusta grunn við hrõnnum.

²⁰ "until the ale-Gefjun <goddess> [WOMAN = Gróa] could enchant the red boasting destruction of rust [WHETSTONE] from the inclined slopes of the hair [HEAD] of the bearing-Týr <god> of wounds [= Þórr]. I see clearly these happenings [depicted] on the fence of Geitir <sea-king> [SHIELD]. I received the quivering cliff of the shield-boss [SHIELD], decorated with moving stories, from Þorleifr." (Clunies Ross, 2017, p. 461)



Hlaut innan svá minnum. (Marold, 2017, p. 402–424).²¹

The fact that the poets explain the meaning of the images through poetry, is not only a laudatory device, but as the sagas and the treatises show, the quoting or composition of stanzas was considered the suitable way of recovering historical, legendary or mythological truth, and of conveying wisdom.

The similarities between the intricate patterns of Scandinavian plastic arts during the Viking Age with the riddle-like nature of story-telling and poetry, are thus culturally important, and both present themselves in the runestones, where the runes are symbols that are hard to be interpreted and necessitated a mediator between the artifact and the community to be fully understood. In many Viking Age inscriptions, the inscription itself is bound in a serpent or dragon such as it is the case of Ramsund already mentioned, and Åsunda stone (Gs 9), Ockelbo stone (Gs 19), Gök stone (Sö 327), Drävle (U 1163) are runic stones that also incorporate narratives concerning Sigurðr and Fáfnir (Symons, 2015, p. 87–89).

Without cultured people, these runestones would have been void of meaning. As Brian Stock comments:

No less far-reaching than in literature were the effects of literacy on medieval art and architecture, [...] as noted, oral and written traditions made different demands on the human senses. The one emphasized the ear, the other, the eye. [...] As in literature, the Middle Ages knew two interdependent traditions. Classical representational art was closely linked to the written text. Northerly art was more primitive and abstract. Were these the artistic equivalents of oral lays and epics? The stylistic connections are difficult to prove: yet, it is suggested that the rich, “interlaced” ornamentation of the brooches, pins, belt-clasps, drinking horns, and sword-hilts are artifacts of a “heroic” society; [...] the elaborately decorated swords of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse poetry effectively recapturing the sense of awe accompanying the discovery of metal-working. [...] the interwoven text and decoration achieved symbolic status. (Stock, 1983, p. 81).

Moreover, the relation between the interlaced design of the brooches, pins and swords, as in the button found in Hornsherred Denmark, certainly relates a scene that could only be

²¹ “The most powerful killer of the mountain-Gautr <man of the Gautar> [GIANT > = Þórr] let his fist slam against the ear of the tester of the bone of the reed [STONE > GIANT]; that was a mighty injury. The Víðgymnir <giant> of the ford of Vimur <river> [= Þórr] struck the ground of the ears [HEAD] off the gleaming serpent near the waves. Thus [the hall] received [decoration] inside with memorable pictures.” (Marold, 2017, p. 415.)



conveyed orally and ritualistically. As the presence of the myths and legends discussed above in the ekphrasis and runestones, the oral dimension of the endeavour becomes evident: in the structure of a society that functions primarily through orality, if one does not know the meaning of a representation, one is bound to ask another person that has a corpus internalized for the answer, and that person will have a lexicon of stories, poems, images, metaphors, and similes by which to teach the meaning and the semantic fields that each occupy. Without this, the formation of an *imago mundi* would be impossible, and social, cultural, ethical, religious, and intellectual life would be meaningless since this *imago mundi* is “the sum of all our concepts of the physical and spiritual world which allows us to come to terms with all the eternal human questions.” (Simek, 2009, p. 183).

Finally, the runic literate people in Viking Age Scandinavia created, through an oral culture and with a store of abilities of interpretation, what Brian Stock termed as *textual communities*. Stock maintains that “Relationship between the individual and the family, the group, or the wider community are all influenced by the degree to which society acknowledges written principles” (Stock, 1983, p. 88).

Íþróttir and dissemination

King Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson of Norway and Saint Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson jarl of Orkney have poems where they boast about their skills. Although Kali Kolsson lived chronologically outside the Viking Age, in this regard his poetry reflects late Viking Age attitudes similar to those the king of Norway proclaims. King Haraldr harðráði boast of his skills thus through a *lausavísa*:

Íþróttir kannk átta:
 Yggs fetk líð at smíða;
 fœrr emk hvasst á hesti;
 hefk sund numit stundum.
 Skríða kannk á skíðum;
 skýtk ok ræk, svát nýtir;
 hvártveggja kannk hyggja



harpslött ok bragþöttu. (Gade, 2009, p. 39–40).²²

Here we find a mixture of intellectual and physical feats that show how dexterous and cultured King Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson was. In comparison, the jarl of Orkney gives a much more balanced set of skills that can perhaps be best described with the portrayal in *Orkneyinga saga* “atgörvimaðr meiri en velflestir menn aðrir.” (Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1965, p. 130).²³ Jarl Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson brags in the following fashion:

Tafl emk þorr at efla;
 íþróttir kannk níu;
 týnik trauðla rúnum;
 tíðs mér bók ok smíðir.
 Skríða kannk á skíðum;
 skýtk ok ræk, svát nýtir;
 hvárteggja kannk hyggja:
 harpslött ok bragþöttu. (Jesch, 2017, p. 576–577).²⁴

The jarl of Orkney makes no humble claims nor mistake about the greatness of his achievements despite his observance of the Christian faith that he also versifies “Hvat munk yðr eða ǫðrum/ ulfbrynnǫndum kynna/ -heiðs lofak hilmi blíðan/ háranns- nema goð sannan?” (Jesch, 2017, p. 342).²⁵ But in these stanzas, Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson boast mostly about his intellectual abilities since the first four stanzas are exclusively attributed to him, while the last four are identical to the last four by Haraldr harðráði; of course, this can be explained by the remark of Pierre Riché about early Germanic education: “Even before the invasions, Romans, after the example of the Barbarians, assigned greater importance than had previous generations to the military education of their sons.” (Riché, 1976, p. 76–77). In the first half of his *lausavísa*, the jarl shows his intellectual sharpness by drawing attention to his swift thinking while playing either *hnefatafl* or chess, the last one a possibility since the Lewis Chess pieces are roughly contemporary with the jarl (Jesch, 2017, p. 576); then he mentions his

²² “I have eight accomplishments: I forge {Yggr’s <= Óðinn’s> drink} [POETRY]; I am skilled at travelling swiftly on horseback; I have practised swimming on occasion. I can glide on skis; I shoot and row well enough; I can comprehend both harp-playing and poems” (Gade, 2009, p. 39–40)

²³ “a man full of accomplishments more than most other men.”

²⁴ “I am quick at playing board games; I have nine skills; I forget runes slowly; the book is a preoccupation with me and also craftsmanship. I am able to glide on skis; I shoot and I row so that it makes a difference; I am able to understand both: harp-playing and poems.” (Jesch, 2017, p. 576–577.)

²⁵ “What will I make known to you and other wolf-waterers [WARRIORS] except the true God? I praise the gracious ruler of the bright high hall [SKY/HEAVEN > = God].” (Jesch, 2017, p. 342)



ability to read runes and books, probably in Latin, and his delight for building. *Hnefatafl* is mentioned in *Völuspá*, stanzas 8: “Teflðu í túni” and 59 “Þar munu eptir/ undrsamligar/ gullnar tǫflur/ í grasi finnask,” (Kristjánsson and Ólason I, 2014, p. 293, 306).²⁶

The two poems give us a glimpse of what it meant to be a cultured person in the Viking Age, and the latter perseverance of the Scandinavian tradition even in Christian times can be explained by the tendency of Christianity to appropriate elements from other cultures, as well as for what Torfi Tulinius explains about medieval Icelanders: “they pursued the lore of their pre-Christian culture when other Christianized peoples were doing everything they could to forget or disguise theirs.” (Tulinius, 2002, p. 66). The fact that Haraldr harðráði does not mention runes in his repertoire might be due to the stanza being corrupted or incomplete (Gade, 2009, p. 39–40). It is indeed probable, that, as *Rígsþula* states, a chief was supposed to have a basis of runicity: “En Konr ungr/ kunni rúnar, [...] Hann við Ríg jarl/ rúnar deildi, [...] ok betr kunni;” (Kristjánsson and Ólason I, 2014, p. 456–457 stanzas 41 and 43).²⁷ And *Völsunga saga* presents Reginn when he was a foster father for Sigurðr providing this education: “Hann kenndi honum íþróttir, tafl ok rúnar ok tungur margar at mæla sem þá var títt konungasonum, ok marga hluti aðra.” (Finch, 1965, p. 23).²⁸ *Hnefatafl* and runes appear again together, which makes it even more striking that the king of Norway doesn’t mention it.

Nevertheless, Jarl Rǫngvaldr Kali Kolsson bring us also to the fundamental aspect of runicity in the Viking Age. As was said before, the rune carvers presented challenges to the reader that called forth runic literate people to interpret both for themselves and for other. The *1GT* tell us that “Skalld erv hofvndar allrar rynní ęða máálf greinar fem ímiðir [ímiðar] ęða lǫgmenn laga.” (Benediktsson, 1972, p. 224/226)²⁹ and as Judith Jesch points out, the word *skald* appears five times as a nickname of the rune carver or the sponsor, but none of these inscriptions is in verse, implying either a connection between poetry and rune-carving, or that

²⁶ 8 “Played chess in the field,” 59 “There they will after/ marvelous/ gold checkers/ in the grass find,”

²⁷ “But Konr the young/ knew runes, ... He against jarl Ríg/ runes contested, ... and knew better”

²⁸ “He taught him skills, checkers and runes and many languages to speak as was the custom to sons of kings, and many other things.”

²⁹ “The scalds are the authorities in all (matters touching the art of) writing or the distinction (made in) discourse, just as craftsmen (are) [in their craft] or lawyers in the laws.” (Hreinn Benediktsson, 1972, p. 225/227)



the word *skald* had a different semantic field in OEN, related to runes but not necessarily to poetry. (Jesch, 2001, p. 6 n2).

In a way, the enigma is hinted in two related sources that have much in common and at the same time are unrelated. The first is in a rune stick found in Trondheim, dated to 1175–1225 (Knirk, 1994, p. 419) that contains an inscription transliterated and normalized by James E. Knirk in the following fashion:

Sá skyli rúnar rísta,
er ráða(?) vel kunni;
þat verðr mǫrgum manni,
at ... (Knirk, 1994, p. 416).³⁰

Knirk supposes that the stick, on which runes were carved was discarded due to a misspelling at the beginning of line c that would normalize as *so*, instead of the intended *at*, keeping unfinished the remainder of the fourth stanza, that Knirk thinks should end “*at um myrkvan staf villisk*”. The stanza is related to a well-known *lausavísa* from *Egils Saga*:

Skalat maðr rúnar rísta,
nema ráða vel kunni,
þat verðr mǫrgum manni
es of myrkvan staf villisk.
Sák á telgðu talkni
Tíu launstafi ristna,
þat hefir lauka lindi
langs oftrega fengit. (Knirk, 1994, p. 412, 418).³¹

Here, the second half stanza relates exclusively to the situation in which Egill finds himself, having to heal a woman afflicted by a runic charm (Bjarni Einarsson, 2003, p. 136), but the first part is so general that can be an aphorism used through the late Viking Age until c. 1200, as Mikael Males says: “Strofens tvá halvör skiljer sig át i flera avseenden. Den första halvan är

³⁰ “He should carve runes/ who can understand(?) them well;/ it happens to many a man,/ that ... (?)” (Knirk, 1994, p. 416)

³¹ “One should not carve runes/ unless one can interpret them well;/ it happens to many a man,/ that he makes a mistake with a dark (rune-)stave./ I saw on the whittled piece of whalebone/ ten secret staves carved;/ that has given the linden of leeks (=woman)/ long-term grief.” (Knirk, 1994, p. 412, 418.)

allmängiltig, medan den andra halvan kopplar strofen till handlingen.” (Males, 2011, p. 127–129).³²

The verb *ráða* can mean read or interpret in these contexts, and implies an intellectual dominion of the subject, not just the ability to recognize the characters. As the stanza by Jarl Rongvaldr Kali Kolsson and the half stanza that was discussed above imply, the reading and carving of runes was considered a supreme skill that required sharpness of mind. The evidence of the intricacies of poetry and its different levels of complexity discussed on the paragraph about poetics, has a parallel on the different layers of obscurity that are brought to light in runic inscription. The cryptographic elements of Rök runestone (Ög 136), the use of kenningar, and the obscure language of the stone makes it obvious that one of intentions of the carver was to pose a challenge for possible readers. Bragi *inn gamli* Boddason and some of the Gotlandic picture stones are roughly contemporaneous with the Rök monument, which means the contents of the runestone belong to the same cultural background that produced and is present in the Eddic poems one can find in the *Codex Regius*. (Holmberg *et al*, 2020, p. 9–10).

The Rök monument is an interesting artifact for understanding the set of runic skills expected from the elite. As was highlighted above, runicity is not simply the skill to recognize the characters and their phonemes to produces meaningful words. Rök shows that an awareness of the different elements of runicity in Viking Age Scandinavia is fundamental. The cipher runes are just one of the manifestations of encrypted language present in the monument, and the presence of different orthographic features displays a similar approach to poems such as *Alvíssmál*, where the poem presents different concepts and words for ordinary objects; here, the different orthographic features require a person versed in many and complex runic dynamics. There are three different types of runic script: the short-twig runes and the long-branch runes compose the greater part of the inscription, while the rune carver uses the characters of the Elder Futhork for certain sections. The use of the Elder Futhork corresponds with the presence of cipher runes that can be classified as substitution cipher and numerical cipher, all divided in six passages constructed as memories. (Holmberg *et al*, 2020, p. 8, 17–18).

³² “The two halves of the stanza differ in several respects. The first half is universal, but the second half couples the stanza to the story.”



Fig 2. Ög 136: The b-side of Rök stone in Rök, Östergötland, Sweden, c. 800–850. Photo taken from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b1/R%C3%B6kstenen_1.JPG the 04-10-2021.

The fact that runicity presents these layers of depth and complexity implies, in a way, an interaction with the interpreter of the inscription and a dialectic between the carver and the reader. To exemplify early dialectic practices in the Viking Age, it is useful to remember the first stanza of *Ragnarsdrápa*, where Bragi inquires if Hrafnketill would like to hear his laudatory poem. As Margaret Clunies Ross discusses, the identity of this Hrafnketill is problematic, since normally, the opening stanza addresses the patron of the skald, or the audience in a general



manner, but the possibility that it was a contending skald, which would presuppose that Bragi and Hrafnketill are the same Brahi and Rakil that Saxo Grammaticus situates on the battle of Brávellir is compelling (Saxo, 2015, I, viii, p. 540–541 apud Clunies Ross, 2017, p. 28–29), or the messenger from Ragnarr loðbrók, that would bring us to the realm of memorization or runic inscriptions, shows the complex social situations possible in a court (Clunies Ross, 2017, p. 29).

Nevertheless, the second possibility is of real interest for an interpretation of the Rök monument, and for our task of unveiling the role of runic literate people through the Viking Age: Rök is not only approximately contemporary with Bragi Boddason, but Saint Angar is said to have brought back a message to the emperor Louis the Pious after his visit to Birka in 831, from the Swedish king. It is presumable that the message was written in runes, since Rimbert says: “servi Dei cum certo suae legationis experimento et cum litteris regia manu more ipsorum deformatis ad serenissimum reversi sunt augustum.” (Rimbert, 1884, p. 33)³³ and it is also the time when the *Abecedarium Nordmannicum* was compiled, probably to allow a certain degree of written communication from the Frankish court with Scandinavia. (Derolez, 1954, p. 78). Finally, on this respect, Liestøl speaks about early Viking Age wooden sticks or *rúnakefli*, including one with a metrical text in short-twig runes from eighth or ninth century, found in Staraja Ladoga and one from Hedeby that contains a *fupark*. Aslak Liestøl finally discusses the use of short-twig runes as a cursive variant of the normal runes and links the rise and spread of this spelling style to the merchant class, pinpointing that many of the inscription in short-twig style are present in ancient trading centers of the Viking Age. (Liestøl, 1969, p. 70–75).

An important remark when interpreting the cryptographic elements of the Rök monument is that “Runes were not solely nor even chiefly a monumental form of writing [...] first and foremost they were employed in practical, everyday life.” (Liestøl, 1969, p. 75) but Rök makes it harder for the average runic literate person to disclose its meaning. As Holmberg *et al* explain on their interpretation of this monument, the purpose that guided the making of the inscription was providing meaning to the death of a son in the social and spiritual context

³³ “When the servants of God [...] had attained the object of their mission they returned to the emperor and took with them letters written by the king himself in characters fashioned after the Swedish custom.” (Robinson, 1921, p. 49.)



of early Viking Age; they unveil this ritual foundation to the text, by relating its textuality to the content and structure of both early Eddic and Skaldic poems such *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Eiríksmál*, and highlighting the question-answer structure of the text, that requires a comprehension of the context. (Holmberg *et al*, 2020, p. 12). Of course, the interpretation that Holmberg *et al* provide corresponds neatly with what has been demonstrated about the role of runic literate people, since those individuals were able to conjure the fund of knowledge from their hearts to provide the community with an interpretation. The interpretation by Holmberg *et al* fits well with this analysis, because Rök has so many intriguing aspects, that required a great amount of knowledge and comprehension of conventions, so much that Derolez deems, “This, one of the most interesting and puzzling of all runic inscriptions, offers a regular catalogue of cryptic systems.” (Derolez, 1954, p. 143–144), which implies that, in a way, the runic inscription is a riddle not too different from those so common in Old Norse literature.

In many cases, and this seems important for the Rök monument as well, the inscription mentions someone that was probably well-known in the community or area, and thus, the one to interpret the inscription was expected to either know first-hand the identity of the commemorated people or be able to complete the information from the monument, with whatever information could be found in the vicinity. The Rök monument is an elite dispositive, that evidence the social, religious, and political changes that have structured Scandinavian culture after the Migration Period and the hardship that climate changes brought to Scandinavia between 536 and 810, as well as the extraordinary climatic events that appear around the turn of the ninth century AD. It is also of importance for our interpretation, that funerary rituals seem to involve the utterance of enigmatic questions that only a selected few knew the answer for. (Holmberg *et al*, 2020, p. 13–16). The structure of the runestone, presenting questions or riddles to the reader is not unlike other Scandinavian riddles (Holmberg *et al*, 2020, p. 19) which shows the ritualistic aspect of the inscription; these aspects might reflect the role of the *þulr* that, if we follow the example of the þyle *Ūnferð* that tests Beowulf’s courage and physical ability by asking: “Eart þū se Bēowulf, sē þe wið Breca



wunne / on sīdne sǣ, ymb sund flite,” (Klaeber *et al*, 2014, p. 14, 149–150)³⁴ intend to reveal the true nature of the one that is challenged, but that we can apply to the intellectual capacity rather than the physical one.

The ritual aspect of the stone is revealed through the presentation of six passages that contain nine questions, that are separated by the concept of (*minni*) memory:

[T]he concept of memory should not only be understood in its ordinary sense as a recollection of the past, something of which the people who read the inscription are reminded. Instead, these memories are ritual acts of social and religious significance relating to the past, present, and future, that together contribute to the maintenance and renewal of the world. The alteration between present and past tense throughout the Rök text should be seen in this light. It is also important to notice that the memories, if only viewed as text passages, are incomplete. They are completed only through the efforts of readers. Each passage is formed as a complex of speech acts. (Holmberg *et al*, 2020, p. 18–19).

This signifies that the disclosing of the literal meaning of the text, as any runologist knows too well, is barely scratching the surface of the river of meaning underneath the characters. It points to the extensive set of skills necessary for runic literate people to be able to adequately convey the meaning of the text to others, with the limitations and advantages of an oral culture: without dictionaries, or encyclopedias, but with the Rök monument, the cipher runes present a difficult challenge: “Some readers must have had to stop here, even if they belonged to those who knew how to read runes, and to the select few who knew all the answers so far.” (Holmberg *et al*, 2020, p. 29).

The presence, then, of a wide set of skills necessary for interpretation brings us to the difference between high and low culture in Viking Age Scandinavia, where the different levels of runicity are expanded, and the runic literate people are graded depending on the depth of their abilities. The extent of this abilities can seem vastly divergent. But the intellectual abilities are not completely unrelated to the ability to read runes, since the games such as chess or *hnefatafl* do not only require the ability to “read” the game, the rules, and the strategy of the opponent, but also, the game presents a “conversation” in which one has to be able to anticipate the meaning the other one is trying to pose, an ability that Skaldic poetry and

³⁴ “Are you the Beowulf who against Breca fought / in the broad sea competing over swimming.”

runicity also imply with the difficulties that the kenningar, the intricacies, and the cryptic elements present to the reader.

Runestones, runicity, and runic literate individuals

Historian Stefan Brink tries to understand how oral culture is evidenced in official verdicts, laws, rules and royal proclamations in Viking Age Scandinavia through the runic inscriptions and provincial laws, in his chapter *Verba Volant, Scripta Manent? Aspects of Early Scandinavian Oral Society* (Brink, 2005, p. 77-135). He starts from the tenet that just as archeologists can identify fossilized elements of the material culture that can help them to reconstruct life in a period in a culture, so textual research can find traces of orality. That is to say that the fossilization of the oral culture when it is written allows scholars to reconstruct elements of the oral discourse. However, it points to the period of transition between both cultural forms, and to achieve this reconstruction, Brink proposes a comparison between other oral societies that function as a lens through which we can read certain literary devices. Thus, Brink states that in order to make sense of certain runic inscriptions, context is needed to understand the situation of the runic utterings, and he illustrates his point with the Forsa rune ring, the Oklunda, and the Rök inscriptions, deducing from the last, that the inscription represents a form of fossilized existential utterance. I will return to some of his arguments through this section.

In a similar fashion, Joseph Harris has proposed that the complexity of Skaldic poetry could be explained due to the fact, that those who produced this kind of highly elaborated poetry, were runically literate individuals. He explains also that this influence of runic literacy can explain or inform other aspects of Scandinavian oral culture, such as the persistence of verses and stanzas, and the stories that brought the *Íslendingasögur* to existence (Harris, 2008, p. 319-347). An important element that Joseph Harris discusses, is the fact that Skaldic poetry has explicit authors, and defies the Lord and Parry paradigmatic conception that oral poetry is fundamentally formulaic and thus, subject to everlasting change; yet, Skaldic poetry seems to have both been usually readily composed by those poets, and at the same time, was complex enough to challenge the listeners, as he demonstrates with the story of Einarr Skúlason: the skald is challenged to compose an eight-line poem before a certain ship passes a headland,



and the skald proves capable; yet, the skald has on its turn challenged the audience of eight retainers, by demanding that each one remembers a line or to be rewarded for each forgotten line. The retainers forget every line. (Harris, 2008, p. 337) Harris then presents the hypothesis, that at the core of the particularities of Skaldic poetry, lies an important element of the literate mentality. (Harris, 2008, p. 332–339).

This argument is not only important but corresponds to other investigations that have shown that runestones are by no means the majority of Viking Age inscriptions, but rather the vast majority of those inscriptions found by runic literate people through the Viking Age were produced in perishable materials. (Meijer, 1997, p. 83–84). The erection of runestones on the side of roads has been used as evidence that many Viking Age Scandinavians possessed runicity enough to at least be able to read the characters inscribed in stone. As Jan Meijer says: “It is difficult to see [...] what the use of these texts would be if only a small number of people could read them.” (Meijer, 1997, p. 87) and it is difficult to disagree with him. Nevertheless, despite the growing number of runic literate individuals, the many aspects of runic and poetic intricacies have to be explained by the fact that the acquisition and distribution of the knowledge was the task of the intellectual elite. In the same manner, Meijer thinks that the phrase *ráð rúnaR*, “interpret/read the runes”, is a formula that invites to read the text, and can be also imagined as a pedantic invitation from the runic literates to the illiterates. (Meijer, 1997, p. 90). I think that evidence suggests that the runes and the intellectual links supported by them evidence an elitist dimension, and that those able to read runes in general adjudicated the role of administrating the knowledge for themselves, creating thus a difference between the low culture and the high culture. This status of the runic literate people was changing along the growing expansion of runicity among the Viking Age Scandinavians; this is evidenced by both the increase of inscriptions, that speaks to us about this increment in education about runes in the population, especially those that could easily find useful ways of dealing with them, such as the merchants, and also the increasing proliferation of cryptic or ciphered inscriptions evidences the distance between the popular use of runes, and the elitist use of runes.



The evidence for the elitism of the runic literate people can be evidenced by the Rök monument towards the beginning of the Viking Age, and with the runic inscriptions found in the Maeshowe grave-mound, near Kirkwall, capital of the Orkney Islands. There one can find inscriptions contemporaneous with saint Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson jarl of Orkney. One of the inscriptions hints directly to Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson:

𐌺𐌰𐌱𐌰𐌻𐌰𐌹𐌿𐌲𐌰𐌺𐌰𐌹𐌿𐌹𐌸𐌰𐌺𐌰𐌹𐌿𐌹𐌸𐌰𐌺𐌰𐌹𐌿𐌹𐌸𐌰𐌺𐌰𐌹𐌿𐌹𐌸𐌰𐌺𐌰𐌹𐌿𐌹𐌸

iorsalaminburtuhaukþ[æ]

Jórsalamenn brutu haug þenna

“Jorsalamenn (cruzaders) brooke into this mound” (Spurkland, 2005, p. 144).

But there is another inscription that shows the elitist nature of the runicity: **rist sa maþr.er.runstr er.fyrir uæstan haf**, *rist sá maðr er rýnstr er fyrir vestan haf*. “were carved by the man most skilled in runes west of the ocean.” (Spurkland, 2005, p. 178, 146), the runes are written under a row of ciphered runes based on a numerical system, once translated, the ciphered runes can be normalized thus: **þisarrunar**, *þessar rúnar* (Spurkland, 2005, p. 178) making the inscription complete thus: *Þessar rúnar reist sá maðr er rýnastr er fyrir vestan haf* “These runes were carved by the man most skilled in runes west of the ocean...” (Spurkland, 2005, p. 146). This inscription is similar to Fyrby stone (Sö 56) that states: **iak · uait : hastain : þa : hulmsttain : bryþr · mennr : rynasta : a : miþkarþi : setu : stain : auk : stafa : marga eftiR · fraystain · faþur · sin ;** *Iak væit Hastæin þa Holmstæin brøðr mænnr rynasta a Miðgarði, sattu stæin ok stafa marga æftiR Frøystæin, faður sinn.* “I know those, Hastæin and Holmstæin the most skilled in runes brothers in Miðgarðr, they set a stone and many staffs in memory of Frøystæin, their father.” (Samnordisk runtextdatabas, 2018)

When compared with inscriptions that are dated in between these two extremes: Rök and Maeshowe grave-mound, it is clear that the role of orality is essential in Viking Age inscriptions. In the Ågersta runestone (U 729), the inscription is written in a block of granite taller than two meters high, is carved in beautiful way in Urnes Style and contains a poetic stanza. The inscription goes like this:



· uifugsi · lit · raisa · stain · þiasn · iftiR · seref · faþur · sen · koþan · han · byki · agurstam · hier ·
mn · stanta · stan · mipli · bua · raþi · tekr · þaR · ryn si · runum · þim sum · bali · risti ·

Viðhugsi let ræisa stæin þennsa æftiR Særæif, faður sinn goðan. Han byggði i Agurstaðum.

Hiær mun standa stæinn miðli byia.

Raði drængR þaR rynn se

Runum þæim, sum Balli risti. (Jesch, 1998, p. 463).

“Viðhugsi had this stone raised in memory of SæræifR, his good father. He lived in Ågersta.

Here will stand a stone between farms.

The man good at runes may read

The runes carved by Balli.” (Jesch, 1998, p. 463).

Here, the important elements conjure oral tradition, as well as important utterances. The text speaks about the location and situation of the individual that is commemorated by the stone. It is clear that the stone stands close to the farms that probably belonged to SæræifR and now to his son Viðhugsi, but the challenge exalts the carved boulder as well while challenging the reader to translate its elements into oral vocabulary. This is true especially for the poetry found in the inscription, that require a person be able to differentiate the two elements of the prosimetrum. Then, the stone is inscribed in the bodies of two intertwined serpentine figures: “Thus the design has balance, though not symmetry, and is pleasing to look at. However, a consequence of this aesthetic arrangement is that the text becomes very hard to read.” (Jesch, 1998, p. 464). Of course, this brings the question again, of what is the purpose of having a hard to read monument, instead of an easy to read inscription, that everyone could easily understand. On one side, the monumentality of the stone, the beautiful serpentine design, and the conventions of commemoration would be enough for a great many people that were illiterate, and as *Hávamál* states: “sjaldan bautarsteinar / standa brautu nær, / nema reisi niðr at nið.” (Kristjánsson and Ólason I, 2014, p. 336).³⁵ On the other, the poem inscribed seems to convey an invitation for those that can read, to translate for others and explain the meaning of the inscription. It is not farfetched to imagine people gathering around these stones and

³⁵ “seldomly funeral-stones / stand near to the road/ unless a descendant rose it for an ancestor.”

having experts explaining the meaning, not only because we do it all the time, but because the narratives from Iceland tend to present us with individuals explaining or discussing lore elements between themselves, as was discussed with *Íslendinga þáttr sögufróða*, and a similar case can be made about the stanza composed in honour of Gunnarr at Hlíðarenda after his last battle “Um vörn hans orti Þorkell Elfararskáld í vísu þessi”. (Einar Sveinsson, 2010, p. 190).³⁶



Fig 3. U 729: Ågersta stone in Enköping, Sweden, c. 1050-1080. Photo taken from <https://kulturbilder.wordpress.com/2016/02/05/runstenar-uppland-u-729/> the 05-10-2021.

In the Ågersta inscription, it is evident, that runic literate individuals could convey to others the meaning of a text presented in the stone and translate it by recounting the information necessary for them to understand its social importance, by connecting the

³⁶ “About his defense composed Þorkell Elfararskáld in this rhyme”



statement with the family that owned the farms and the raised the boulder to commemorate SæræifR as a good father. As Stefan Brink reminds us:

In my childhood, on the farm *Brinks* in a small rural hamlet in the remote northern parts of Sweden, a sofa of wood stood close to the entrance to the kitchen, as was the rule in practically all farms in this part of Sweden. For everyday socializing these sofas were *axes mundi* in our society. Neighbours and relatives could just drop in and sit on the sofa, quietly visiting and participating in the work in the kitchen or socializing more actively. The common start of a conversation was to discuss neighbours and relatives, and how he/she and we were related. In these introductory, highly complex discussions — a kind of *íþrótt* in the Old Norse sense — family ties and far-distant relatives were discussed: ‘who was related to whom’ [...] The same obsession with declaring who is who and who is related to whom and where people come from we of course find in the Icelandic sagas, where the story is very often interrupted by a long and tedious digression about ancestors and relatives, every time a new person is introduced into the story. [...] This emphasis on family, relatives and geography must have been essential in early Scandinavian culture. We have a special genre, called *langfeðgatal*, made up of long enumerations of ancestors. This fixation had also a legal background, at least in Scandinavia. Normally, to be able to claim the land you were living on you had to be able to enumerate (normally) five generations of family ancestors living in the land. If you could, you were the legal owner of the land, it was your *óðal*. (Brink, 2005, p. 88–90).

Moreover, the act of reading in an oral culture is very different from the act of reading on a society that functions on the basis of literacy and has a visual aspect at its foundation that subjectifies the relationship between the individual and the object of knowledge “During the Middle Ages a text was read out loud [...] this constant declaring out loud of matters that happened [...] is something that is typical of an oral society.” (Brink, 2005, p. 90). This is an indispensable element for the development of what Brian Stock calls *Textual Communities* and the impact the texts have on such communities:

Texts, as noted, when introduced into a largely oral society, not only created a contrast between two different ways of looking at the world. They also raised the possibility that reality could be understood as a series of relationships, such as outer versus inner, independent object as opposed to reflecting subject, or abstract sets of rules in contrast to a coherent texture of facts and meanings. (Stock, 1983, p. 531).

This means that, although Scandinavian society, during the Viking Age, operated under the Aegis of an oral society, the use of runes, Skaldic poetry, the monopolization of a warring ethos, and the administration of justice and public speech, allowed the elite to



maintain control and order. Without these developments of the elite, the rules of society would have become superfluous and phenomena such as the local þings, the acclamation of kings, and the stipulation of laws, would have been rendered useless, and we can have a glimpse about that in *Íslendingabók*:

En þeir vǫru sóttir á þingi því es vas í Borgafirði í þeim stað, es síðan es kallat Þingnes. Þat vǫru þá lög, at vígsakar skyldi sækja á því þingi, es næst vas vettvangi. En þeir þorðusk þar, ok mátti þingit eigi hejask at lögum. Þar fell Þórolfr refr, bróðir Álfs í Dølum, ýr liði Þórðar gellis. En síðan fóru sakarnar til alþingis, ok þorðusk þeir þá enn. Þá fellu men ýr liði Odds, enda varð sekr hann Hænsa-Þórir ok drepinn síðan ok fleiri þeir es at brennunni vǫru. Þá talði Þórðr gellir tǫlu umb at lögbergi, hvé illa mǫnnum gegndi at fara í ókunn þing at sækja of víg eða harma sína, ok talði, hvat hǫnum varð fyrir, áðr hann mætti því máli til laga koma, ok kvað ýmsavandræði mǫndu verða, ef réðisk bætr á. Þá vas landinu skipt í fjórðunga, [...] Svá sagði oss Úlfheðinn Gunnarssonr lǫgsǫgumaðr. (Ari Þorgilsson, 1986, p. 12).³⁷

These attitudes in a way are also represented in runestones, where the poetic element objectifies the relations and solidifies important social bonds. That is the case for Karlevi runestone, that was raised by the men of the retinue of Sibbi:

A: + s-a... --(s)- i(a)s · satr · aiftir · si(b)(a) · kuþa · sun · fultars · in hons · liþi · sati · at · u ·
-ausa-þ-... +: fulkin : likr : hins : fulkþu : flaistr (:) · uisi · þat · maistar · taiþir : tulka · þruþar
: traukr : i : þaimsi · huki · munat : raip:uiþur : raþa : ruk:starkr · i · tanmarku : --ntils :
iarmun · kruntar : urkrontari : lonti

A: S[t]æ[inn] [sa]s[i] es satr æftir Sibba Goða/Guða, sun Fuldars, en hans liði satti at...

*Fulginn liggR hinns fylgðu,
flæstr vissi þat, mæstaR*

³⁷ "And they were prosecuted in the assembly which was in Borgafjörðr in that place, which since has been called Þingnes. That was then law, that for a case of homicide, it should be prosecuted in that assembly, which was the nearest to place of the assault. But they fought each other there, and it was not possible for the assembly to be conducted by the law. There fell slain Þórolfr refr, brother of Álfr in the dales, from the company of Þórðr gellir. And afterwards the suits went to the Alþingi, and they then fought each other there again. Then fell men from Oddr's company, and happened as a conclusion, that he, Hænsa-Þórir, was outlawed and killed later, and most who were at the burning. Then Þórðr gellir gave a speech over the law-rock, about how badly suited it was for the men to go to unknown assemblies to prosecute over killings or their hardships; and recounted, what had hindered him, before he was able to have that case to be settled by law, and declared that difficulties would present alternately, if amendments were not set forward. Then the land was arranged into Quarters... So said to us lawspeaker Úlfheðinn Gunnarsson."



*dæðiR dolga ÞruðaR
draugR i þæimsi haugi;
munat Ræið-Viðurr raða
rogstarkR i Danmarku
[Æ]ndils iarmungrundaR
uRgrandaRi landi. (Samnordisk runtextdatabas, 2018)*

“This stone is placed in memory of Sibbi the Good, Foldarr’s son, and his retainer placed on Öland this memorial to honour the dead. [...]

Hidden in this mound lies one,
An executor of the goddess of battles,
Whom the greatest deeds followed
(most knew that).
No strife-strong god of the wagon
Of Endill’s wide ground
Will rule land in Denmark
More faultlessly.” (Jesch, 2001, p. 2).

The poem is complex, and requires a keen knowledge of poetic forms, as well as a deep comprehension of the mythological, lexical, and poetical language that surely was not widespread. That the runestone is a public monument should not be considered indicative that most people in Viking Age Sweden were cultured enough to account to the real meaning of the poem, or to read the runes, and comprehend the deep net of meanings, social allusions, and individual identities, that form the core of the text. On the contrary, as with the Rök monument, Karlevi manifests the vast difference between Viking Age high and low culture in Scandinavian society. In a way, it is similar to modern allusions to Philosophers and other elements of high culture in movies or tv shows, that only a few selected can truly account for, yet, the meaning of the movie is not lost.

Another more easily available example can be Gripsholm (Sö 179) (Samnordisk runtextdatabas, 2018): × **tula : lit : raisa : stain : þinsa | | at : sun : sin : haralt : bruþur : inkuars : þaiR furu : trikila : fiari : at : kuli : auk : a:ustarla | | ar:ni : kafu : tuu : sunar:la : a sirk:lan:ti**

Tóla let reisa stein þennsa at son sinn Harald, bróður Ingvars:

*Þeir fóru drengila fjarri at gulli,
ok austarla erni gáfu,*



dóu sunnurla á Serklandi.

“Tóla had this stone raised for his son, Haraldr, brother of Yngvarr:

*They travelled honourably for distant gold,
in the east they feed the eagle,
On southerly Serkland died!”*

We can see here that the punctuation, used to separate words in runestones, makes no sense towards the end. I think that a possible explanation is an oral awareness at display, that as we can hear sometimes in poetic performances, towards the end of a stanza, the reciter tends to elongate the last syllables of the stanza, this perhaps can be represented in a similar fashion to how it is represented in Gripsholm’s runestone. This returns us to the role of runic literate individuals, able to not only decipher the inscription, but perform the poetic stanza back into the oral world where poetry truly belongs. We must remember how rare silent reading was until recent centuries. And although it is not impossible that silent reading was practiced many times, it is less likely that poetic forms were regarded as visual literacy, as we tend to regard poetry, but rather it was immediately returned and tested with the ear, not the eyes.

The runic inscriptions that I presented, I hope, were satisfactory enough to evidence that the role of runic literate individuals was fundamental in Viking Age Scandinavia, not only as readers and interpreters, but as depositaries of poetic, mythological and ritual traditions that allowed Viking Age Scandinavians make sense of their worlds, their communal life, and their history.

Conclusions

It has been demonstrated that the role of runic literate people in the Viking Age was fundamental: first of all, the education towards learning runes had a clear oral component, that is highlighted by the perseverance of different rune poems, which allowed the individuals learned in runes to recall the phonetic values of each runic character. The link with poetics is more powerful, as the poetics reinforce the role of both memory and listening as the basis of learning and acquisition of knowledge and wisdom. Other fundamental aspect of the poetics is that it allowed individuals to define words, terms and phonemes as distinctive units. That



lexicon could be socialized also by means of the poetics themselves in any circumstance it was necessary.

The presence and use of images, such as those from the picture stones from Gotland and the newly found silver button at Selsø in Hornsherred was both a cultural trend, but as was shown with the examples of Bragi *inn Gamli* Boddason, Þjóðólfr ór Hvini, and Úlfr Uggason, the runic literate people was bound to socialize the corpus of myths, stories, genealogies and concepts through ritualistic performances that allowed the community to internalize this stories, its variants, and finally its fundamental ethical and practical meanings into every-day life. One only has to think about the role of the *lǫgsǫgumaðr* in Iceland to glimpse the importance of this ritualistic aspects. Without this, the formation of an *imago mundi* would be impossible, and social, cultural, ethical, religious, and intellectual life would be rendered meaningless.

For the runic literate people in Viking Age Scandinavia to create through an oral culture and with a store of abilities of interpretation, what Brian Stock termed as textual communities, it was fundamental to have a set of skills that rise above the average individual. The difference between levels of depth amid cultured individuals, the high levels of abstraction present in Skaldic poetry and ciphered runicity, evidence the existence of a higher and lower culture dynamic, that is manifested in runic devices such as Rök, that presents levels of complexity to various and increasing levels, but also returns the textuality of the surface to a ritualistic endeavour were the text demands answers from the interpreter. This explains the presence of maxim-like poems such as the one attributed to Egill, where he advises against the writing of runes by illiterates or semi-illiterates.

The presence, then, of a wide set of skills necessary for interpretation brings us to the difference between high and low culture in Viking Age Scandinavia, where the different levels of runicity are expanded, and the runic literate people are graded depending on the depth of their abilities. The extent of these abilities can seem vastly divergent. But the intellectual abilities are not completely unrelated to the ability to read runes, since strategy games as chess or *hnefatafl* do not only require the ability to “read” the game, the rules, and the strategy of the opponent, but also, the game presents a “conversation” in which one has to be able to



anticipate the meaning the other one is trying to pose, an ability that Skaldic poetry and runicity also imply with the difficulties that the kenningar, the intricacies, and the cryptic elements present to the reader.

Finally, as was seen in the runic inscriptions, the elements of the inscription invite the reader to socialize his interpretation of the inscription. Nevertheless, runestones also represent an elite device that presents difficulties and anomalies for the average reader, implying the necessity that society had for runic literate individuals, able to translate the intricacies of the text into meaningful teaching. It is notorious the wide set of skills that was necessary to possess in order to make sense of certain runestones, and it is likely that the term *skald* originally meant an individual versed both in poetry, stories, and runes, but that we read it nowadays exclusively as poet, following the Icelandic development of the concept, where Icelanders prioritized their monopoly over poetry.

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