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# A New Runic Inscription from Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul

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## Abstract

During the investigation of the interior of Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul in search of Cyrillic inscriptions, Russian epigraphists discovered an inscription that was later identified as comprised of Scandinavian runes. In 2011, the present author had the opportunity to study it herself. The inscription is located on a marble windowsill in the eastern wall of the northern first floor gallery, a sill covered with many Cyrillic (mostly of the second half of the twelfth to the mid-thirteenth century) and Greek graffiti. The c. 27 cm long line of runes reads **ar̥inbārpr̥r̥aṣṭrunārpaṣi**, Old Norse *Arinbárðr reist rúnar þessar* [older: *þā(r)si*], ‘Arinbárðr cut these runes’. The inscription appears to be cut fairly regularly but demonstrates some paleographic idiosyncrasies, e.g. all *r*-runes (also in **ar̥**) have sharply pointed tops. Some distinctive features include the consistent usage of the bind-rune **ar̥** whenever a combination of **a** and **r** is employed (four times, once for **ra**) and the absence of the *r*-rune in older *rúnar*. Though neither peculiarity provides firm grounds for dating the inscription, it was most probably produced in the second half of the eleventh or first half of the twelfth century and most likely carved by a Scandinavian mercenary in the service of the Byzantine emperor.

**Keywords:** Runic graffiti, Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul, Vikings in Byzantium, carver formula

The presence of Scandinavians in Byzantium is attested to by a great variety of Greek, Scandinavian and Russian written sources (Vasil'evskij 1915; Blöndal 1978; Jansson 2005), as well as by archaeological material (Müller-Wille 1997, 1999; Piltz 1989; Androshchuk 2013, 91–130). Runic inscriptions occupy a prominent place among these records, being

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authentic contemporary witnesses. More than thirty runestones, mostly from Central Sweden, memorialize people who traveled to and sometimes died in Byzantium (Mel'nikova 2001, *passim*; Mel'nikova 2005, 160–80; Källström 2016). Much rarer are written traces of the Varangians (Greek βαρᾱγγοί) preserved in Byzantium itself. The most imposing is the Piraeus lion statue (now in Venice) with, according to the most recent examination, three inscriptions on its body, one ornamented in the typical Central Swedish runic style (Mel'nikova 2001, 259–72; Snædal 2014). Two other undoubtedly Scandinavian runic inscriptions were found in Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul. The first, reading **alftan...**, **hlftan...** or **(h)alftan...**, was published by Elisabeth Svärdström in 1970, the second was read as **ari : k** by Mats Larsson (1989) but **arni** by Folke Hagberg in 1975 and Svein Indrelid in 1997 (both cited in Knirk 1999, 26). Both inscriptions were republished with commentaries in Mel'nikova 2001, 258 f., and on examining the inscription *de visu*, the present author is inclined to agree with the reading **arni**. Five more rune-like graffiti consisting of two to five letters were reported by Indrelid to Knirk, who (1999) was skeptical about their identification as runic. These graffiti (runic or otherwise) remain unpublished. The runic inscriptions can now be supplemented by four incised drawings of ships that were interpreted by Thomas Thomov (2015) as depictions of Viking Age *drekar* (large war ships).

In 2009, the Russian epigraphists Alexej Gippius, Jurij Artamonov and Tatjana Roždestvenskaja started a project the purpose of which was to search the interior of Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul for Cyrillic inscriptions. As some fifteen of these dating from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century have been documented since the nineteenth century, there was a reasonable expectation that modern technical apparatus might uncover some further examples. The medieval surfaces suited to writing (inner walls, windowsills, parapets, etc.) were examined and photographs of all possible graffiti were taken. Studying the photographs back in Moscow, they suspected several graffiti to be runic, and their photographs were forwarded to the present author. Only one of these emerged as authentically runic. The rest included the inscription first published by Larsson, pictorial representations and a multitude of occasional scratches. In September 2011, the present author visited Istanbul and had the opportunity to examine the inscription in person. A visual examination, even in the absence of advanced technical apparatus, permitted the correction and clarification of several details.

The inscription is incised on the marble sill of a window that was bricked up probably as early as the Middle Ages (perhaps after the Muslim



Fig. 1. The window with the inscription

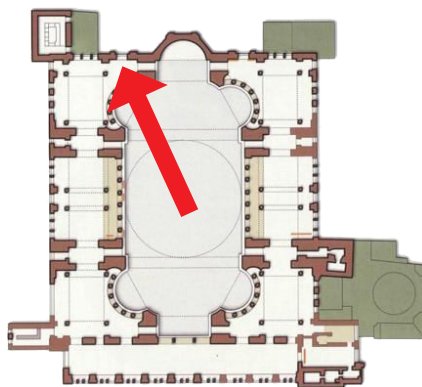


Fig. 2. The location of the window on the plan of the first floor gallery of Hagia Sophia cathedral

conquest of Constantinople) and later decorated using grisaille technique (fig. 1). The window is located in the eastern wall of the northern gallery of the first floor to the left of the arched opening leading to the central apse (fig. 2). The sill is covered with dozens of medieval Greek, Cyrillic and Arabic graffiti. Some fifteen centimeters closer to the edge of the sill than the runic inscription, for example, there is a Cyrillic graffiti, **коца ѱ** ('Kosa wrote' or 'Kosa has written'), and a little further to the left, **игнат ѱ** ('Ignat wrote' or 'Ignat has written'). On this and adjacent window-sills was found the largest complex of Cyrillic graffiti, including more than twenty inscriptions that on the basis of paleographic and linguistic features can be dated to the second half of the twelfth to the mid-thirteenth century (Artamonov and Gippius 2012). There are also many later inscriptions, including modern ones, in various languages.

The runic inscription is 26.8 cm long, and the height of the runes varies from 3 to 4.8 cm. While the inscription is relatively well preserved, there are two badly worn areas where the runes cannot be read with certainty (see fig. 3).

Rune 1, like rr. 5, 8 and 14, is a bind-rune **ar** with the branch for **a** only on the left side of the stave. This is a well-attested bind-rune and by far the most common one used in the Middle Ages (MacLeod 2002, 190 et passim). In the Hagia Sophia inscription, this bind-rune is used consistently in all cases where the collocation of /a/ and /r/ occurs. The graphic form of all instances of **r** (both in combination with **a** and separately) is striking — it has a distinctively pointed top and a rounded pocket that is often not very wide.

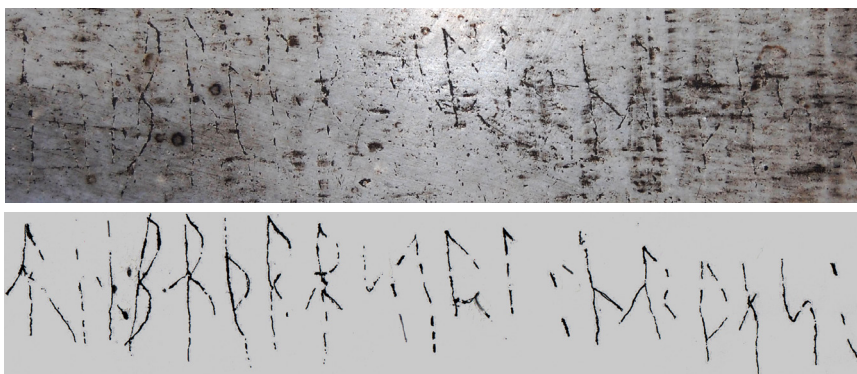


Fig. 3. The photograph of the inscription (made in 2009 by Alexej Gippius and Ju. Artamonov) and its drawing

Rune 1  $\widehat{ar}$  is followed by a partially damaged area where two staves can be discerned. No branches can be detected belonging to the first stave (r. 2), but between the staves can be seen a rather shallow slash which seems to continue to the right of the second staff and to end in a deep pit. It thus seems that these two staves and the downward sloping cut form the runes  $\dot{i}$  and  $\eta$  (with long-branch form), although their reading is uncertain.

Following this group of runes and before the next rune there is a small pit. Another pit seems to terminate the right branch of r. 3  $\eta$ . These two pits might have formed a division mark, but this is highly unlikely. The lower dot is somewhat obliquely formed, as if terminating the branch of the preceding  $\eta$  with a deeper cut, and there is a third and larger pit between the two but far to the left and practically on the staff of the  $\eta$ . This third pit seems to constitute damage that occurred after the inscription was cut. The interpretation of the pits as a division mark separating the two words is also highly dubious since there are no other division marks in the inscription.

Rune 4 is a distinct **b** with rounded but not very wide pockets. The top of r. 6 is poorly preserved but a rounded pocket in the middle part of the staff identifies it with certainty as **p**. Rune 7 **r** has the same top typical of the bind-runes: pointed and with a rounded pocket. Rune 8 is a ligature of the runes **a** and **r** which, in addition to representing  $\widehat{ar}$ , might stand for  $\widehat{ra}$  (in what is sometimes called “unnatural order”, since the **a**-branch is on the left side of the staff and is the first element the reader perceives).

After r. 8 there is a badly damaged area where the number of decimated runes, two or three, is unresolved. The only readily visible sign is the staff of a rune at the right edge of the area. There may be a branch descending from its top on the left side although only an indication of the lower part



is visible. It can be presumed to be an uncertain **ṭ**. Since the runes are generally cut roughly equidistant from each other, the space between r. 8 and the rune identified as **ṭ** seems enough for either one wide rune such as **r**, **u**, or **s** or two narrow runes such as **i**, **a**, **t**, **l**. In the middle part of the damaged space are traces of a barely visible zigzag line with smooth curves and a rather long right stroke descending perpendicularly. The zigzag line is similar to the middle part of the much clearer r. 17 **s** toward the end of the inscription. There is also a barely visible stroke which might be the upper part of the left perpendicular of the **s** form **ḥ**. The remaining cuts thus best correspond to an uncertainly read **ṣ**.

The rest of the inscription is well preserved and all the runes are clearly visible. Their distinctive features are as follows: r. 11 **r** has a much wider pocket than in other instances, and the leg proceeds from the pocket rather than the meeting point of the pocket and the stave; in r. 14 **ar** the pocket appears to be open, the leg then descending from the open end of the pocket; the pocket of r. 15 **p** is also much wider than in the first occurrence (r. 6) and its upper part is slightly damaged; the middle part of r. 18 **i** is worn and partially obliterated.

The whole inscription can thus be rendered:

**arīnbārpr̥rāṣṭrunārpaṣi**

1            5            10            15

Runes 1 to 7 can be interpreted as the masculine personal name *Arin-bárðr*. The name is not attested as such but both stems are widely used in dithematic names found in runic inscriptions and in the Icelandic sagas. The first, highly productive stem *Ar(i)n-* (with variants *Arn-*, *Erin-*, *Ærin-*, *Ærn-*) is correlated with Old Norse *ǫrn* (< \**arnur*) ‘eagle’ or *arinn* ‘hearth’ (Peterson 2007, 24; Janzén 1947, 65). As a separate name it is rarely used, but it forms the first part of many compounds such as *Arinbjörg*, *Arinbjörn*, *Aringeirr*, *Arinmundr* (Peterson 2007, 25 f.; Lind 1911, col. 32 f.). The second stem *bárðr* (< \**Baðu-friður*) could be used as a simplex name *Bárðr*, which is found in runic inscriptions only in Norway (Peterson 2007, 40) and is common in the West Scandinavian area (Janzén 1947, 67; Lind 1911, col. 111–13). In compounds, it is used as the second stem in both mythological (*Hár-bárðr*) and ordinary names such as *Hag-bárðr* (U 1041, which Lena Peterson [2007, 102] regards as a borrowing from Old High German *Hagupart*), *Ráð-bárðr* (in the context of *fornaldarsögur*) and so on (Janzén 1947, 67; Lind 1911, *passim*). The interpretation of the second stem as a byname meaning ‘beard’ is impossible due to the final **-r** which undoubtedly points to *-bárðr* masc. and excludes *barð* neut. ‘beard’.

Runes 8–10 form the sequence **ṛaṣṭ** which can be interpreted as the preterite form *reist*, 3rd person sg. of the verb *rísta* ‘carve, scratch’, one of the standard designations for cutting runes on memorial stones and objects (Källström 2007, 141 f.). The usual rendering of *-ei-* in the preterite singular of *rísta* is **ai** or **i** (Peterson 1994b, 44). Magnus Källström (2010, 188) has, however, indicated the possibility of regional variations in spelling. The usage of **a** for the root vowel *-ei-* is on the other hand not uncommon in Swedish runic inscriptions, cf. 3rd sg. pret. **rasi** (Sö 258), **rasti** (Ög 14, Ög 221, Sö 62, Sö 341, U 1173), **raspi** (Sö 129) and pl. **rastu** (Ög 228, U 755, U 768, etc.) of *reisa* ‘raise, erect’, although the most frequent forms are **raisti** and **raistu**. Another parallel is provided by the noun *steinn* ‘stone’ spelled **stan** in 40 cases while in c. 300 cases it is spelled **stain** (Peterson 1994b, 45–48, 62 f.). The first case is particularly significant for this comparison since it also concerns root vowels immediately before the consonant group *-st*. Most of the inscriptions with **a** rendering *-ei-* in the root come from Uppland, Södermanland and Östergötland, which of course are also the Swedish counties with the greatest number of runestones.

Runes 11–14 represent the word **runar**, acc. pl. of *rún* f. ‘rune’.

Runes 15–18 represent the word **pasi**, acc. pl. of *sú* f. ‘this’. The spelling is usual for Swedish runic inscriptions (Peterson 1994b, 53).

The inscription thus can be read as Old Norse:

*Arinbárðr reist rúnar þessar* [older: *þā(r)sī*]  
 ‘Arinbárðr cut these runes.’

The inscription is seemingly carved in a mixture of short-twig and long-branch runes, but explanations may be provided to account for the presumably short-twig variants. The particular short-twig form of **a** in all the **ar** bind-runes may have been necessitated by the presence of the distinguishing features of **r** on the right side of the stave, as appears generally to be the case for this bind-rune, although variants with long-branch **a** do occur (MacLeod 2002, *passim*). The branch appears to cross the stave to some extent in r. 16 **a**, thus probably representing long-branch **†**. Rune 3 **n** appears to be the long-branch variant **†**, and r. 17 **s** and probably also r. 9 **ṣ** are the long-branch variant **ḥ**. The absence of the right branch of r. 10 **t** (likely **↑**) and of any continuation of the branch on the left side of r. 13 **n** (likely **†**) could be the result of damage to the marble surface and may not necessarily constitute instances of the short-twig variants **1** and **†**.

The inscription was executed by a skillful person practiced in writing runes. The graffito appears to be painstakingly carved: the line is even and the distance between runes is approximately the same throughout.

Variations in the height of individual runes may largely be due to surface damage. One characteristic of Arinbárðr's writing is the graphic form of his **r**: All instances have a sharply pointed top, a pocket that usually touches the stave (r. 16 appears to be an exception) and a straight leg as far as this can be determined (although the point of contact with the pocket or pocket and stave appears to vary). Of interest, although probably only incidental, is the fact that the form of the **r** here appears somewhat similar to the form in Hagia Sophia 2 (**arni**; see the drawing in Knirk 1999), which also has a pointed top, although there the pocket begins somewhat below the top of the stave, and the pocket is open (as apparently in r. 14 **ār** here). In addition, many pockets on the **b**, **r** and **p** runes are rather narrow, and if r. 9 is indeed **s**, it is quite similar to r. 17, with smooth curves in the middle, the upper stroke on the left side and the lower stroke on the right. All collocations of /a/ and /r/ are rendered by the bind-rune **ār**. Such stability in the usage of bind-runes is unusual for younger runic inscriptions (MacLeod 2002, 125). In most cases, bind-runes substitute for individual runes only occasionally, and in any one inscription there can be both ligatures and individual runes rendering the same combination of sounds. For example, in the Kälvesten inscription (Ög 8, early 800s) the combination /au/ is rendered once by a bind-rune and three times with the unligatured runes **au**. Proficiency in writing runes is also reflected in Arinbárðr's employment of the same bind-rune for both **ār** (rr. 1, 5, 14) and **ra** (r. 8). No marks designating the division between words are used.

There seem to be no specific paleographic indications that could facilitate dating the inscription more or less precisely. The bind-rune **ār** appears in older runic inscriptions and continued to be used throughout the entire period of runic literacy. In the ninth to the eleventh century, bind-runes were seldom found in inscriptions on memorial stones (Peterson 1994a, 65; MacLeod 2002, 124): Mindy MacLeod counts some sixty instances of bind-runes in Swedish inscriptions, mostly from Uppland, Södermanland and Gästrikland, including four instances of the bind-rune **ār** (three from Uppland; MacLeod 2002, 125–27). She also stresses the irregularity of bind-rune usage as well as the absence of inscriptions with more than one bind-rune. She points out, however, that inscriptions on various portable objects can feature more than one bind-rune (MacLeod 2002, 125 and note 12). Thus, on the rune-stick from Old Ladoga, dated to the early ninth century, there are at least three bind-runes of different composition. The usage of bind-runes as well as their repertoire increases from the turn of the eleventh to the twelfth century, and they are widely used in medieval inscriptions in Sweden and Norway (MacLeod 2002, 184–89).

Another feature of the Hagia Sophia inscription is the total replacement of the rune **ᚱ** /ř/ by **ᚱ** /r/ (i.e. the final **ᚱ** in both **ar̥inbārpr**, after a dental consonant, and **runār**), but neither can this serve as a precise indicator for dating. The confusion of these runes as a result of the depalatalization of /ř/ is attested as early as the ninth century more or less regularly in Norway, and occasionally in Denmark and Sweden. The usage of the *yr*-rune continued longer in Sweden and it was only in the second half of the eleventh century that the regular use of the *r*-rune in all positions became standard (Steblin-Kamenskij 1953, 123; Larsson 2002, 33–36; Schulte 2008, 175 f.).

In view of these peculiarities, it seems safe to assume that the inscription was made no earlier than the mid-eleventh century. As to the upper limit of its dating, it could hardly be later than the twelfth century, probably its first half since the inscription shows no traces of high medieval Scandinavian developments in the rune-row.

The new runic inscription in Hagia Sophia Cathedral, like the two previously known, was most probably carved by one of the Scandinavian mercenaries in the emperor's guard (Blöndal 1978), though the possibility that it was made by a Scandinavian merchant or pilgrim cannot be excluded. One of the duties of the Varangians was to attend services in the cathedral as the escorts and bodyguards of the Byzantine emperor. The emperor's guard began to be staffed by Scandinavians at the end of the tenth century (in the 980s). After the conquest of England by the Normans in 1066, large numbers of Anglo-Saxons entered the service of the Byzantine emperor and the ethnic composition of the guard began to change (Vasil'evskij 1915, 355–73). Though Scandinavians continued as members of the emperor's guard in the second half of the eleventh century as well as in the twelfth century, their golden age had passed and most of them served as so-called outer Varangians, i.e. in the field army. This makes the dating of the inscription to the second half of the eleventh century or beginning of the twelfth century more probable.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The interpretation of this inscription was discussed at the Runic Forum (*Runråd*) at the Department of Scandinavian Languages, Uppsala University, on 4 December 2014, and I am greatly thankful to Henrik Williams, Lena Peterson, Magnus Källström and all the other participants there for valuable suggestions and observations. I published a shorter, preliminary presentation of this inscription in Mel'nikova 2013.

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