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Documenting the Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of the British Isles

Confessions of a field runologist

Abstract

Although fieldwork has been undertaken since the dawn of runology in the seventeenth century, very little has been written about it. The procedures adopted by the field runologist, the problems encountered and their solutions, are matters that can often only be dimly discerned in publications that emerge as the end product of the fieldwork. This paper offers insights into how the documentation of the Scandinavian runic inscriptions of the British Isles proceeded from conception to implementation. It includes accounts of the various trials and tribulations suffered by the field runologists involved, and reveals the sort of (mis)adventures that can lie hidden behind the sometimes arid presentations in published volumes.

Keywords: British Isles, runic inscriptions, runological fieldwork, Maeshowe, medieval Dublin excavations, SC 15 Thurso II, SH 6 Eshaness II, St. Molaise's cave inscriptions (SC 3-7, 9, 12-13), †E 5 Settle

The examination and documentation of inscriptions lie at the heart of runology. Without those core activities, there would be little to say about runes and runic writing at all. The great corpus editions are based on exhaustive fieldwork, as are many reports of individual inscriptions or groups of inscriptions. In the light of this, it is surprising that relatively little has been written on the subject. The procedures adopted by the field runologist, the problems encountered and their solutions, are matters that can often only be dimly glimpsed in the text of the edition or article that emerges as the end product of the fieldwork. At the first International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions held in Ann Arbor in 1980, Erik Moltke and Sven B. F. Jansson shared a few of the insights they had gained during a lifetime of runological fieldwork (Moltke 1981, Jansson 1981), but these are fairly idiosyncratic pieces, and Jansson's is largely anecdotal. In a brief article in *Fornvännen*, Bengt Lundberg gave a summary account of his experiences photographing rune-stones (Lundberg 1988). Useful in its day, the techniques he recommends have in part become standard practice, and in part been superseded by developments in photography. In *The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions*

of Britain, Ray Page and I included a chapter entitled 'Examining the inscriptions', which detailed the more significant problems we had encountered in our fieldwork and the steps we had taken to try to overcome them (Barnes & Page 2006: 44–50). This was not, however, intended as a full account of the work that led up to the edition; it was more in the nature of a warning to readers that the reliability of readings and measurements can vary according to an inscription's remoteness and the circumstances in which it is examined.

Since 1988 there has been a yearly meeting of field runologists. These have varied somewhat in structure and scope, but at most of them participants have been offered hands-on experience. They have been directed to inscriptions, and given the opportunity to examine them and discuss their findings with fellow runologists. A few such meetings have been devoted to lectures, but these have not on the whole concerned runological fieldwork. The 1994 gathering in Schleswig, for example, dealt with runic tradition in the Danish-German border region, as is borne out by the published volume *Von Thorsberg nach Schleswig*.

Two general introductions to runology, Klaus Düwel's *Runenkunde* and my own *Runes*, incorporate brief guidelines on the examination of inscriptions, particularly new finds (Düwel 2008: 15–22, Barnes 2012: 177–8). Common-sense advice is offered: *inter alia* that the field runologist should seek to learn as much as possible about the find circumstances, the nature of the object or structure bearing the inscription, and the age of inscription and inscription-bearer; measurements are to be taken, and the text examined both in its totality and rune by rune; the inscription should be photographed under different lighting conditions; drawings may also with advantage be made; and so on. From all this activity will emerge a reading – the writing the runologist thinks to see. It may in addition be possible to discern how the inscription was planned and carved, and to judge the extent to which layout, or particular rune or word forms, can be ascribed to the shape of the inscription-bearer, the space available on it, or difficulties the carver experienced with the material.

As is clear from this list of desiderata, neither Düwel nor I do much more than state what for the field runologist should be fairly obvious. However, the *Handbook of Runology*, which is envisaged as the tangible outcome of the 2013–14 Oslo-based project *The Reading and Interpretation of Runic Inscriptions: The Theory and Method of Runology*, is to include an entire section on field runology. Here, if all goes well, we can look forward to the setting out of detailed guidelines for runological fieldwork, based on older and more recent experience.

In the meantime, it will do no harm to offer a few insights into how the documentation and publication of the Scandinavian runic inscriptions of the British Isles proceeded from conception to implementation. The account can serve as a practical demonstration of field runologists at work.

Unlike Denmark, Norway and Sweden, neither Great Britain nor Ireland possesses an authority dedicated to the care, study and publication of runic inscriptions. This means that serious runological endeavour has been the product of individual interest and effort, chiefly on the part of academics trained in a branch of historical linguistics or archaeology. Such corpus editions as have been compiled have come about by chance rather than as the result of a grand plan.

For a long time many of the British inscriptions written in Scandinavian runes were destined to take their place in a future volume of the Norwegian corpus edition, *NlyR*. The editor of its first five volumes, Magnus Olsen, had examined much of the relevant material and written on it for sundry publications (e.g. 1903, 1912, 1954, *NlyR* 5: 230–32). It is, however, by no means clear that all of the inscriptions Olsen thus planned to annex are in fact Norwegian; nor indeed, precisely what “Norwegian” means in a British-Isles context.

In the 1950s, Aslak Liestøl (Magnus Olsen’s runological collaborator in later years and ultimately his successor) made a detailed survey of the inscriptions in Maeshowe, the renowned prehistoric cairn on the Orkney Mainland. The aim, in line with Olsen’s grand plan, was to document and edit these runic graffiti with a view to incorporating them into a future volume of *NlyR*. However, overwhelmed by the 550 or more inscriptions found at Bryggen, Bergen, Liestøl suggested to me in the late 1970s that I might consider taking over the task of editing and publishing the Maeshowe material. At that point, I had no experience of field runology, but agreed nevertheless to bear his suggestion in mind. In the following years I read up on the Maeshowe corpus, and began to make preliminary notes, but I still had very little idea of how to proceed with the actual examination of the runes. Then, in 1987, I managed to persuade a small group of colleagues with the requisite experience to accompany me on a field trip to Orkney (out of which grew the annual meeting of field runologists). From Sweden came Helmer Gustavson, Thorgunn Snædal, Jan Paul Strid and Marit Åhlén, and from Norway Terje Spurkland. Together we subjected all the inscriptions in Maeshowe to detailed examination, and it is chiefly on the basis of knowledge gathered from this experience that I proceeded on my later visits to the cairn. Naturally, I also took into account the type of information provided in published runic

corpus editions as well as in reports of new finds. With the help of a 500-watt lamp and tape measure, I recorded the location of each inscription in the cairn, its length, and the height of its graphs. Using magnifying glass and spyglass (loupe), I examined the inscriptions rune by rune, making notes and drawings. I was not starting from scratch, of course. Other runologists had been there before me, and I knew what the inscriptions were supposed to say – with the advantages and disadvantages such knowledge brings. Being only moderately handy with a camera myself, I was delighted when colleagues in the Swedish Runverket proposed that their photographer, Bengt Lundberg, should join me on one of my Maeshowe trips and undertake the difficult task of documenting the whole corpus. I received valuable advice and help from others too, Ray Page and James Knirk in particular. My visits to Maeshowe were of necessity many: it is astonishing how little you remember once you are on your way home, and how many details you have omitted to note.

From all this it will be clear that I learnt the trade on the job – through confronting the task of documenting and editing a corpus of runic inscriptions. But I doubt if I am alone in that respect.

Field runology, it gradually dawned on me, involves considerably more than the acts of examination and documentation. In Scandinavia, the runologist tends to arrive as the representative of some august institution, as a member of staff of a national museum, for example. He or she is there in an official capacity. In Britain one has first to explain who one is, what one hopes to achieve, and, where access is restricted – as in the case of Maeshowe – to apply for permission to spend extended time at the site. Maeshowe is under the guardianship of Historic Scotland, and in the 1980s and '90s one applied to their office at Fort George, which lies not far from Inverness. Provided permission was granted, one then proceeded to Orkney, and, waving the relevant document, requested access. With today's volume of tourism, affairs at the site are much more professionally organised than they were twenty or thirty years ago. In those days much depended on the whim of the custodian and his family. Some who had spent time in Maeshowe before me spoke of receiving a rather frosty reception. I therefore made it my first priority to cultivate the custodian, a local farmer by the name of Norry Selater. I booked in at his sister's bed-and-breakfast establishment nearby, and in the evening joined him for drinks and darts at the Pomona Inn or the bar of the Standing Stones Hotel. Having concluded fairly rapidly from this that I was a fit and proper person, he let me have a spare key to the cairn, so that I could come and go more or less at will. He also brought ladders as and when I needed them, and was happy in return to be offered tots of Highland Park. Maeshowe is always

damp and chilly, so the sensible runologist will keep a bottle of whisky tucked away out of sight in one of the side chambers of the cairn.

While working on the Maeshowe inscriptions, I had the opportunity of hearing the custodian address the groups of tourists who at regular intervals traipsed in and out of the mound. Norry did not vary his recitation greatly, so I soon came to know it by heart. At a certain point he would gesticulate towards a couple of stones in the south-east wall and, conflating two of the inscriptions, intone: “Here it says: ‘In the north-west a great treasure is hidden, and happy he, who finds!’” On one occasion, and quite against the regulations, an elderly gentleman poked his head into the side chamber where my bottle of Highland Park resided. Deeply moved, he exclaimed: “Och, I see a wee bit of the treasure’s still here!”

According to local legend, Maeshowe is haunted by a figure called the “Hogboy”, i.e. *haugbúi* ‘mound-dweller’. I cannot say that I ever encountered this supernatural being, despite spending several late winter evenings in the mound with the Orkney wind whistling outside. However, Norry informed me one morning that an anxious couple had stopped by his farm the previous evening to report seeing ghostly lights emanating from the passageway into the central chamber. Alas for the legend, it seems to have been nothing more than the reflection from my 500-watt lamp.

One of the Maeshowe inscriptions, or what is left of it, has to be inspected not in Orkney but in Edinburgh. No. 17 scaled off the wall shortly after excavation of the mound in 1861, and in 1863 six pieces, about a third of the total, found their way to Edinburgh, to what is now the National Museum of Scotland. Having spent a happy few hours with these fragments and about to leave the museum, I was called back by a curator and asked whether I wouldn’t care to see further fragments of the same inscription! While extremely grateful to the man concerned, I was rather taken aback by the element of chance involved. Had it not suddenly dawned on this museum official that a chap interested in runes might be glad to see more rather than less, the additional five pieces he then brought out for my inspection (another third of the inscription) might still be lying unnoticed in a National Museum of Scotland store. (See further below on the Settle slate.)

The corpus edition of the Irish inscriptions (Barnes, Hagland & Page 1997) came about through the initiative of Jan Ragnar Hagland of the then University of Trondheim. In the early 1990s he suggested to Ray Page and me that the three of us should approach the National Museum of Ireland with a view to documenting and publishing the runic inscriptions found during the medieval Dublin excavations of 1962–81. The project was swiftly agreed be-

tween all parties involved, whereupon several visits were made to the National Museum to examine the material. Museum staff provided drawings and photographs, and the Director arranged for publication in the Royal Irish Academy's Medieval Dublin Excavations series. Since the four runic inscriptions from Ireland outside Dublin had not been edited as a group, Hagland, Page and I proposed that they should be included in the work, and that was accepted by the editorial board overseeing the Medieval Dublin Excavations publishing programme. At the time we were documenting the Irish runic material I can hardly claim to have been a seasoned field runologist, but I had learnt a fair amount from my encounter with the Maeshowe corpus. Cooperation with Hagland and Page taught me a good deal more – as also the attempt to get to grips with inscriptions that were in effect new finds – certainly ones that up to that point had not been satisfactorily described and edited.

Our brush with Ireland's runic heritage had as its outcome an edition that the three of us were reasonably happy with. Our activities failed, however, to produce much in the way of amusing anecdotes – at least not ones that can decently be given a public airing. This is probably because most of the inscriptions were in the keeping of the National Museum of Ireland, and our agreement with the museum elevated us more or less to the role of official runologists, to be afforded all the assistance and courtesy due to such exalted persons. For a time we were unable to examine the Greenmount bronze strap-end (IR 1), on tour with the *From Viking to Crusader* exhibition of 1992–3 (*From Viking to Crusader*: 333). We did catch up with it during the exhibition's sojourn in Copenhagen, but only to find that the authorities had placed it rune-side down in its display case – not, unfortunately, a first in the history of curating. Eventually, however, it made its way home to Ireland, where we were able to inspect it under modern museum conditions.

Experience gained from dealing with the Irish material was of considerable help when Ray Page and I undertook the more ambitious project of editing the Scandinavian runic inscriptions of Britain. As befits British runological endeavour, the seeds of this work were sown over a few pints of real ale in the Museum Tavern, a local well known to staff at the nearby British Museum. We probably had one pint too many, for in the light of the time and effort the venture ultimately cost us, this was a foolhardy idea. The task of examining the inscriptions took us from Canterbury in the south of England to Eshaness in the north-west of Shetland, and was spread over some twelve years, 1992–2004.

As with the Maeshowe corpus, many of the Scandinavian runic inscriptions of Britain had already been edited, or at least described. And indeed,

much that seemed to us doubtfully runic had been thrown into the mix. Not least because Hertha Marquardt's *Bibliographie der Runeninschriften nach Fundorten* 1 (Marquardt 1961) includes a fair number of doubtful items, we had constantly in mind the need to establish (to our satisfaction) what was in the corpus and what not – and the need to explain our choice to users of the edition we were planning. This part of our labours sent us up many blind alleys. Much that has been reported as runic in Britain has on investigation proved to be chance marks – the result of accident or wear, or simply natural furrows in a stone. Some objects said to have borne runes have disappeared, and where there was neither photograph nor drawing, we had to ask ourselves: How is the writer using the words “rune” or “runic”? Do they refer to anything we would recognise as runes, or simply to something old and hard to read?

In the case of pieces held by major museums, in Edinburgh, Kirkwall, Lerwick and London, we encountered few problems of access or other practical difficulties. The British Museum did, though, manage to mislay its two casts of the lost $\ddot{\text{T}}\text{E}$ 10 Canterbury – and that at an early stage of our labours, so that we were able to examine them only once. In Edinburgh we had the good fortune to work while relevant sections of the National Museum of Scotland were being reorganised and inscriptions of interest to us were temporarily released from captivity before being remounted for public display. This enabled us to examine them in their entirety and with much greater precision than would have been the case if we had had to mingle with the general public in a museum gallery.

Many runic inscriptions in Britain are not held by major institutions. A good few are to be found in churches, some reside out of doors, and several are in private hands. In all such cases there may be problems of access, and difficulties in subjecting object and inscription to detailed and varied examination.

Until recently the stone bearing SC 15 Thurso II was set some 6.2 metres above the ground in the tower of Old St. Peter's Kirk, Thurso, Scotland's most northerly town. Having found our way to the north-eastern corner of Caithness, Page and I thus had to requisition a long ladder, climb it, and, perched perilously close to its top, try to examine the inscription, measure it and record its details. To make matters worse, the runes were set upside-down in the wall. It will be easily understood that our account of Thurso II is less reliable than those of inscriptions examined in more favourable circumstances. (*Postscript*: Around the time of the publication of Barnes & Page 2006 the runic stone was removed from the wall of the church and sent to

Edinburgh for conservation. It was subsequently returned to Thurso and placed in the care of Caithness Horizons museum, currently closed for refurbishment.)

SH 6 Eshaness II offered obstacles of a different sort. Partly buried in a small churchyard in the north-west of the Shetland Mainland is a gravestone bearing writing in both runes and the roman alphabet. First mentioned in the 1770s (cf. Low 1879: 135–6), it was long regarded as lost. And when re-found in the 1930s, it was deemed “a typical 17th-century tomb-slab” (*RC* 1946, 3: 89). This misdiagnosis may have had to do with the fact that in daylight it is hard to make out anything at all on the surface of the stone. Here we were helped by the Shetland Museum and the Shetland Islands Council. On our first visit they supplied a tent which blocked some of the outside light, enabling us to make a cursory inspection with the help of a lamp and torches and confirm the gravestone as a medieval object. In view of the poor state of the carvings and the difficulty of examining them *in situ*, we suggested the slab be taken into the Shetland Museum in Lerwick. This sparked a lengthy and at times heated disagreement between local opinion and the museum authorities. The locals argued (a) that the stone belonged in Eshaness, not in Lerwick, and (b) that as a matter of principle gravestones should not be removed from hallowed ground. Some went so far as to claim that a transfer from graveyard to museum would be “tantamount to theft” (*Shetland Times* 10 ii 1995), although in point of fact it was unclear with whom ownership of the memorial resided. Several participants in the debate adhered to the belief that the stone marked the last resting place of one John Williamson, popularly known as “Johnny Notions” and widely credited with having developed a method of inoculation against smallpox. Yet he died not in the Middle Ages but towards the end of the eighteenth century or very early in the nineteenth. As Page and I arrived in Shetland for our second visit to Eshaness, we were confronted by a headline in the *Shetland Times* (19 ix 1997), announcing: “Runic stone triggers anger”. All manner of people had become involved, including the MP for Orkney and Shetland. It was clear the slab was unlikely to be moved in the near future. Once again the Shetland Museum and the Council stepped in, this time erecting a wooden shack over the site, which, with the door closed, gave us almost total darkness. A generator and 500-watt lamp were also provided, and a professional photographer, enabling us to carry out a thorough examination and have a series of excellent pictures taken. On the minus side, we were the whole time under the watchful eye of the local minister, one of our chief antagonists in what the press had by now dubbed the “rune-stone row”. The minister was, at least to begin with, very

hostile, and offered negative running commentary on our activities, from time to time upbraiding us for “profaning holy ground”. There is no denying that the feeling of being in “enemy territory” detracted from our ability to concentrate on the job in hand.

Difficulties of a different kind – indeed perils – attended our first attempt to get to grips with the inscriptions in St. Molaise’s Cave, Holy Island (SC 3–7, 9, 12–13). Holy Island lies off the east coast of Arran in the Inner Hebrides. When Page and I, together with our wives, went to examine its eight or more runic inscriptions, the island was inhabited only by a couple of young Buddhists who were slowly restoring a tumbledown farmhouse. The sound between Arran and Holy Island was peaceful enough when the boatmen we had engaged ferried us over, but by the time they returned to take us back a storm had blown up. Holy Island had no landing stage at the time, with the result that we were unable to get safely on board for the return trip. Given the smallness of the craft and the size of the waves, we were not entirely unhappy about being left on *terra firma*. As the two men swung the boat round, the strains of the hymn *Abide with me* could be clearly heard.

Stranded on Holy Island, we had no alternative but to throw ourselves on the mercy of the Buddhists. They kindly provided bread, cheese and tea, and found us some damp blankets for the night. One advantage of our enforced stay was that we were able to start work bright and early the next morning after the Buddhists had most hospitably shared their breakfast with us.

Inscriptions with an apparently respectable pedigree occasionally turned out to be suspect. The runes on the Settle slate are a case in point. When first recorded (Smith 1962: 62), the slate was in the delightfully named Pig Yard Club Museum in the town of Settle, in the West Riding of Yorkshire. It was displayed together with various objects, mostly Romano-British, said to come from Victoria Cave in the Yorkshire Dales. Subsequently its inscription was treated in two learned articles (Page 1971: 173–4, Swanton 1971). Swanton saw in the runes what he called the “singular” ON personal name *Óframr* (1971: 214). Because of the rarity of the name he thought it likely that the Óframr Sigurðarsonr who carved Maeshowe inscription no. 17 was also responsible for the Settle runes. From photographs, however, the Settle characters seemed to bear an uncanny likeness to those of a missing part of Maeshowe no. 17, the whole of which had scaled off the wall of the cairn shortly after excavation, and broken in pieces (cf. above). Since the chief excavator of Maeshowe, James Farrer, had once lived at a place called Ingleborough, only 6 km or so from Settle, could he at some point have taken this piece with him from Orkney to Yorkshire, we wondered.

When we arrived in Settle, the Pig Yard Club Museum was no more. But we found a local gentleman farmer, one Thomas Lord, who had, as he put it, “come into possession” of the artefacts from the Museum. He turned out to be fairly knowledgeable, and explained that the Settle slate was not, as far as he knew, discovered in Victoria Cave at all. According to him, it had first come to light in 1937 behind a display cabinet in Giggleswick School Museum (not far from Settle). At some point it had been placed together with the Victoria Cave objects.

Lord allowed me to take the slate to the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh to see if it would fit with other fragments of Maeshowe no. 17 held there. Geological analysis showed the slate could be a lost part of the Maeshowe inscription, but in the event the piece did not quite fit with the fragments held by the National Museum of Scotland, though it was only a question of a few millimetres. The most likely explanation of the Settle inscription’s genesis seemed to be that Farrer (or another) had for some reason copied the runes **ōframr** on to a fragment of Orkney stone from a drawing of Maeshowe no. 17 in its complete state (of which a number exist). Faced with this evidence we classed the inscription as modern and relegated it to an appendix (cf. Barnes 1996, Barnes & Page 2006: 340–41).

The discovery of runic inscriptions must of course be distinguished from fieldwork. While I have documented many inscriptions, I have never been fortunate enough to find one – though my wife did spot a group of three previously unknown runes in Carlisle Cathedral while Ray Page and I were busy examining E 3 Carlisle I (cf. Barnes & Page 2006: 289–92, Barnes 2010). Runic inscriptions are discovered in all kinds of circumstances, and by all manner of people. OR 14 Tuquoy came to light during the 1982–3 rescue excavation of a late Norse settlement site on the Orkney island of Westray – though not as part of the excavation. True, the runes were first observed by one of the participating archaeologists, but while bending forward head in hands in an attempt to relieve the symptoms of a massive hangover. And as if that were not enough, we now learn (Sarah Jane Gibbon, pers. com.) that the most recent runic find from Orkney, OR 23 Naversdale, was unearthed by a pig – possibly a first in the annals of runology. (*Postscript*: For a presentation of OR 23 see Barnes, Michael P., 2015. Two recent runic finds from Orkney. In: *Futhark* 6. Pp. 143–151.)

Publication, too, must be kept separate from fieldwork, although the two are of course intimately associated. This is not the place to discuss the reporting of new finds or the making of corpus editions. I would simply note that if *The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain* (Barnes & Page

2006) has any advantage over earlier runic corpus editions it is in its transparency. Page and I go to considerable lengths to explain how we arrived at the material we present to the reader, and to make clear the steps by which we proceeded from examination to interpretation.

There is to date no corpus edition of the Scandinavian runic inscriptions on the Isle of Man, which are spread across thirty-four stones or stone fragments, some with more than one discrete text. Ray Page had been working on such an edition for a good many years when he died in 2012. I have been lucky, or unlucky, enough to take over the manuscript, which I am even now checking, reworking and supplementing in close collaboration with Henrik Williams and James Knirk. This labour, which *inter alia* serves as a practical instance of runological field- and editorial work, has been subsumed under the Oslo runic project. Publication is planned for 2016, and will for the most part follow the lines established in Barnes & Page (2006). In addition to the Scandinavian corpus, the projected volume is for the sake of completeness to include the two Anglo-Saxon inscriptions found on Man. (*Postscript*: This edition finally appeared in 2019. It is entitled *The Runic Inscriptions of the Isle of Man*, and forms vol. 22 of the Runrön series. Authorship is credited to Michael P. Barnes, although, as will be clear from the above, a number of scholars were involved in its preparation.)

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