Lisbeth M. Imer. *Peasants and Prayers: The Inscriptions of Norse Greenland*. Publications from the National Museum, Studies in Archaeology and History, 25. Copenhagen: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2017. 349 pp. ISBN 978-87-7602-345-4. DKK 348.

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Lisbeth Imer's book *Peasants and Prayers: The Inscriptions of Norse Greenland* deals, as its title suggests, with the written tradition of medieval Greenland as attested in around 160 runic inscriptions and a few inscriptions in Roman letters. This material has aroused less attention than the larger runic corpora from Scandinavia. However, as Imer's book makes clear, the Greenlandic runic tradition offers a unique insight into the writing practices of a remote rural community which shows strong ties to other Scandinavian countries but also its own identity as attested by independent developments.

The book consists of four chapters followed by a lengthy catalogue of all the inscriptions included in the study. The first and introductory chapter has a wide scope and its different sections provide information regarding previous research on the archaeological sites and findings, the societal background of the Greenlandic written tradition, the methodology used in the book, as well as an account of the datings, runes, orthography and language of the inscriptions. The section on the history of research is instructive and gives a good overview of the problems on which previous researchers have focused, and consequently also of some of the topics that Imer herself discusses in the book. Understandably enough, Imer does not provide a complete account of all the previous results regarding for example the chronology of the inscriptions or their runic typology, matters which are discussed later in the book. However, in this section and throughout the entire book in general (see below), cross-references would have helped the reader to find where different topics are discussed at more length.

The following section on Norse society in Greenland is likewise very informative and serves to explain the kind of milieu in which the Greenlandic inscriptions arose. Interesting discussions consider for instance the possible social classes present at the time and the status of different settlements (pp. 18–20); this last can be linked to factors such as the type of farm, “centralised” or “dispersed”, and the presence of a church. These observations are not connected to the runic findings and their geographical distribution, which are however discussed later in the same chapter (pp. 29 f.). There, Imer highlights the interesting fact that writing does not seem to have been limited to the largest farms with churches but was a phenomenon that had also spread to mid-sized farms where no remains of

churches have been found. Hence, she concludes that writing as such does not seem to be “a strong indicator of social status” (p. 29). This is a fascinating result that could perhaps have been further supported or nuanced by a finer analysis of the distribution of the inscriptions, considering for example the inscription type or any factor that might reflect the level of literacy or social status at large, mid-sized and small farms.

An important section of this introductory chapter is devoted to “Material and methodology” (pp. 23–28). It might firstly be mentioned that in choosing which inscriptions to add to the corpus under investigation, Imer deviates from the practice of previous researchers of excluding inscriptions consisting of only one rune, which have been regarded as owner’s marks. Imer’s opinion is that such exclusions result in an imbalance in the material, which has negative repercussions on the analysis of the written tradition. Moreover, it is difficult to justify the inclusion of inscriptions consisting of two runes when artefacts of the same type with only one rune are disregarded. The choice of corpus for a study must depend on the study’s purpose. Imer clearly has a point in the case of her book as single-rune inscriptions can also contribute to our knowledge of Greenlandic literacy, particularly since she regards some of these runes as abbreviations of religious names or formulas (see below). On the other hand, the disadvantage of such an expansion of the corpus is that it was impossible for Imer to register all the single-rune inscriptions (p. 26). In the same spirit, she also includes the few inscriptions with Roman letters found in Greenland, which is a welcome decision.

Imer mentions as a central part of her methodology the analysis of the interplay between text and context. *Context* is defined very broadly, comprising for example the type of artefact bearing the inscription, its preservation, dating, provenance and the circumstance of its finding. Although hardly revolutionary, it is important to be reminded that consideration of all these aspects is crucial to an accurate account of a written tradition. At this stage of the book, it would have been useful to operationalise the term *context*, specifying exactly how these factors were taken into account in the analyses and which variables were combined in order to gain new insights into the Greenlandic tradition. Although this is not explicitly stated, the reflections on *context* in practice translate into a descriptive structure for the inscriptions (chapter 2) which follows the kind of artefact the texts are carved on: gravestone, cross, amulet and so forth. This leads to several valuable observations regarding each specific variable which is thoroughly investigated by Imer. This contextual approach, however, might have been further exploited, for example by the systematic combination of more variables—e.g. text type and degree of literacy with chronology and provenance of the inscriptions—and by the placement of these at the centre of specific research questions. Observations on these matters are indeed spread throughout the book but could have been treated more exhaustively and systematically.

A last remark regarding the section on methodology concerns the short notes on graphemic and graph-typological terminology. The precise definition and employment of concepts such as *grapheme*, *graph-type* and *graph-type variant*

is not required in every runological study. The nature of Imer's analysis, for instance, does not require a thorough consideration of *grapheme* since it is not a graphemic study. This is reflected in the fact that the term is only briefly defined and in general avoided in the analyses, and perhaps rightly so. Similarly, Imer decides against undertaking a typological classification of the rune forms in her corpus. For the sake of simplicity, the term *variant* is avoided and instead the terms *graph*, *rune*, *form* and *type* are used (p. 24), without however being defined. While it may be justified to refrain from carrying out a complete typological classification—it is not the aim of this book—it remains important to specify which graphic criteria are relevant in the analysis rather than relying solely on runic fonts. In the section on “Runes and orthography” (pp. 38–48), for example, the rune ᚱ is discussed as a possibly distinct Greenlandic shape (p. 40). Since the rune form is not described, however, it is not exactly clear which graphic feature is hypothesised to be Greenlandic. In the three inscriptions where ᚱ is found, its “dot” seems in fact to show different shapes: a triangular shape (Herjolfsnes 8), a short vertical stroke (Herjolfsnes 3), and a longer vertical stroke that reaches the baseline (Herjolfsnes 4 and 8). In the same passage, it is stated that the form ᚱ “is found in most of the rune-writing areas”, and that it is for example normally used for /y/ in Sweden. It is plausible to understand the statement as referring here to the dotted *u*-rune with a vertical stroke of some sort. The examples provided, however, **iybiurn** *lōbiq̃rn* (U 77) and **iyān** *lōhan* (Ög 231), clearly show that the reference is simply to the dotted **u**, independent of the shape of the dot, or alternatively the *u*-rune with a rounded dot. Similar potential misunderstandings surround other rune forms, such as the different shapes of the *b*-rune, e.g. closed ᚷ, open ᚸ, with separated pockets ᚷ and so forth (p. 42).

The section on “Runes and orthography” contains a series of interesting observations on the rune forms used in medieval Greenland, and especially on certain types which are either unique or seem to be chiefly Greenlandic. This rural and remote region in fact seems to have given rise to a few local palaeographic developments. Apart from the so-called Greenlandic *r*-rune, ᚱ and ᚲ, which although proportionally more common in Greenland also appears elsewhere (p. 42), special forms of **b** (ᚷ), **p** (ᚷ, transliterated **P** by Imer) and **ḁ** (ᚹ and ᚺ) are attested (pp. 42–44). As regards the rune ᚷ **P**, Imer refers to two hypotheses: that it derives from the Roman capital letter P, which is supported by the fact that the shape appears only in runic inscriptions in Latin; or that it is a development within the runic tradition since it relates graphically to the rune **b** ᚷ. She concludes that the solution might be a combination of the two hypotheses (p. 43). It is naturally difficult to be certain, but it is surely tempting to connect the types **b** ᚷ and ᚷ **P** as mirrors of each other, especially in consideration of the third innovation ᚹ ḁ mentioned above which mirrors the *p*-rune ᚺ. If these types are to be considered part of the same development, albeit scarcely attested, they might be explained as a consequence of two common tendencies in alphabetic development known as facilitation and homogenisation (cf. Staffan Fridell, “Graphic Variation and Change in the Younger Futhark”, *NOWELE* 60/61 [2011], 69–88, at pp. 72, 74; Fridell,

“Tendenser i skrifttecknens utveckling: Alfabet och runor”, *Futhark* 6 [2015], 7–19, at pp. 9, 11). The first describes the tendency for elements of a semiotic system such as an alphabet to develop towards greater facility of execution (see e.g. William C. Watt, “What is the Proper Characterization of the Alphabet? 5. Transcendence”, *Semiotica* 138 [2002], 131–78, at p. 159). The second involves an evolution of the written signs towards greater mutual similarity, following principles such as symmetry of shape (see e.g. Watt, “Semiotic Evolution as a Vindication of Lamarck”, in *The Semiotic Bridge: Trends from California*, ed. I. Rauch and G. F. Carr [Berlin, 1989], 319–25, at p. 322).

In this context, it is likewise tempting to add another innovation to the list of those allegedly resulting from these tendencies, namely the *m*-rune with only one ascending branch, ᚠ. This type is attested in a few Greenlandic inscriptions and has been transliterated **q** or **k** in previous research (cf. p. 44). Noting the use of the same type as an *m*-rune in some medieval Gotlandic inscriptions, Imer instead concludes that ᚠ is to be read as **m** in the Greenlandic cases as well, produced either by mistake or as a deliberate variant. In my opinion, it might not be a mistake. This type, like the aforementioned innovations ᚵ **b**, ᚶ **p** and ᚷ **ð**, could in fact be explained as a consequence of the tendency towards facilitation and homogenisation of written signs, ᚠ having a simpler shape than ᚹ and being symmetric compared to ᚷ **k** (cf. Alessandro Palumbo, “Gutarunor: studie i runformernas bruk och utveckling på Gotland under medeltiden och reformationstiden”, unpublished M.A. thesis [Uppsala, 2012], at pp. 75 f., 84 f.).

In concluding this section, Imer notes that the general development of runes and orthography is “well synchronised with the rest of the Nordic rune-writing communities” (p. 48), and that the development of “a few regional peculiarities ... is to be expected when dealing with a long settlement period in a remote region”. I think that Imer may be downplaying the importance of these results here. The existence of local developments, which moreover seem to follow systematic patterns, might indicate that writing was more widespread and well established than the remoteness of the region might instinctively lead one to believe, or at least that a literate elite with a strong interest in writing comprised part of the society. The invention and spread of medieval innovations in the runic writing system did not occur in the same way and to the same extent in all rune-writing communities. In Sweden, for example, most innovations started and were more consistently used in a defined area where the writing culture was particularly lively whereas such developments were more scarcely attested or non-existent in other regions (Palumbo, “Skriftsystem i förändring: en grafematisk och paleografisk studie av de svenska medeltida runinskrifterna”, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation [Uppsala, 2018], at pp. 203–07). The fact that innovations are found in the Greenlandic material and that these, moreover, can be differentiated from other runic traditions, for example in Norway or Iceland, might suggest a strong local interest in writing. This is furthermore supported by Imer’s interesting and promising observation (p. 28) that inscriptions have been found at almost all excavation sites and that many more sites are yet to be excavated.

Chapter 2, “Artefacts and inscriptions”, is a presentation of the Greenlandic runic inscriptions structured according to the type of script-bearing artefact: gravestone, cross, amulet, household utensil, wooden stick and object connected to textile production. Some inscriptions, such as the so-called Gudveig’s stick (Herjolsnes 10), the Kingittorsuaq stone and the walrus skull from Le Mans, are treated in some detail whereas others are mentioned more briefly. In general, this chapter gives a very good overview of the Greenlandic material and of the great variety of inscribed objects that have been found, as well as of some of the reading and interpretational difficulties connected to the inscriptions. Throughout the chapter, the Greenlandic artefacts are also compared to analogous objects in other rune-writing communities, and both similarities and more marked Greenlandic characteristics are pointed out. Comparisons to other corpora are of course welcome although in some cases Imer might have drawn clearer conclusions from these, as on a few occasions they appear lacking in relevance to her argument. Although this chapter is rich in data relating to artefacts and inscriptions, the book itself is not a corpus edition, meaning that the information provided on the texts may be lacking in detail, which in view of the number of inscriptions treated is understandable. The specialist is nevertheless sometimes left wanting more, be it a transliteration, a transcription, a photograph or a drawing, but actually needs only to look through the catalogue at the end of the book to find most of the required information.

In a few cases, Imer’s otherwise precise descriptions of the texts and her findings lead to conjectures which should have been presented with more caution. One of these cases regards the so-called Gudveig’s stick. This inscription gives the name of a woman, Gudveig, who probably died on a ship since the text states she was laid overboard. The stick was found in an empty grave, probably in place of the body which was of course lost. The carver of the inscription is believed to be Norwegian and Gudveig is also claimed to have the same background (p. 62). The orthographic observations underlying the first claim, however, do not seem particularly compelling, and the carver being Norwegian does not mean that Gudveig herself must have been. Addressing the claim that Gudveig was Norwegian, Imer adduces as proof the fact that it is common to mention the full name of the deceased in gravestone texts, and that had Gudveig been Greenlandic, someone would have known her full name and included it in the inscription. This last statement is clearly speculative. Secondly, Herjolsnes 10 is not a gravestone inscription but a wooden stick. Thirdly, Greenlandic parallels to gravestone texts are scarce and varied: as far as I am aware (cf. fig. 24, p. 56), there are five comparable texts on gravestones, only two of which give just the first name of the deceased. Although in this and a further few cases, Imer’s conclusions are, to my mind, a little premature, problematic interpretations are in general presented cautiously and bolstered by sound arguments.

Since, as mentioned previously, the structure of chapter 2 is based around artefact type, themes or characteristics that are common to inscriptions across the categories are dispersed among the different sections. Here again, cross references

to further relevant passages of text, or a summary paragraph, would have allowed a transversal reading of the book following areas other than the text-bearing objects. Nevertheless, Imer highlights many interesting traits of the Greenlandic medieval writing tradition. It is for instance remarkable that a few inscriptions show signs of influence from the runic and Roman epigraphic traditions, with a mixture of languages, i.e. vernacular and Latin, or alphabets, i.e. runes and Roman letters (e.g. pp. 57, 60, 66, 71, 75). Also striking is that so many of the Greenlandic inscriptions with religious content were probably not produced in a clerical context, for example textile utensils (pp. 73–79). On many of these objects, for instance on loom weights, single runes or pairs of runes have been found and interpreted as owner's marks. Imer suggests however that at least some of these inscriptions might be abbreviated religious texts. For example, she considers the many single *m*-runes as abbreviations of the name *Mary*, others as abbreviations of *ave* or *ave Maria*, and finally some are interpreted as *Jesus Christus* (pp. 77 f.). As supporting evidence, Imer notes that the same single runes or runic combinations occur too often and furthermore in different settlements to be considered symbols of identification for specific households. Moreover, the fact that they are often carved in connection with crosses strengthens the hypothesis of their connection with the religious sphere. Imer's argument appears reasonable, and even though the existence of abbreviated texts is difficult to prove beyond any doubt, I agree that at least part of the material can probably be given such an interpretation.

This topic is also revisited in chapter 3, where Imer treats illegible (or more precisely uninterpreted or uninterpretable) inscriptions, single runes and rune-like signs (pp. 108–113). Here, she provides more examples (fig. 65, pp. 110 f., and p. 112) of possibly abbreviated texts. For instance, Garðar 8 consists of the sequences *kri* or *gri* and *au*, which she interprets as an abbreviation of *Christus* and *ave*. In consideration of Imer's interpretations and the alleged presence of monograms or bind-runes for sacred names, it is tempting to entertain the idea that further uninterpreted inscriptions might be similarly explained. For instance, Garðar 13 bears the sequence *+auP*. If the "rune" *P* were a monogram for *Christ*, the Greek letter *rho*, we might have here the same content as in Garðar 8, *ave [Maria]* and *Christus*.

The aforementioned chapter 3 is titled "Literacy" and has two quite different aims (p. 91): to investigate the purpose of the Greenlandic inscriptions and to assess the different stages of literacy for which the corpus provides evidence. The level of literacy is studied by comparing the inscriptions with different stages in the childhood process of learning to read and write. The model used by Imer for comparison is largely taken from Klaus B. Günther ("Ein Stufenmodell der Entwicklung kindlicher Lese- und Schreibstrategien", in *Rätsel des Schriftspracherwerbs: Neue Sichtweisen aus der Forschung*, ed. H. Balhorn and H. Brügelmann [Lengwil am Bodensee, 1995], 89–102), and includes five stages ranging from the learning of letters to full competence in reading and writing. Although the application of modern results from children's development of literacy to medieval material certainly entails several complications, the

approach is interesting and relatively unexplored in runology (but cf. Jan Ragnar Hagland and Rutt Trøite Lorentzen, “Skrift med runer i lys av forskning på tidleg skrivning hos barn”, in *Runor och ABC: Elva föreläsningar från ett symposium i Stockholm våren 1995*, ed. S. Nyström [Stockholm, 1997], 43–78). The main flaw I see in this chapter is, however, that such an analysis is in practice reduced to scattered observations in various sections, whereby some inscriptions are loosely connected to earlier or later stages in Günther’s framework. This does not mean that the observations are uninteresting; on the contrary, they show important aspects of the Greenlandic written tradition, but they remain rather unsystematic.

One problem is that the chapter is not structured according to Imer’s results on the stages of literacy attested in the Greenlandic inscriptions. The inscriptions are instead “divided into types according to their textual content” (p. 95), such as names, owner’s inscriptions, religious inscriptions, poetry and so forth. A question which is not properly answered is how relevant these categories are to the level of literacy in Greenlandic society. For example, the religious inscriptions form a heterogeneous group that attests to varying stages of literacy. A further problematic aspect is that the same artefact can be listed under different categories if its inscription has more than one function or can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, Herjolfsnes 6 is listed under “Names”, “Owner’s inscriptions” and “Religious inscriptions”. Such classification is perhaps justified if the purpose is to present the different kinds of content attested in the corpus, but it is hardly suitable for analysis of the level of literacy shown by a particular inscription. This kind of study of literacy must instead consider several aspects in a comprehensive examination of the inscriptions. In some instances, conclusions about the carvers’ low level of literacy are drawn, in my opinion, rather too hastily.

One example is Herjolfsnes 4 which occurs on a wooden cross and reads **pulibr : kor|þi krūs fæna | tilūfs ok tȳrkunar | kūþi ōlmokku|m Þórleifr gerði kross þenna til lofs ok dýrkunar Guði almáttkum**. The carver noticed too late that he had run out of space at the right end of the horizontal arm, forcing him to carve the last **m**-rune at the far left of the same arm. Imer (p. 103) writes that “This adding of extra signs in places where they should not be is a classic example of the first stages of learning to write”. The arrangement of the inscription, using some unusual bind-runes to try to make the text fit is, according to Imer, revealing of the carver’s lack of experience. While the carver may well have been inexperienced, we are nevertheless dealing with a fairly long text with no apparent mistakes (apart from the misjudgement in the layout), employing dotted runes and bind-runes, as well as the double spelling of a long consonant in one case. All in all, I would argue that this inscription attests to a relatively high level of competence in the written language.

There are other traits that I would not necessarily connect to the process of learning to write. The use of cryptic runes, for instance, seems to me to require a degree of familiarity with the writing system rather than being a method for a beginner to practise his or her writing skills (cf. Garðar 26, p. 98). The writing of wordplay or poetry, to take another example, does not necessarily need to

be interpreted as a way of practising one's skills since it may have had other purposes (cf. Qorlortup Itinnera 2 and Narsaq Ø17a 1, pp. 96 f.).

A particularly interesting observation made by Imer concerns the strong connection that seems to have existed in Greenland between writing and religious practices. The high rate of religious inscriptions in the Greenlandic corpus suggests that "writing may have found its platform in worship and the religious life" (p. 108). Another intriguing feature is that many of the religious inscriptions, due to the presence of many mistakes, seem to reflect a relatively low degree of literacy. This could in some cases be explained by the fact that the content of religious formulas and prayers, such as *Ave Maria*, *Pater noster* and others, might have been used for practising writing skills; this has parallels in practising writing in Roman letters, as Imer points out. It is also interesting to note the connection between writing and domestic religion shown by the many single and two-rune inscriptions on household utensils, which according to Imer are probably abbreviated sacred names and Christian formulas. These would then show the extent and pervasiveness of runic writing in everyday life.

The book concludes with a fourth chapter summarising the main results, a bibliography, summaries in English, Greenlandic and Danish, as well as a catalogue of the corpus. This catalogue contains, among other information, transliterations, transcriptions and translations of the texts. Although the book is not a corpus edition, the information in the comment field might have been more generous; comments on the readings, for example, are minimal, as are linguistic discussions. The drawings are high quality and extremely useful, although the almost complete lack of photographs in the catalogue is regrettable. Should one wish for something more, it would be an index indicating where in the book the inscriptions are discussed.

On a formal and editorial level, the book generally presents well. Imer's writing style makes it easy to read and in some instances gives it an almost popular-science character, which might appeal to the interested general public as well. The text would have benefitted from further editing and cross-referencing as it contains a number of repetitions. As regards figures and tables, the maps on p. 29 lack legends and it would have been useful for the one on p. 17 to indicate at least a few of the names of the Norse settlements.

Imer's book is a valuable contribution to research into the medieval writing culture of Greenland. Although the analyses might have been more penetrating in some regards, this work provides a comprehensive overview of the material with its unique features and its connections to other rune-writing communities in the North. By collecting all the inscriptions in one book and presenting them from a variety of angles, Imer also provides a good service to scholars who wish to acquaint themselves with this material. With the multiplicity of topics raised by the author and the richly illustrated catalogue, *Peasants and Prayers* is sure to stimulate future research in this field.