Runrön

Runologiska bidrag utgivna av
Institutionen för nordiska språk vid Uppsala universitet

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Kopár, Lilla, 2021: The Rise and Fall of Anglo-Saxon Runic Stone Monuments. Runic Inscriptions and the Development of Sculpture in Early Medieval England. In: Reading Runes. Proceedings of the Eighth International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions, Nyköping, Sweden, 2–6 September 2014. Ed. by MacLeod, Mindy, Marco Bianchi and Henrik Williams. Uppsala. (Runrön 24.) Pp. 143–156.

DOI: 10.33063/diva-438873

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The Rise and Fall of Anglo-Saxon Runic Stone Monuments

Runic Inscriptions and the Development of Sculpture in Early Medieval England

Abstract

The Old English runic corpus contains at least thirty-seven inscriptions carved in stone, which are concentrated geographically in the north of England and dated mainly from the seventh to the ninth centuries. The quality and content of the inscriptions vary from simple names (or fragments thereof) to poetic vernacular memorial formulae. Nearly all of the inscriptions appear on monumental sculpture in an ecclesiastical context and are considered to have served commemorative purposes. Rune-inscribed stones show great variety in terms of monument type, from name-stones, cross-shafts and slabs to elaborate monumental crosses that served different functions and audiences. Their inscriptions have often been analyzed by runologists and epigraphers from a linguistic or epigraphic point of view, but the relationship of these inscribed monuments to other sculptured stones has received less attention in runological circles. Thus the present article explores the place and development of rune-inscribed monuments in the context of sculptural production in pre-Conquest England, and identifies periods of innovation and change in the creation and function of runic monuments. It points to changes in commemorative practices, monument types, and patronage that had an impact on the use of runes on sculpture, from their growing popularity on monastic commemorative sculpture in the late seventh century to their ultimate abandonment in a sculptural context in the early eleventh century.

Keywords: Anglo-Saxon England, stone sculpture, runic inscriptions, Old English, vernacular memorial inscriptions, name-stones

Runic inscriptions on stone constitute a significant part of the Anglo-Saxon runic corpus: not counting coins, about one third of the surviving inscriptions have been preserved in this medium, in most cases in a commemorative context as part of monumental sculpture. There are at least thirty-seven monuments with Anglo-Saxon runes, or traces thereof, known from the British Isles,¹ and the recent discovery of an inscription on a church wall at Kirby Misperton in North Yorkshire² has further increased this number. As for

¹ There are an additional two graffiti inscriptions from Italy, at Monte Gargano and Rome, but they constitute a different type of record in spite of the shared medium of stone. The Kirby Misperton inscription resembles these two inscriptions in its graffiti-like nature.

² Joanna Story and Martin Findell, pers. comm. For a 3D model by Prof. Dominic Powlesland, see <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/kb-runes-2013-25dfc42f477d46beaf58b3867e9f69ab>.

their geographical distribution, the vast majority of the monuments come from the north of England and adjacent territories, including the Wirral, (present-day) southwest Scotland, and the Isle of Man.³ The only two southern outliers are the rather unusual Dover and Sandwich (or Richborough) stones from East Kent, less than twenty kilometers from each other, but probably separated by centuries.

These runic monuments have all (or almost all, see below) been assigned a post-650 A.D. date based on historical, art-historical, and, when possible, linguistic evidence. This puts them into the later (post-650) group of runic inscriptions (cf. Page 1999: 25–28, Parsons 1999: 40–42, Barnes 2012: 42), in linguistic terms of the period of (recorded) Old English (as opposed to Proto-Old English, c. A.D. 450–650). They represent a version of the runic script after its proposed reform and standardization in the seventh century (Parsons 1999: 130) that most likely originated in or was closely associated with a monastic context. This post-650 dating and the ecclesiastical context of the monuments are in harmony with the circumstances of the rise of sculptural production in England in the wake of the first reorganization of the English church (after the Synod of Whitby in 664) and concerted efforts in building churches and monastic establishments in the latter half of the seventh century (Bailey 1996: 23–41, esp. 24–25).⁴ Although the earliest runic stone monuments are of mid- to late-seventh century date, most rune-inscribed monuments are dated to the eighth and ninth centuries—the most productive period of runic writing in England, but not the most prolific in Anglo-Saxon sculptural production. The use of runic inscriptions on sculpture continued into the tenth and the early eleventh century before it died off, some time after the settlement of the Vikings but before the arrival of the Normans.

The development of runic monuments in England has been discussed by runologists and epigraphers from the perspective of changes in literacy, language, and epigraphy (Okasha 1971: 4–6, Page 1999: 130–156, Parsons 1999: 76, Barnes 2012: 42–51, Findell 2014: 41–44, 54–55 etc.). In the following, I propose to look at further aspects of contextual transformations: changes in sculptural traditions, monument types, patronage, and commemorative practices—that is, transformations in sculptural production in pre-Conquest

³ A similar distribution is characteristic also for non-runic inscriptions, of which about eighty percent were found in the north of England (see Okasha 1971: 5, 140).

⁴ Ray Page (1999: 131) noted only two monuments where an ecclesiastical origin is uncertain: the Falstone stone with a Christian memorial inscription and the Sandwich/Richborough stone with its undeciphered text, most likely a name. The latter may be of pre-Christian date (cf. Bailey 1996: 23–24). Interestingly, while the north of England has produced considerably more stone sculptures than the south, most surviving Anglo-Saxon stone churches (or parts thereof) are in the south (Okasha 1971: 5, Taylor & Taylor 1965: xxx–xxxiii).

England that had an impact, directly or indirectly, on the use of the runic script, its preservation in stone, and the rise and fall of runic monuments in England.

A note on dating

The dating of stone sculpture is notoriously difficult, and in the case of inscribed stones there is a real danger of circular arguments based on linguistic versus art-historical dating. In the development of Anglo-Saxon sculpture, specifically in the north of England, there is a watershed in the early to mid-tenth century that divides the earlier, so-called Anglian or pre-Viking period from the later, so-called Anglo-Scandinavian, Viking-Age, or simply late Anglo-Saxon sculpture. This periodization has significant regional variation (primarily with regard to the extent of Scandinavian control or lack thereof), and is based largely on developments in style, iconography, and patronage, as well as in drastic changes in the volume and distribution of sculpture (Bailey 1996: 13–18, 77–80, 1980). The majority of the rune-inscribed monuments fall into the earlier, Anglian period of sculptural production, but a few monuments show Scandinavian influence, most notably the tenth-century Crowle stone (no. 1, Lincolnshire)⁵ with its Anglo-Scandinavian-style figural iconography and its curving rune-band (Everson & Stocker 1999: 147–152). (Figure 1) Further, the lost Leeds fragment (no. 9, Yorkshire) with its memorial inscription with a possibly Anglicized Scandinavian name (*Onlaf*) is suggestive of cultural interaction with Scandinavians (Coatsworth 2008a: 207). The now illegible (and thus disputed) Bingley font or cross base (no. 2, Yorkshire) is also of later, Viking-period date (tenth to eleventh century) with design elements similar to those in Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture (Coatsworth 2008a: 101–2). These few examples suggest some continuation of the tradition of vernacular runic monuments (although in reduced numbers) even under the changing circumstances of Scandinavian settlement.

In the context of the development of sculptural production in early medieval England, I would point to three periods of intense transformation of runic monuments. First, in the mid- to late-seventh or early eighth-centuries, when runes were widely introduced in ecclesiastical sculpture in the north of England; second, in the course of the eighth century, when there developed a fashion of formulaic vernacular inscriptions; and lastly, in the

⁵ The numbering of the monuments is based on the standard catalogue of Anglo-Saxon sculpture, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* (Cramp 1984–2018, 13 printed volumes to date). For the online catalogue, see <http://www.ascorpus.ac.uk/catindex.php>.

Figure 1: Crowle, Lincolnshire. Photo: Judy O'Neill. Copyright: Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, Durham University.

Figure 2: Falstone, Northumberland. Photo: Tom Middlemas.

early to mid-tenth century, when a gradual shift in the balance of text and image in a commemorative context led to the decline of runic inscriptions on stone. Beyond these recognizable periods of change, it seems that rune-inscribed monuments were an area of constant innovation and experimentation, and the corpus, limited as it is, shows a surprising variety of monuments.

Monument types and chronology

Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions appear on monumental crosses, name-stones, recumbent slabs, cross-shafts, and occasionally on unique and unusual monuments like the Falstone skeuomorph (no. 2, Northumberland), which appears to be a leather bag or wooden or bone reliquary rendered in stone (Coatsworth 2008b: 161, Cramp 1984, I: 172–3). (Figure 2) In runological literature, these diverse monuments are often referred to by the common label “rune-stones”, as in Ray Page’s seminal work, *Introduction to English Runes* (1999, Chapter 10: Rune-stones, 130–56). There is a real danger in putting all rune-inscribed stone monuments into one big bag, because we disregard, or at least marginalize, valuable contextual information as to their varied functions and audience. This type of information is important for interpreting the individual inscriptions as much as for understanding runic literacy at large. The term “rune-stone” itself is an unfortunate generic label for the Anglo-Saxon material as it is often used in a more specific sense to describe a particular type of inscribed memorial monument in a Scandinavian or Norse

Figure 3: Name-stone, Lindisfarne 29, Northumberland. Photo: Tom Middlemas. Copyright: Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, Durham University.

cultural context. From the point of view of sculptural typology, none of the Anglo-Saxon monuments is a rune-stone. They represent a different monumental and artistic tradition (or traditions) that emerged from a different cultural context and was inspired for the most part by models different from the rune-stone tradition in Scandinavia. Stone sculpture in early medieval

England originated as an ecclesiastical art form with strong ties to the Continent. Consequently, almost all surviving runic monuments in England show obvious links to a Christian context, in most cases to an ecclesiastical or monastic setting.

A review of the chronology of the runic monuments and its correlation to monument types allows us to detect some trends and local traditions. The earliest monuments with runic inscriptions from the north of England constitute a fairly unified typological group: they are small name-stones found at major monastic foundations at Lindisfarne (Northumberland, nos. 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30a–b), Monkwearmouth (Co. Durham, no. 4) and Hartlepool (Co. Durham, nos. 1, 2). (Figure 3) They are part of a bigger corpus of thirty similar slabs and fragments in total,⁶ some in roman, others in runic lettering, and some roman-runic bishcriptal. These name-stones are decorated with an incised cross and carry one or two personal names. They served commemorative functions, but it is unclear whether they have been used as grave markers. Only Hartlepool, where some of the name-stones were interred with bodies, suggests a direct connection with burials (Cramps 1984: 97). The new finds at Lindisfarne also emerged from the general area of a cemetery, although they could not be associated with individual graves (David Petts, pers. comm.). Christine Maddern, in her 2013 monograph on Northumbrian name-stones, concluded that the function of the name-stones was “to perpetuate monastic memories and to seek salvation for the souls [of the departed and of the patrons] through prayer” in anticipation of the Last Judgment (2013: 250). The layout of some of the stones suggests that name-stones “may also have been intended as pages of *libri vitae*, each stone forming a page in a book to be read by Christ on the Last Day” (ibid.).

On the basis of their iconography, the majority of the name-stones are dated to the eighth century, with the non-runic Wensley stone (no. 8, N. Yorkshire, Lang 2001: 224–26) being the latest attested name-stone from the early ninth century (Maddern 2013: 248). The Lindisfarne stones seem to represent the beginning of this tradition in the second half of the seventh century. The rune-inscribed stones of Monkwearmouth 4 and Hartlepool 2 are of similar date, while Hartlepool 1 is possibly a bit later in the eighth century. It is possible that Jarrow had a similar tradition of runic name-stones, although none of this particular type survives.⁷ The context and patronage of

⁶ A new name-stone fragment with the roman-letter inscription FRITH was discovered at Lindisfarne by DigVentures in 2016. For a digital model of the stone (by Hugh Fiske for DigVentures), see <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/lindisfarne-anglo-saxon-name-stone-v1-0b7f5c01740a4594baeb39dc1276efea>.

⁷ The Jarrow cross-slabs display longer Latin inscriptions (see nos. 16a–b, 14), but the fragment Jarrow 12 (Cramp 1984: 110–11) may point in the direction of simple name-stones.

these monuments are undoubtedly monastic, and the runic ones come from known centers of literacy nested in well-established cultural (and power) networks.

One might also expect similar name-stones from the monastic site of Whitby (N. Yorkshire), on the basis of its close connections to Hartlepool and its documented runic literacy.⁸ But Whitby had a different tradition of inscribed gravestones: plain stone crosses with inscriptions across the lateral arms, as opposed to the manuscript-page-like slabs with letters in two or four quadrants around a central cross.⁹ The earliest ones are dated to the late-seventh to mid-eighth century, the later ones to the eighth or ninth century. None can now with any certainty be identified as runic, but Whitby 23 may include a thorn amidst roman lettering (Lang 2001: 245) and Whitby 26 may have once carried a runic inscription (Lang 2001: 248). These two stones are both dated to the eighth or ninth century, and thus belong to a later phase of this tradition. Another fragment of a ninth-century cross-shaft from Whitby (no. 34, Lang 2001: 251–52) may represent a further development of these crosses with separate panels for inscriptions at the top of the broad face of the shaft, as on some other ninth-century crosses, e.g. at Lancaster St. Mary's (no. 1, Lancashire, Bailey 2010: 215–18), a feature that we will return to later.

Let us now take a quick detour to the south, home of two unusual and seemingly isolated monuments with runes. As opposed to the north, the south does not appear to have had any established tradition of runic monuments, thus the Sandwich and the Dover stones of Kent are hard to contextualize. If the surprisingly early dating of the Sandwich stone (no. 1) were correct (dated fifth to eighth century in Tweddle et al. 1995: 170; cf. also transitional period of seventh to eighth centuries in Parsons 1994: 317; early seventh century in Elliott 1989: 106; similarly Bailey 1996: 24), the chronological sequence of rune-inscribed monuments, and in fact of Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture in general (Bailey *idem.*), would start in the southeast. However, the linguistic reasoning behind the dating of the Sandwich stone is very uncertain (Page 1999: 27–28, Parsons in Tweddle et al. 1995: 170). The inscription is most likely a personal name, and the monument is understood to be a funerary monument (grave marker). In contrast with the sculpture from the north, it carries no Christian symbolism and has no obvious link to an ecclesiastical site; it was found in a field near Richborough. Besides another very similar

⁸ Whitby's founder, St. Hild, was abbess of Hartlepool, and maintained control over Hartlepool even after her move to Whitby. Whitby has so far produced three rune-inscribed objects: a bone comb (7th–9th cent.), a jet disc (7th–8th cent.), and a silvered copper bracteate (8th cent.?); see Page (1999: 165, fig. 56; 170, fig. 61; 94 respectively).

⁹ For the Plain Cross series, see Whitby 20, 21, 22, 26, also 23, 24 (Lang 2001: 39–40).

stone from the same site that might once have carried an inscription (Elliott 1989: 106, no. 2 in Tweddle et al. 1995: 170–71), this stone has no obvious typological parallels in England. It may have been inspired by Merovingian funerary monuments¹⁰ or followed wooden prototypes (Tweddle et al. 1995: 169). Its vertical inscription is paralleled in early Scandinavian practice but it is unusual for Anglo-Saxon England. This unique monument may thus be the result of isolated local innovation, or developed under foreign influence, possibly in response to a demand for inscribed memorial monuments outside the monastic network.

At about the time of the rise of the name-stone fashion in the northeast, or soon thereafter, the northwest developed another type of runic monument: the monumental cross with a combination of extended text and carved images. The famous Bewcastle and Ruthwell crosses (now in Cumbria and in Dumfries and Galloway respectively), with the longest Old English runic inscriptions preserved in stone, represent this tradition. While the iconography of both monuments suggests sophisticated Christian communities, these large-scale public monuments are likely to have catered to a wider audience than a monastic community and served functions beyond commemoration. These monuments are suggestive of a context of secular Christian culture as opposed to an exclusively monastic setting.

The Bewcastle cross (no. 1; dated to the first half of the eighth century) with its long memorial inscription and the associated image of a secular figure (probably a reference to the deceased; cf. Bailey & Cramp 1988: 69) stands at the beginning of a new tradition of commemorative monuments with formulaic vernacular memorial inscriptions. (Figure 4) This new trend emerged in the eighth century, and there are a total of eighteen such monuments from the north of England,¹¹ with eighth to ninth century dating. Of the eighteen monuments, some have runic inscriptions while others have texts in roman lettering. The longest and best preserved examples come from Great Urswick (no. 1), Falstone (no. 2), Dewsbury (no. 10), Thornhill (nos. 1–4), and Overchurch (no. 1). As with the name-stones, there is no obvious preference for one script over the other in this context, although runic examples (11) outnumber those in roman lettering (6). Thornhill in West Yorkshire has produced individual examples in both scripts. The biscopal

¹⁰ These Merovingian monuments are “also unlikely to date from after the seventh century” (Cramp 1993: 70 in Tweddle et al. 1995: 169).

¹¹ There are two additional eleventh-century vernacular memorial inscriptions from the south, Winchester Old Minster 6 (with Scandinavian influence) and London All Hallows 2. They are both in Anglo-Saxon capitals and represent a different vernacular memorial epigraphic tradition from that of the north. For an overview of the corpus of vernacular memorial inscriptions, see Parsons 2008; Kopár 2015.

Falstone memorial stone (dated mid-eighth to mid-ninth century) with its vernacular inscription repeated side by side in runes and in insular majuscules may serve as an example of the ‘democracy of scripts’ in a commemorative context. (Figure 2) It is important to note that monuments with formulaic memorial inscriptions suggest a greater awareness of the public nature of monuments compared to the earlier name-stones. They are no longer only or primarily memorials to the deceased and a reminder for continued prayers for the salvation of souls, but increasingly a statement of social and political legitimacy and power, claimed through an association with the deceased and reinforced through the patronage of the monument.

This sentiment is reflected in the overall design of some of the monuments where memorial inscriptions, documenting the names of the deceased and often also of the patrons, are given visual emphasis in design: They are placed in separate panels (see Great Urswick, Thornhill, also Lancaster St. Mary) on a par with the figural or decorative carvings. In these cases, the text becomes

Figure 4: Bewcastle cross, Cumberland. Photo: Tom Middlemas. Copyright: Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, Durham University.

an image and collaborates with the iconography of the monument.¹² (Cf. Figure 5) The aforementioned Bewcastle cross (Figure 4) is an early example of this, and it may also represent another emerging trend: the appearance of secular images of patrons or the deceased on memorial monuments—a feature that becomes one of the distinguishing markers of Viking-Age sculpture in the north with its numerous horsemen and warrior portraits. As I have argued elsewhere (Kopár 2013), the shift from monastic to secular patronage together with changes in the appearance of commemorative monuments started some time in the ninth century, right before or around the time of the Viking settlement. The outcome was twofold. On the one hand, it resulted in the proliferation of sculpture in the Viking period: the new Anglo-Scandinavian elite embraced this emerging commemorative tradition and harnessed the social and political potential of public monuments through secular patronage. On the other hand, the balance of text and image shifted in favor of images, and the tradition of formulaic memorial inscriptions in the vernacular was gradually abandoned. The bilingual context in the Scandinavian settlement areas may have contributed further to this shift already in motion. That these changes in commemorative sculpture predate the Vikings may be illustrated by the late ninth-century cross at Great Urswick (no. 1) in Cumbria, with its poetic memorial inscription accompanied by an (unidentified) scene with two figures in secular dress. (Figure 5) Examples of Anglo-Saxon runic monuments with Scandinavian influence (see above) indicate that the tradition of runic monuments continued into the Viking period, but ultimately was abandoned before the Norman Conquest.

The late tenth- or eleventh-century stones of Whithorn I in southwest Scotland (Dumfries and Galloway), and of Dover in Kent suggest that the last outposts of production of Anglo-Saxon runic stone monuments lay outside the earlier heartland of runic epigraphy in stone. Whithorn, the westernmost example of Anglo-Saxon runic epigraphy (together with the nearby St. Ninian's Cave) is, of course, not far from the two most splendid early runic monuments, the Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses, but far enough from the dominant literary culture of late Anglo-Saxon Wessex (Findell 2014: 55). In the heartland of rune-inscribed sculpture, the Bingley font in Yorkshire, if indeed runic (see above), might be one of the last runic monuments, and has possible Scandinavian artistic influence.

¹² On name-stones, the words (names) are visually subordinated to iconography in the design: they are regularly dissected by the dominant cross and divided into two parts to occupy adjacent quadrants around the cross.

Figure 5: Great Urswick. Photo: Gaby Waxenberger.

Conclusion

In this brief account of Anglo-Saxon sculpture with runic inscriptions, I have boldly attempted to achieve the impossible: to systematize a group of surprisingly diverse monuments, and to detect larger trends of transformation in a corpus that may not be representative of the actual production of rune-inscribed stones at all due to chance of survival. I am aware of these pitfalls. But I am convinced that there is value in attempting to provide an overview of runic monuments in the context of sculptural development at large, in order to understand the diversity and transformations of these objects over time, and perhaps to detect gaps and losses in the surviving record. Due to the limits of this short paper, only general trends could be addressed and therefore not all monuments are mentioned. And frankly, not all may fit the general trends described above. We must keep in mind that Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture is characterized by significant regional variation. Anglo-Saxon carvers and patrons were often very innovative, and it seems that those who liked runes were even more so than the average. The situation is further complicated by the fact that many of the sculptural sites are poorly documented; therefore, a true contextual analysis of individual monuments is at best informed guesswork. But it is worth a try. The more we understand the context, the better informed we will be about the individual texts, which brings us closer to their decipherment beyond the linguistic message.

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