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Runes in Finland: The margins of Scandinavian runic culture

Although Finland is geographically close to the areas in central Sweden with the highest concentration of Viking Age runic monuments, only a handful of runic inscriptions have been recovered from the territory of present-day Finland. In general, Finland has not been considered to have a tradition of runic writing.

Most of the inscriptions found in Finland which have been dated to the Viking Age – the brooch found in Tuukkala in 1882 and a few coins and amulets – are generally believed to have been carved elsewhere and transported to the find sites. It is not clear that any locals would have been able to read the runes. The runestone fragment found in Hitis (Fi. Hiittinen) in 1997 has also been thought to be imported, although it could have been carved or raised near the find site, which is not far from a Viking Age trading post with other Scandinavian artefacts (Edgren 1999). A few late medieval inscriptions from Turku (discussed by Harjula 2008, 2016, 2019 and Palumbo & Harjula in this volume) do provide evidence of a restricted local tradition of runic writing during the Middle Ages. The tradition of runic calendar sticks spread

from Sweden with the Reformation (Oja 2015), and some ownership marks used in Finland are thought to be based on runes (Ekko 1984).

In modern times, much discussion of (the lack of) runic inscriptions in Finland has been tied to debate over the length of time there has been a Swedish-speaking population in Finland. The majority opinion is that the migrations that led to the modern Swedish-speaking communities stem from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Ahola & Frog 2014: 56), after the heyday of runic memorials in Sweden. Speakers of Germanic languages were almost certainly present in the territory of modern-day Finland at different times before and during the Viking Age but the extent of continuity in settlement and language transmission is unknown. Numerous loanwords from North Germanic languages into Finnish appear to date from the Viking Age (Häkkinen 2014: 389) but many borrowings are difficult to date. Place-name etymologies are even more problematic (Schalin 2014: 406). There are many questions about the location and nature of the contacts between North Germanic and Finnic languages during the Viking Age (see e.g. Ahola & Frog 2014: 56; Tolley 2014: 96, 101).

This discussion has often been partisan and connected with contemporary identities and language politics. Runic inscriptions have been seen as proof of the presence of Scandinavian speakers during the Viking Age, which has been connected with the position of the modern Swedish-speaking population. Scholarship has been suspected of partisanship and either seeking to exaggerate or minimise Swedish presence and influence in Finland (see e.g. Bågenholm 1999: 120–121). The discourse shows some commonality with debates over other issues such as place-name etymologies.

This applies in particular to the runic inscriptions from Vörå (Fi. Vöyri) in Ostrobothnia, which caused a stir in the 1980s. Another controversy concerned the inscriptions on the cross of Sund and the cliff by Kastelholm in Åland, which fueled provincial archaeologist Matts Dreijer's highly speculative theory that the Viking Age emporium of Birka was in fact located in Åland, emphasising Åland's centrality in Viking Age Sweden.

Some decades have elapsed since those controversies; many of the central participants in the debates are no longer active. Views of the early settlement history of Finland and of Finland in the Viking Age continue to evolve. Finds such as the runestone fragment from Hitis discovered in 1997 and medieval runic inscriptions found from the 1980s onwards in Turku have provided new evidence of "authentic" runes in Finland. The time therefore seems ripe to revisit the issue of runes in Finland.

Can we speak of a Finnish runic tradition? The phrase can be taken to have a double meaning: on the one hand, to refer to a practice of carving and reading runes, on the other, to ideas about runes which circulate in different discourses in modern times. While the inscriptions from Finland are not numerous, they vary in their medium, age, and find location. Although there were probably very few Finnish rune carvers, it seems likely that there was some familiarity with runes in Finland dating at least from the Middle Ages and perhaps from the Viking Age. Some rune-related traditions remain down to modern times, such as runic calendars and various marks of ownership thought to derive from runes, as well as modern inscriptions carved in a Romantic spirit. In addition, vernacular beliefs about earlier use in Finland are sometimes reflected in writings from scholarly to popular to pseudoscientific. The relation between these two senses of tradition is complicated. Understanding the ideas about runes in circulation and the ways in which these are embedded in wider discussions is important for source-criticism in regard to the finds and their research history. This is especially the case for disputed inscriptions.

The papers in this collection explore different aspects of Finland's runic culture, bringing together for the first time information in English about runes in Finland from different times and areas.

Heikki Oja ("In search of Finnish runes") gives an overview of the runic inscriptions found in Finland, including inscriptions on coins and amulets as well as runic calendars. He concludes with some possible reasons for the dearth of runic inscriptions in Finland. Oja's contribution also tells the personal story of how a retired astronomer

came to write a popular book on runes (*Riimut: Viestejä viikingeiltä* 2015).

The silver brooch from Tuukkala, Mikkeli, discovered in 1883, was the first runic inscription found in Finland that was agreed by scholarly consensus to date from the Late Iron Age. It is assumed to have originated in Gotland. Ulla Moilanen ("The inscribed silver disc brooch from the Tuukkala cemetery in Mikkeli") revisits the brooch from an archaeological perspective, placing it in the context of similar brooches, the find site, and the inferred biography of the artefact.

Magnus Källström ("Who carved the runestone from Hitis?") revisits the one Viking Age runestone known from Finland, the fragment found at Stora Ängesön in Hitis in 1997. Källström believes that the inscription is genuine; some unusual features in its appearance can be attributed to its having lain under water for some time. He finds parallels to several features in the carvings of Balle in Löt in northeastern Uppland, Sweden, and suggests that the Hitis inscription might have been carved by Balle or by a member of his school.

The main evidence for medieval runic practice in Finland comes from runic inscriptions on everyday objects (wooden vessels and an antler comb) found in Turku in the 1980s and 1990s. Alessandro Palumbo and Janne Harjula ("Material and written culture in medieval Turku: Runic inscriptions from an urban environment") discuss these inscriptions in the context of medieval urban culture and religious practice. The carving of Latin prayers in runes on wooden vessels was a widespread practice around the Nordic area. Palumbo and Harjula compare various features of the orthography of the Turku inscriptions (spelling of *ave* and *gratia*, combination of runes and Latin letters, use of bind-runes) to different regions of medieval Sweden and Gotland. Somewhat surprisingly, the Turku inscriptions match more closely with Östergötland than with Gotland, which is geographically closer and where the runic tradition persisted longer than in the mainland of present-day Sweden.

The lack of Viking Age inscriptions from Åland is particularly striking given the close connections between Åland and central Sweden

during the early Viking Age (followed by a mysterious dearth of artefacts from the eleventh century, which has sometimes been taken as an indication of depopulation or discontinuity in settlement). Åland's most prominent inscription, which has been interpreted as runic writing in Latin, is carved on a stone cross from the church at Sund. Long-time provincial archeologist Matts Dreijer used his interpretation of this inscription as the foundation for his discredited theory that the Viking Age town of Birka was in fact located in Åland. Per Olof Sjöstrand ("The cross of Sund") discusses Dreijer's theory in relation to cultural and political developments in Åland and the shaping of Ålandic identity in the twentieth century. Sjöstrand views the inscription as likely to date from the fifteenth century rather than the tenth. If the marks are in fact runes, Sjöstrand suggests the text might be a Latin inscription, possibly *venialis* 'forgiveable', commemorating the resolution of a feud. An apparent copy of the Sund inscription on the cliff at Kastelholm has been connected to the runologist and antiquarian Johan Bure, a.k.a. Johannes Bureus (1568–1652). Sjöstrand places the discussion of the Sund cross in the context of the long-standing scholarly debate over the transition from the Viking Age to the Middle Ages in Åland. While Åland was central to trade routes during the early Viking Age, a dearth of archaeological finds from the late Viking Age and apparent lack of continuity in placenames has led to the hypothesis of a period of depopulation. This is at odds with many Ålanders' sense of their own history, including Dreijer's.

In southern Ostrobothnia as well, the mainstream archaeological view has been that the area was depopulated during the Viking Age. This so-called "tomrumsteori" [void hypothesis] has been viewed by the local population, mainly rural and Swedish-speaking, as a negation of their history and an erasure of the Swedish presence. The discovery of runestones in Vörå from 1978 triggered a crisis of authority and epistemology regarding the authenticity of the inscriptions and the early history of the region more generally. Kendra Willson ("Contested narratives of the Vörå runestones") points out that the discourse surrounding the Vörå runestones is characterised by an emphasis on nar-

rative. The finders, and other local Ostrobothnians who were committed to the inscriptions being old, worked to present the account of their find as believable and themselves as reliable witnesses while elaborating on an imagined narrative about the carvers and the people mentioned in the inscriptions.

Some modern runic inscriptions are not necessarily forgeries or motivated by language politics but part of a general tradition of commemorating events by carving names and dates, as Antti Lahelma, Jouko Pukkila, and Tapani Rostedt argue ("Fake or not? Some observations on finds of runic inscriptions in southwestern Finland"). While inscriptions in Nauvo and Masku are obviously modern, others are difficult to date. An inscription in Naantali is written in Old Norse (with some grammatical peculiarities) and echoes the style of many inscriptions from the late Viking Age from central Sweden. While it is most likely to be a sophisticated imitation, the authors would also like to maintain the possibility that it is a genuine Viking Age inscription.

The papers in this collection are intended to provide both an overview and new insights into the use of runes in Finland at different times. It is hoped that this will lead to further investigation of Finland's runic culture.

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