## Contents

Foreword ................................................................. 5

Bernard Mees. The Hogganvik Inscription and Early Nordic Memorialisation ........................................... 7


Luzius Thöny. The Chronology of Final Devoicing and the Change of *z to *r in Proto-Norse .................... 47

Helmer Gustavson. Två runristade kopparamuletter från Solberga, Köpingsvik (Öl Fv1976;96A och Öl Fv1976;96B) ............. 63

Elena A. Mel’nikova. A New Runic Inscription from Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul ............................................ 101

Jana Krüger and Vivian Busch. The Metrical Characteristics of Maeshowe Runic Inscription No. 20 ........................... 111

### Short notices

Juliana Roost. An Inscribed Fibula from Basel-Kleinhüningen? ........ 127

Charlotte Boje Andersen and Lisbeth M. Imer. Ydby-stenen (DR 149) genfundet .......................................................... 131

Jan Owe. Åsa, en mö i Skänninge (Ög 239) ................................. 137

Magnus Källström. Till tolkningen av runorna på ett dryckeskarl från Lund (DR EM85;474A) ........................................ 143

Per Stille. Johan Bures runtavla och dess titel .......................... 149

### Reviews

Martin Findell. Runes. Reviewed by Mindy MacLeod ........................ 155


Wolfgang Krause. Schriften zur Runologie und Sprachwissenschaft. Reviewed by Martin Hannes Graf ................................ 164

Klaus Düwel. Runica minora: Ausgewählte kleine Schriften zur Runenkunde. Reviewed by Patrik Larsson .......................... 170

Irene García Losquiño. The Early Runic Inscriptions: Their Western Features. Reviewed by Martin Hannes Graf .............................. 174

Lisbeth M. Imer and (photo) Roberto Fortuna. Danmarks runesten: En fortelling. Reviewed by Anne-Sofie Gräslund ...................... 181
Contributors .................................................................. 193
The Metrical Characteristics of Maeshowe Runic Inscription No. 20

Jana Krüger and Vivian Busch (Kiel University)

Abstract
Maeshowe runic inscription no. 20 in Barnes’s edition (1994) is one of the most discussed among the runic inscriptions which were carved into the walls of the prehistoric cairn by Norsemen around the middle of the twelfth century. The inscription states that it was carved by the man who was most skilled in runes west of the ocean with the axe of Gaukr Trandilssonr (known from Njáls saga and Landnámabók). Various opinions have been aired with regard to the metrical character of the inscription. Whereas Olsen (1903, 18–21) considered it to be poetic, Finnur Jónsson (1904–05, 33) firmly rejected this notion. In this paper a thorough investigation of the metrical character of Maeshowe no. 20 is carried out, starting from the premise that a runic inscription can only be declared metrical if it shows both rhythm and alliteration. This leads to a refinement of the principles for evaluating the metricality of any given inscription.

Keywords: Maeshowe, younger futhark, runic poetry, metrics, Sievers’s verse types, fornyrðislag, ljóðaháttr

Introduction

The corpus of runic poetry is a relatively small one compared to what has been transmitted of Eddic and skaldic poetry with Roman letters in manuscripts. Nevertheless it is an important primary source which largely precedes the medieval manuscript transmission of these genres and it is important for our understanding of the development of the different verse forms and their distribution. For instance we find the oldest attestation of end-rhyme in Sweden in a runic inscription from the beginning of the twelfth century, i.e. U 214 from Vallentuna.
Poetry in runes can be found throughout the entire time span of runic use, starting with the corpus of inscriptions in the older futhark with the well-known KJ 43 Gallehus inscription from the fifth century which is generally regarded as the first firm attestation of a Germanic long-line (for an overview of this corpus of metrical inscriptions see Marold 2012). It seems furthermore that there is evidence of so-called full lines found in runic inscriptions as early as those in the older futhark (see the analysis of the KJ 75 Kjølevik inscription from Norway in Marold 2012, 78 f.). In contrast to a long-line, a full line has no metrical caesura. In general it has three lifts and at least two alliterations placed on the lifts within the verse line.

Most of the metrical runic inscriptions date from the Viking Age, and are predominantly found on runestones from Sweden. Often they show a mixture of prose and verse with the versified part of the inscription consisting only of one or two long-lines in fornyrðislag. Inscriptions in the skaldic metre dróttkvætt are rare, although an example is found on the Karlevi stone (Öl 1) from Öland. As Marold (2010, 3–7) pointed out in her paper at the international runic symposium in Oslo in 2010, certain sections with a particular content in these Viking Age memorial inscriptions can on occasion be expressed metrically. These particularly concern praise of the deceased, information about any journey(s) abroad and the mode or place of death. In a number of inscriptions, praise of the memorial and the wish that it may last for a long time is also expressed in verse.

In the Scandinavian Middle Ages, the custom of erecting runestones was largely abandoned. Runic inscriptions in this period come predominantly from an urban cultural context. Bergen, with its many finds of rune-sticks, is such a source of a large number of medieval metrical inscriptions. Whereas the runestones of the Viking Age are characterized by their official and public purpose, the medieval inscriptions are often of a more private nature.

In recent research, diverging views on the requirements for the classification of a runic inscription as metrical have been proffered. It is agreed that alliteration is a necessary prerequisite. But Hübler (1996, 36 f.), in his investigation of Swedish metrical runic inscriptions from the Viking Age, expressly discards rhythm as a criterion. His approach has, however, been strongly criticized (Wulf 1998, 93 f.; Marold 2012, 69 f.). As Marold points out, both criteria, i.e. rhythm and alliteration, are essential: A rhythmical inscription without alliteration or an inscription with alliteration but without rhythm cannot be classified as verse. The alliterating expression þrōttar þiagn, for example, is attested in a number of runic inscriptions

_Futhark_ 7 (2016)
The metrical characteristics of Old Norse poetry have been a subject of much scholarly discussion. From Södermanland which are not versified (Sö 90, Sö 112, Sö 151, Sö 158, Sö 170, Sö 367, Sö Fv1948;295). The sentence Hann varð dreppinn i Æist-landum on the Frugården stone from Västergötland (Vg 181) evidences rhythm and could be analysed as a long-line if it showed alliteration.

The Maeshowe cairn and its inscriptions

The large prehistoric cairn of Maeshowe is situated on Mainland, Orkney, Scotland, and was probably built about 2,800 B.C. (Ritchie and Ritchie 1991, 29). It consists of an 11 m long and only 91 cm high entrance passage leading to the central chamber which measures about 4.6 m on each side and which has three side chambers. There is good reason to assume that the Maeshowe barrow is identical with the Orkahaugr mentioned in one of the Maeshowe inscriptions (no. 24 in Michael Barnes’s edition of 1994) and in Orkneyinga saga (ch. 93), where it is related that the Orcadian earl Haraldr Maddaðarson and his retinue sought shelter in the barrow Orkahaugr during a storm in 1153.

In 1861 the cairn was excavated and the runic inscriptions (thirty-three according to Barnes’s edition), carved into its walls by several people, were discovered. The rune forms, orthography and language indicate that the inscriptions were carved c. 1125–75 (Barnes 1994, 39 f.). Two of the inscriptions (no. 14 and 24) relate that crusaders on their way to or from Jerusalem broke into the mound. It is tempting to link these inscriptions with Earl Rǫgnvaldr Kali’s crusade to the Holy Land and to assume that he and his retinue broke into the mound on their journey to Jerusalem in the winter of 1150–51 (Barnes 1994, 117 f.).

The content of inscription Maeshowe no. 20

Inscription no. 20 of Maeshowe (OR Barnes20) spans two different surfaces on the south-eastern wall (see Barnes 1994, pl. 4a). It consists of four lines: the first, second and third are carved to the left of the entrance to the south-eastern side chamber; the inscription continues with the fourth line immediately above the entrance. There is no doubt that these lines belong together (for arguments see Barnes 1994, 144 f.). The first line consists of coded runes (e.g. 3/3 = þ) in a twig-rune variant, the other three lines of ordinary runic characters, with the exception of rune 7 in the second line, which is similarly a twig-rune. The inscription reads as follows (here the coded runes are decoded and placed within angle brackets):
The man who is most skilled in runes west of the ocean carved these runes with the axe which Gaukr, Trandill’s son, owned in the south of the country [Iceland].

Unfortunately we do not know who carved these runes. But we do know of a Gaukr Trandilssonr from Old Icelandic sources. Njáls saga (ch. 26) relates that a man named Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímssonr slew his foster-brother named Gaukr Trandilssonr in Iceland in the late tenth century, although Gaukr’s axe is not mentioned (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 72; Cook 2001, 44, with the personal names normalized here according to the system otherwise employed):

Gaukr Trandilssonr var fóstbróðir Ásgríms, er frœknastr maðr hefir verit ok bezt at sér gorð. Þar varð illa með Ásgrími, því at Ásgrímr varð banamaðr Gauks.
‘Gaukr Trandilssonr, who was a most valiant and accomplished man, was foster-brother to Ásgrímr, but bad blood arose between them, with the result that Ásgrímr slew Gaukr.’

We even know that a saga about Gaukr Trandilssonr must once have existed because in the Icelandic manuscript Mǫðruvalla bók from the middle of the fourteenth century, after the conclusion of Njáls saga, the following note is found (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 72; translated by the authors):

Látta réta hér við Gauks sǫgu Trandilssonar; mér er sagt, at Grímr eigi hana.
‘You should have Gauks saga Trandilssonar written here; I am told that Grímr owns it.’

Hermann Pálsson (1962; somewhat differently in 1970) attributed the inscription Maeshowe no. 20 to the Icelander Þórhallr Ásgrímssonr, who according to Orkneyinga saga (ch. 90) transported Earl Rǫgnvaldr with his ship from Norway to Orkney in 1153 (see Barnes 1994, 158, and Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, 238 f.). He assumes that Þórhallr was the great-great-great-grandson of Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímssonr and therefore could have been in possession of Gaukr’s axe. But, as Barnes (1994, 38) points out, we should not take the words of the Maeshowe inscriptions literally as they are to be understood as medieval graffiti. Thus, in his
opinion, all that Maeshowe no. 20 reveals for certain is that its carver knew about Gaukr and his axe.

Previous statements as to the metrical character of Maeshowe no. 20

In newspaper notices as early as 1861, shortly after the discovery of the Maeshowe inscriptions, C. C. Rafn considered this inscription metrical in form (see Barnes 1994, 155). Olsen (1903, 18–21) commented in more detail on the metrical character of the inscription and interpreted it as a rhythmically regular stanza in fornyrðislag (‘old story metre’, a metre comprised of long-lines: one long-line consists of two half-lines which are divided by a metrical caesura and connected by alliteration; each half-line normally has four metrical positions; the first half-line is called the odd line and the second half-line the even line, see Clunies Ross et al. 2012, li–liv):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Þessar rúnar} & \text{ reist sá maðr,} \\
\text{er rúnstr er} & \text{ fyrir vestan haf,} \\
\text{med þeiri ðxi, er átti Gaukr} & \\
\text{Trandils sonr} & \text{ fyrir sunnan land.}
\end{align*}
\]

In addition to the rhythm and alliteration, he adduced similarities in the sentence structure between his two half-stanzas (sá maðr, er—þeiri ðxi, er) as well as the parallelism between the expressions fyrir vestan haf and fyrir sunnan land as further arguments for considering the inscription a stanza.

Olsen’s conclusion was firmly rejected by Finnur Jónsson (1904–05, 33), however. He argued that the word order and expressions were prosaic, that a rhythmic structure was lacking and that there was no alliteration in Olsen’s second long-line (er rúnstr er / fyrir vestan haf).

The reason these two scholars arrived at such different conclusions on the inscription’s metrical character lies in their differing evaluations of what they considered rhythmical, which, however, in neither case was based on a systematic approach. While Olsen arrived at his evaluation partly by counting syllables, Finnur Jónsson did not relay any specific criteria by which he could decide that the inscription was not rhythmical. If either of them had applied Sievers’s (1893) system for the evaluation of metrical characteristics of Old Norse poetry, they would have shown a more objective approach.
But let us first examine the other criteria which have been applied for the purpose of evaluating the inscription, such as word order and choice. As Wulf (1998, 96) points out, neither non-prosaic word order nor use of stylized vocabulary are prerequisites for poetry. Thus the lack of such stylistic devices does not preclude identification as a versified inscription if the necessary formal criteria, i.e. rhythm and alliteration, are present. Neither does the metrical character of an inscription depend on its content, which might to us often seem prosaic (Marold 2012, 70 f).

Therefore Finnur Jónsson’s use of prosaic word order and expressions as grounds to deny the inscription’s metrical nature has to be rejected, while Olsen’s observation of the parallel structure of his two half-stanzas demonstrates a certain amount of stylization. However, to demonstrate the likelihood of metricality, this element must be combined with a metrical analysis.

Finnur Jónsson’s remark concerning the lack of alliteration in Olsen’s second long-line cannot be disregarded since alliteration of a vowel with a semivowel, as suggested by Olsen for er—vestan, would be highly unusual at the very least. In fact its very existence in Old Norse poetry has been judged altogether doubtful (Kuhn 1983, 50). Olsen’s other long-lines do show regular alliteration if sonr in the fourth long-line is understood as a simplex. The problem with the alliteration in Olsen’s second long-line will now be examined along with the remaining criterion for the evaluation of the inscription’s character as verse, namely metrical analysis.

**Metrical analysis of Maeshowe no. 20**

Sievers’s five-type system is a valuable tool for evaluating the metrical character of runic inscriptions, as has been shown by Marold (2012; see her work for a short introduction and overview of the system and its notation). If for the moment we accept Olsen’s arrangement of the inscription as a stanza consisting of four long-lines, we arrive at the following analysis of the separate half-lines (henceforth counted as lines 1–8):

\[
\begin{array}{lll}
\text{Þessar rúnar reist sá maðr,} & \text{reist sá maðr,} \\
\text{er rúnstr er fyrir vestan haf,} & \text{fyrir vestan haf,} \\
\text{með þeiri øxi, er átti Gaukr} & \text{er átti Gaukr} \\
\end{array}
\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>\text{pessar rúna}r</th>
<th>\text{reist sá maðr,}</th>
<th>\text{A3 / A1 catalectic}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>x z</td>
<td>x z</td>
<td>x z</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>\text{er rúnstr er}</th>
<th>\text{fyrir vestan haf,}</th>
<th>\text{C1 catalectic / B1}</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>x z</td>
<td>x x z</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>\text{með þeiri øxi, er átti Gaukr}</th>
<th>\text{A3 with anacrusis / B1}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>z x</td>
</tr>
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*Futhark 7 (2016)*
Trandils sonr fyrir sunnan land.

(x x | x x) A3 catalectic / B1

(The metrical term *catalectic* means that the last, unstressed syllable of a verse line is missing, i.e. the verse has three instead of four metrical positions, namely syllables. The term *anacrusis* is used to indicate an additional unstressed syllable before the beginning of a verse with four metrical positions.)

This analysis reveals a problem: While lines 1–2 make a regular long-line, line 3 with Olsen’s suggested alliteration on the finite verb *er* is irregular and apparently incorrect because in C-verses the stronger stress and thereby the alliteration is placed on the first lift, not the second (Sievers 1893, 38, § 19.3; see also Kuhn 1983, 49–51, § 11). Thus in line 3 the stronger stress and alliteration should be on *rúnstr*, and therefore the long-line must be deemed to lack alliteration; the alliteration assumed by Olsen was in any case highly doubtful. The following long-lines are, however, unproblematic with regard to alliteration. The question thus arises whether the whole inscription should be viewed as non-metrical, based exclusively on a flaw in the second long-line.

Regarding the inscription as non-metrical would involve ignoring the otherwise regular metre as well as the stylized sentence structure. Alternatively, one could regard the inscription as what Barnes (1994, 155) terms “rough-and-ready verse”, and simply to accept the lack of alliteration in the second long-line. This might find support in the fact that in the *fornaldarsǫgur* there are also several instances of lines without alliteration, as pointed out to us by Kari Ellen Gade (pers. com.). The following long-lines from the *lausavísur* (‘freestanding stanzas’ which do not belong to a longer poem, see Clunies Ross et al. 2012, xli–xliii) by Angantýr Heiðreksson (AngH Lv; see Burrows forthcoming a) and Hervǫr (Herv Lv; see Burrows forthcoming c), and from Gestumblindi’s *Heiðreks gátur* (‘Riddles of Heiðrekr’, Gestumbl Heiðr; see Burrows forthcoming b) from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* may serve as examples:

Ek mun bjóða þér fagrar veigar (AngH Lv 3/1–2)
‘I will offer you fair draughts’

Sé ek eigi þann í mínu liði (AngH Lv 8/1–2)
‘I do not see that one in my troop’

lýða lemill, orða tefill (Gestumbl Heiðr 1/4–5)
‘crippler of people, hinderer of words’
Hvítan skjöld þær um vetr bera

(“Gestumbl Heiðr 20/4–5”)

“They bear a white shield in winter’

Bú þú mik at öllu, sem þú hraðast kunnir

(Herv Lv 4/1–2)

’Prepare me in all respects, as quickly as you can’

at þér þolið aldri kyrrir

(Herv Lv 14/3–4)

‘that you will never rest quietly’

nema þú, Angantýr, selir mér Tyrfing

(Herv Lv 14/5–6)

‘unless you, Angantýr, give me Tyrfingr’

While the lausavísur are composed in fornyðislag, the Heiðreks gátur are composed in ljóðaháttr (‘song form’, a combination of long-lines and full lines: the long-lines are connected by alliteration as in fornyðislag while the full lines contain internal alliteration independent of the long-lines, see Clunies Ross et al. 2012, lvi f.). Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks has been dated to the first third of the thirteenth century, but most of the poetry which it contains might be older (see “Introduction” to Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks, Burrows forthcoming d). In any case this brings the saga as well as the stanzas rather close in date to our inscription from Maeshowe. This shows that an occasional lack of alliteration was not unacceptable, at least in some forms of poetry, around that time. If we recall the graffiti-like character of the Maeshowe inscriptions, it is possible to postulate that the carver of Maeshowe no. 20 made up a short, simple verse which showed regular rhythm but lacked alliteration in one line.

Yet there is another way of analysing the stanza in accordance with Sievers’s system which could even solve the problem of alliteration. So far we have considered the inscription to be a stanza in fornyðislag metre. But according to Sievers (1893, 83 f., § 57,3c), the second long-line (lines 3–4) could instead be analysed as a full line and lines 1–2 together with this full line as a ljóðaháttr half-stanza (then lines 1–3): The first lift in line 3 is on rúnstr, which repeats the alliteration on $r$ found in lines 1–2. It is not recorded that a long-line would alliterate with a previous long-line in such a way. But Sievers (1893, 83 f., § 57, 3c) gives examples of what he calls Anreimung der Vollzeile an die Langzeile, literally ‘rhyming the full line with the long-line’, in ljóðaháttr metre. This means that a full line alliterates with the previous long-line instead of having internal alliteration, as in the following example from Hávamál:

vat er þá reynt, er þú at rúnom spyrr, inom reginkunnom

(“Hávamál, st. 80/1–3; Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 29”)
'That is then attested true, what you ask of the runes, the divinely descended’ (Dronke 2011, 18)

Accordingly, the first half of the inscription could be analysed as:

\[ \text{Þessar rúnar reist sá maðr,} \]
\[ \text{er rúnstr er fyir vestan haf,} \]

A3 / A1 catalectic

The assumed full line would have three lifts and a monosyllabic closing word, each of which is regular according to Sievers (1893, 82–84, § 57, 1–4). Only the type of alliteration would be exceptional. The second half of the inscription could then be analysed as follows:

\[ \text{með þeiri æxi, er átti Gaukr} \]

Trandils sonr fyir sunnan land.

A3 with anacrusis / B1

Here the full line would have four lifts. Sievers (1893, 89, § 57, 9) gives a few similar examples, which according to him have either four lifts or an extraordinarily heavy dip; cf. the following full line from Hávamál:

\[ \text{sjaldan hittir leiðr í lið} \]
\[ \text{(Hávamál, st. 66/6; Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 27)} \]
\[ \text{‘one who’s not liked rarely hits the right moment’} \]
\[ \text{(Dronke 2011, 18)} \]

Thus with Sievers the whole inscription could be analysed as a ljóðaháttr stanza consisting of two half-stanzas, each made up of a long-line and a full line. But as we have seen earlier, Trandils sonr fyir sunnan land would work perfectly well as a regular long-line, and as such it would be less exceptional than a full line with four lifts. So if we retain the long-line, the stanza would then have the structure LFLL (L = long-line; F = full line). If we once more take Hávamál as an example, it becomes clear that next to the regular pattern LFLF, there is room for variation on the structure of ljóðaháttr stanzas. Thus Hávamál st. 141 also shows the pattern LFLL, followed by Hávamál st. 142 (LFFFFF), Hávamál st. 143 (LFFF), and Hávamál st. 145 (LFFFFL; see Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 40 f.; on the structure of
ljóðaháttr stanzas see also Sievers 1893, 80 f., §55). The pattern LFLL is furthermore not restricted to Hávamál, but is also found in Grímnismál, st. 2 (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 57), and Fyr Skírnis, st. 24 (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 74). Thus a final alternative way to analyse the stanza would be:

\[
\text{Þessar rúnar } \text{reist sá maðr}, \quad \text{(A3 / A1 catalectic)}
\]

\[
\text{er rúnstr er fyrir vestan haf}, \quad \text{full line}
\]

\[
\text{med þeiri òxi, er átti Gaukr} \quad \text{(A3 with anacrusis / B1)}
\]

\[
\text{Trandils sonr fyrir sunnan land.} \quad \text{(A3 catalectic / B1)}
\]

It is remarkable that all the long-lines begin with odd lines of type A3 in this analysis. To test this observation, statistical data on the distribution of line types from a recent publication on Old Norse Eddic metres by Suzuki (2013) can be used. While it must be admitted that Suzuki’s scansion differs from that of Sievers in some details (e.g. he analyses type A3 as containing only one lift, preceded by unstressed syllables; on this see Suzuki 1996, 47–59, and Suzuki 2013, 56 f., where he explains “the retention of the first lift by Norse innovation”), he does in principle retain Sievers’s set of line types (see Suzuki 2013, 10). His collected data from Eddic poetry shows that type A3 in fornyrðislag as well as ljóðaháttr, while not prohibited in the even line as in West Germanic poetry, is found primarily in the odd line (Suzuki 2013, 590 f.), as is the case in our inscription. Suzuki also notes that type A3 occurs more often in ljóðaháttr than in fornyrðislag, therefore its predominance in the inscription at least does not contradict the analysis as a ljóðaháttr stanza, although neither does it confirm it. Catalectic type A3, as in line 6 of our final analysis of the stanza, is according to Suzuki (2013, 600) far more common in ljóðaháttr than in fornyrðislag. Suzuki’s (2013, 607, table 12.27) analysis of the distribution of type B in the two different metres shows that in ljóðaháttr, the majority of type B verses (88%, rounded to the nearest whole percent) is found in the even line, as is the case in our inscription, while in fornyrðislag they are conversely much more common (74%) in the odd line. As regards the size of the first dip in type B lines in ljóðaháttr, Suzuki notes a majority of disyllabic dips (46%), as in fyrir sunnan land in the inscription, followed by trisyllabic (24%) and monosyllabic (21%) first dips, the latter represented by er átti Gaukr in the inscription. The inscription’s assumed full line could be analysed.
as type A1 with a monosyllabic anacrusis and a trisyllabic first dip according to Suzuki (2013, 674 f., tables 13.12 and 13.13). However, it must be noted that Suzuki excludes such full lines as Hávamál st. 80/3 inom reginkunnom, which Sievers regards as rhyming with the preceding long-line, from his corpus, and according to his analysis they lack alliteration (see Suzuki 2013, 999). To sum up, his statistics seem to favour analysis of the inscription as a stanza in ljóðaháttr, but the full line would still lack alliteration, as would the long-line if the inscription is instead analysed as a fornyrðislag stanza.

In support of the analysis as a ljóðaháttr stanza, it can be added that combinations of long-lines with full lines are also known from some other runic inscriptions.\(^1\) Consider the following examples:

\[\text{Drængr göþr dræpin üsyni,} \]
\[\text{ok Skögi swék saklø̄san.} \]

‘A good companion, killed shamefully, and Skögi betrayed the guiltless one.’

(DR 387 Vestermarie 5, c. 1075–1125; cf. Krüger forthcoming a)

\[\text{Þēʀ stafar munu Þorgunnr} \]
\[\text{miok længi lifa.} \]

‘These staves will live a very long time for Þorgunnr.’

(DR 40 Randbøl, c. 900–970; cf. Marold forthcoming)

\[\text{Brø̄ðr vāþr bæztra manna a landi auk i liði üti,} \]
\[\text{heldu sinna húskarla vel.} \]
\[\text{Hann fiǫll ī orrustu austr ī Garðum, līðs forungi, landmanna bæztr.} \]

‘The brothers were the best of men in the land and in the retinue abroad, they treated their housecarls well. He fell in battle in the East in Garðar, the leader of the host, the best of the landholders.’

(Sō 338 Turinge, c. 1070–1100; cf. Krüger forthcoming b)

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\(^1\) Our attention was drawn to Maeshowe runic inscription no. 4 by Ragnhild Ljosland at the Orkney Rune Rede in 2015 and by one of the referees of this article. It has been questioned whether this could also be a versified inscription which might combine a long-line and a full line. The first part of the inscription can be interpreted as: \textit{Þat mun satt, er ek segi, at fé var fœrt á brott ‘That will be true which I say, that treasure was carried away‘} (Barnes 1994, 76). However, the alliteration in the assumed even line (\textit{er ek segi}) would fall on the second lift. Although Sievers (1893, 70) gives a few examples of type A3 (with alliteration only on the second lift) in the even line, here the alliteration would also fall on a short syllable. Therefore it must be regarded as alliterating prose.
Furthermore, the word order and the choice of vocabulary do speak in favour of regarding Maeshowe no. 20 as metrical. Despite Finnur Jónsson’s claim to the contrary, the inscription does indeed show specific metrical characteristics in both respects. The usual word order in a carver formula is subject–verb–object with a personal name functioning as the subject, e.g. Maeshowe no. 16. This is not the case here: no personal name is given, and the inscription starts with the object. It is also remarkable that within the runic corpus the adjective rúnn/rynn ‘skilled in runes’ is otherwise attested only in two metrical inscriptions, i.e. the Ågersta inscription from Uppland (U 729; see Busch forthcoming a) and the Fyrby inscription from Södermanland (Sö 56; see Busch forthcoming b). The expressions fyrir sunnan land and fyrir vestan haf are unparalleled in the runic corpus.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the criterion of regular rhythm is fulfilled by the inscription, which can be satisfactorily analysed according to Sievers’s system, and there can be little or no doubt that the carver himself intended to compose a small verse. The criterion of alliteration is conversely less well attended to. However, only one line lacks alliteration if we do not accept Sievers’s Anreimung, i.e. alliteration of the full line with the preceding long-line. The other lines do fulfil the requirement. If the inscription consisted of only one potential long-line which lacked alliteration, it would have to be deemed non-metrical. But here we are dealing with an otherwise regular stanza which might lack one instance of alliteration. On this basis and in the light of other examples from Old Norse poetry where alliteration is lacking, the inscription has to be regarded as indubitably metrical. As we have seen, irregularities were surprisingly frequent in the stanzas from Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks where they seem to have been acceptable. The same might hold true for runic poetry.

It is of course generally more difficult to establish the metricality of a runic inscription as compared to that of poetry in a manuscript text which is often marked as poetic by an introductory sentence such as hann kvad ‘he said/recited’, followed by at least one complete stanza. Far more often, runic poetry consists of only one or two verse lines. In such cases, the only practical rule is to accept only fully regular lines as poetry since they would otherwise be hard to distinguish from alliterating prose or naturally rhythmical sequences of words. But if an inscription consists of a longer poetic sequence which shows just one irregularity, as is the case with Maeshowe no. 20, it should be accepted as metrical. This does
not mean that the essential criteria of alliteration and rhythm can be disregarded in an evaluation of the metricality of an inscription. But, as with other poetry, irregularities do occur, and an inscription should not be deemed entirely non-metrical if only one of its verse lines is irregular.²

Bibliography

DR + number = inscription published in Danmarks runeindskrifter, by Lis Jacobsen and Erik Moltke, 3 vols.: Text; Atlas; Registre (København, 1941–42).

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