Runic Amulets from Medieval Denmark

Rikke Steenholt Olesen

Runic amulets from medieval Denmark are primarily metal objects. The number of examples known has increased greatly in recent years and the material now makes up one of the largest groups of runic inscriptions from the medieval period. New finds are continually being made, not least owing to the increased use of metal detectors by both archaeologists and others.

The aim of this paper is to give a survey of the distribution of the Danish runic finds considered to be amulets, and by reference to concrete examples to illustrate similarities and differences in their manufacture and state of preservation. The content of the inscriptions will also be examined, with particular emphasis on amulet texts as a genre. Finally, I will consider what the Danish runic amulets can contribute to the debate on literacy, and to what practical uses these objects may have been put.

Definitions and methodological problems

My material comprises objects that are registered at the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen (not all of which are necessarily published). They come from "medieval Denmark", which includes Skåne and Schleswig as well as the present-day kingdom. "Medieval" refers to the period A.D. c. 1070–1500.

"Amulet" is used in accordance with the definition formulated in the corpus edition *Danmarks runeindskrifter* (*DR, Text*, 774 f.). That definition is based on the (presumed) protective/healing function of the object and the assumption that this (magical) function is directly related to, and made effective by, the runic writing the object bears. The criteria may seem vague, but since the aim of this paper is to give a survey of objects already categorised as amulets, it seems sensible to operate with established terms.

Map 1. The distribution of amulet finds

Metal amulets are difficult to date. An archaeological dating is not usually possible since we are dealing here for the most part with stray finds. To be sure, peripheral archaeological contexts such as settlement sites can indicate a period of human activity, but settlements can often be shown to have existed for several hundreds of years. The dating of amulets is thus often based on linguistic features—primarily runic typology. The linguistic dates tentatively assigned to metal amulets by Marie Stoklund over the past two decades are usually very broad; for instance "the medieval period" or "late medieval period or later". The runological features that have been used as indicators of "early" or "late" medieval inscriptions appear more and more uncertain as the finds increase—a matter on which Stoklund and I are in agreement. Relevant here are, for example, single-sided branches, ⊬ for /æ(:)/, lack of an etymological basis to the choice between ᛦ and ᛚ, and the use of special symbols for roman letters which do not have equivalents in the futhark, for example ᚴ for *c*, saltire crosses or ⅄ for *x* and ᚠ for *q*, all considered to be indicative of later inscriptions. All the same, there are interesting chronological perspectives to the physical, linguistic/runological, and textual characteristics of the amulet inscriptions, but further comparative

studies need to be undertaken in order to establish more precise dating criteria. It is also to be hoped that more runic amulets will be found in datable archaeological contexts.

The distribution of runic amulets found in medieval Denmark

At the present time forty-eight metal amulets inscribed with runes, or a mixture of runes and runelike characters, are registered in Denmark (cf. Map 1). As many as seventeen of these were discovered between 2000 and 2005 illustrating the recent large increase in the number of finds. The use of metal detectors has been and is still very prevalent on Bornholm, and it is from here the majority of new finds are reported (three in 2005). The distribution map may not give a reliable picture of the relative number of amulets made in the different regions, but the east-west divide is striking. I have asked archaeologists from Fyn if excavators and those using metal detectors there are aware of these apparently insignificant small (folded) sheets of metal, and I was assured that the search is just as intense as on Bornholm. Nevertheless no runic amulets except for a well-known lead tablet from Odense (DR 204) have yet been found on Fyn.

The physical characteristics of metal objects with runes

The majority of the Danish metal amulets are of lead, all in all thirty-seven. Two, both from Bornholm, are of silver (one of them a reused Arabic coin) and seven are bronze or copper. There are also two amulets from Skåne, registered in the archives only as small sheets of metal. The amulets vary considerably in appearance, but certain features seem to be significant. A small number are pierced, for example: the Roskilde bronze amulet from Zealand (DR 246), the Østermarie silver amulet from Bornholm (Stoklund 2000, 286–88; 2003, 863–67) and the Søborg lead amulet from north-eastern Zealand (Stoklund 1987, 198 f.). This suggests that such amulets were worn close to the body, as jewellery perhaps. A wooden amulet 12 cm in length, the so-called Roskilde *uþu* stick (Moltke 1985, 489 f.), may be seen as a parallel to these pierced metal objects since it too is equipped with a hole. A bronze amulet found in the area of the ruined castle of Hjortholm on Zealand has a forged loop. The Danish runologist Erik Moltke did not believe this object, discovered in the late 1950s, was genuine and it was never published. It is inscribed on three sides and the characters that can be identified seem to be a mixture of Viking Age and medieval runes; the remainder can only be

Fig. 1. Gyldensgård bronze amulet. Photo: The National Museum of Copenhagen.

described as runelike symbols. Two Viking Age metal amulets with forged loops were found in the former USSR (Melnikova 1987, 164–66), and pierced wooden and metal objects as well as a number of metal artefacts with forged loops are known from both Sweden and Norway.

In general the silver, copper and bronze amulets are considered to be the oldest types. Rune forms on both the Roskilde bronze and the Østermarie silver amulet suggest that their inscriptions were made in the early medieval period (late eleventh century). The Søborg lead amulet runes bear some resemblance to those on the Roskilde piece (Stoklund 1987, 199) and it is possible that these three artefacts are contemporary, even though lead amulets are normally dated to the period after A.D. 1100, and most often to the thirteenth century. At the time of my lecture on which this article is based, Klaus Düwel argued that a lead amulet like the one from Søborg cannot have been worn round the neck on a string since the metal is far too fragile. The Roskilde and Hjortholm bronze amulets, on the other hand, still have a piece of string attached to them, which makes it highly likely they were worn in this fashion. If the Søborg piece was not pierced for a functional reason it could be a copy of an older type and may then have been made later than the runes suggest. But it could well be the earliest example of a lead runic amulet from the Danish region.

Folding is another significant feature of medieval metal amulets. However, a number show no indications of this practice, e.g. the Søborg lead amulet, the Høje Tåstrup lead tablet from eastern Zealand (Stoklund 1994, 264–66), the fragmentary Ottestrup lead tablet (Stoklund 1987, 202 f.) and the lead fragment no. 4 (a shearing) from Tårnborg (Stoklund 1994, 268), both the latter from western Zealand. Two recent finds from the Roskilde area have more unusual shapes: the Himmelev amulet (Stoklund 2005a, 7) consists of a small, solid and slightly curved piece of lead (3 cm in length), while the Roskilde (Hedegade) find is formed as a four-sided stick of lead

(approximately 5 cm long; Stoklund 2005b). A tablet from Kävlinge in Skåne furnishes a further example of an unfolded lead amulet (Gustavson 1999, 20–23). There are no instances of folded amulets made of materials other than lead. Most of these objects are rectangular, some are rounded at one end (finger-shaped), e.g. the Roskilde bronze amulet and a recent bronze amulet find from Gyldensgård, Østermarie parish on Bornholm (Stoklund, Imer, and Steenholt Olesen 2006, 7 f.; cf. Fig. 1).

The folded amulets are small, solid objects. Typically, a beaten-out square or oblong piece of lead has been folded or rolled over one or more times and firm pressure then applied to it. Some amulets, e.g. the Allindemagle lead fragment from central Zealand (Stoklund 1994, 262–64) and the Dalgård lead amulet from Borbjerg parish in Jutland (Stoklund, Imer, and Steenholt Olesen 2006, 6 f.), have characteristic circular marks, presumably from teeth.

Where possible, newly found amulets are unfolded during the conservation process, but the metal often snaps. The lead strip from Viborg, for example, broke into eight pieces (Stoklund 1996, 282–84), and the Lille Myregård lead amulet from Nylarsker parish on Bornholm (Stoklund, Imer, and Steenholt Olesen 2006, 4–6) now consists of nine fragments of different sizes (cf. Fig. 2–3).

A lead fragment from Glim near Roskilde is of particular interest since its shape indicates that it might be a part of a cross arm (Stoklund 1993, 259 f., with reference to James Knirk). The Norwegian runic corpus contains several examples of elegant cross-shaped lead amulets, but none of the lead crosses from the Danish region are inscribed with runes. There are in fact linguistic indications on the Glim fragment of a Norwegian connection. Runic crosses of metal and wood are known from both Sweden and Norway, but the only cross with runes from Denmark is shaped from a walrus tooth and is not an amulet (DR 413, the Gunnhild cross).

The archaeological context

As already noted, the majority of the objects we are concerned with here are stray finds. In most cases it is uncertain whether the amulets were accidentally lost on the ground or deposited intentionally. A Viking Age grave find from Järfälla in Sweden revealed a rune-inscribed copper amulet inside a small leather purse (Gustavson 1969), another indication that runic amulets were kept close to the person they were meant to protect.

Some amulets have been found in church, chapel, grave or graveyard contexts, among them three of those already mentioned: the Odense lead tablet was discovered in a graveyard (though not in a specific grave), while

Fig. 2. Lille Myregård lead amulet. Photo: The National Museum of Copenhagen.

the Viborg lead strip comes from a male grave as does the Høje Tåstrup lead tablet. Some of the Norwegian runic lead crosses were found in burial mounds much older than the crosses themselves. It has been suggested on the basis of this evidence that the crosses were intended to protect against ghosts and evil powers in general (Knudsen 1995, 26). However, the majority of the Danish amulet finds come from settlement sites (especially true of
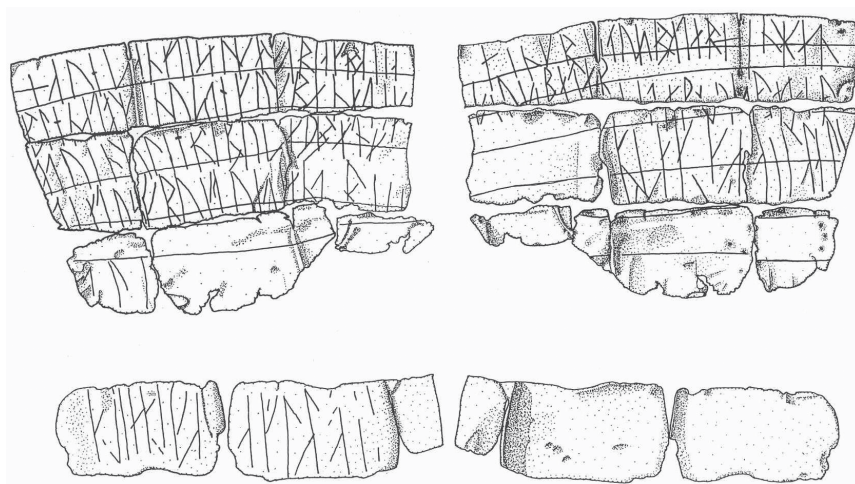
Fig. 3. Lille Myregård lead amulet. Drawing by Lisbeth Imer; © The National Museum of Copenhagen.

Bornholm) and some were found in hoards. The grave context is, judging from the Danish runic amulets as a whole, the exception rather than the rule — as Marie Stoklund has stressed on several occasions (cf., e.g., Stoklund 1987, 198).

The lack of linguistic meaning

Less than half of the Danish amulet inscriptions are linguistically meaningful. There is also a large group whose meaning is very uncertain. This is not least due to corrosion of the surface, often severe, or to fractures and damage from the folding that allow too few runes to be identified. Nevertheless, some fragmentary inscriptions give the impression of having had linguistically meaningful or at least recognisable contents. The Uppåkra bronze strip, for example, has the fragmentary inscription: **…?iḷkar × un × ra…**, where the sequence **ilkar** could be the remains of a personal name (Stoklund 2001, 8 f.), while the Povlsker lead amulet inscription: **gorḷin·g|n·æþigort** (Stoklund 2005a, 8; cf. Fig. 4) seems to be a further example of a magical formula known from the Odense lead tablet, from two inscriptions on amulet objects from Norway (A 194 and B 594) and from an inscription on a wooden stick from Sweden (Gustavson 1987, 122–25). There are other cases where runes can be identified more or less easily but the inscription seems nonsensical.
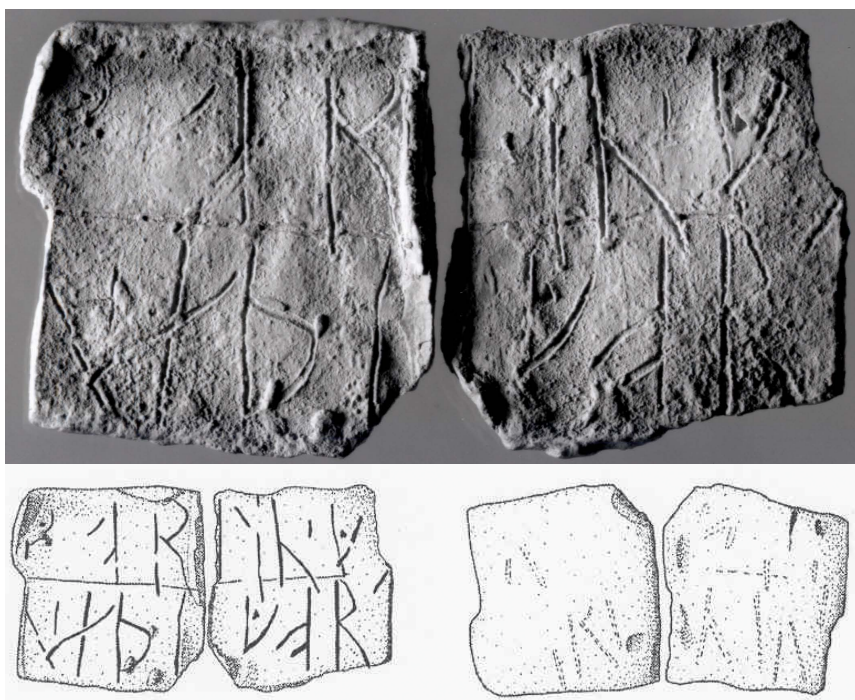
Fig. 4. Povlsker lead amulet. Photo: The National Museum of Copenhagen. Drawing by Lisbeth Imer; © The National Museum of Copenhagen.

Some inscriptions appear to be almost ornamental, consisting of runelike symbols and/or repetitions of characters and sequences. These could be interpreted as alphabet magic, code, the result of incompetent copying or as plain nonsense. Though uninterpretable, such inscriptions must of course be considered when dealing with questions of literacy and the use of script in the medieval period.

Linguistically meaningful inscriptions in the vernacular

The frequency of inscriptions in the vernacular on metal amulets from the Danish region is unfortunately very low. In the following, two inscriptions which are clearly written in the vernacular will be discussed: the bronze amulet from Roskilde and the Østermarie silver amulet from Bornholm.

The two-sided inscription on the Roskilde amulet has only been partially

interpreted. On side A, the Old Norse man's name *Sigvarð(r)* (**siuarþ**) can be identified as well as a number of coded or perhaps ornamental runes. Side B begins with the sequence **lufr**; there is then again a short sequence of strange-looking "runes" and characters, and finally three *r*-runes and a small ×-like mark. In *Danmarks runeindskrifter* some of the coded runes are deciphered and transliterated according to a system known from Norway (cf. N 443 Rødven kirke), but still the sequence does not seem to make sense. There is a resemblance to the amulet inscriptions from the former USSR, mentioned above, but these have not in my view been convincingly interpreted either.

The Østermarie silver amulet is a fragment only, so parts of the text are missing. The inscription has been thoroughly discussed by Stoklund (2000, 286–88; 2003, 863–67). The runes are relatively well shaped, and well preserved, and several words can be identified, but the order in which things are to be read is a problem. While working on the amulet I began to have doubts about the linear order proposed by Stoklund (2003, 863). Her reading is as follows:

A (1) **sigmoþʀį…**
   (2) **þiʀsį…**
   (3) **…?arnsmo** (inverted)

B (1) **suaristaʀ…**
   (2) **runaʀauk…**
   (3) **…ąʀheili** (inverted)
   (4) **…akireistbį** (inverted)
   (5) **-rk** (vertically up the left side)

The strange inverted setting of some of the lines could be easily explained if the layout is assumed to parallel the curving pattern known from many runestones. This was suggested to Stoklund by both Jonas Nordby (personal communication) and Magnus Källström (personal communication) when the inscription was first published in *Nytt om runer* 15 for 2000. The reason Stoklund rejected the suggestion at the time is that she was convinced the vertical of the *r*-rune in **runaʀ** was intersected by the final *k*-rune in **bį-rk**. However, the verticals—including that of the relevant *r*-rune—all end in a typical triangular fashion (visible on the published photographs) formed by the point of the knife. In my view the line that the *k*-rune intersects is not part of the *r*-rune, but an accidental mark—perhaps the vertical of the **r** was overcut. Stoklund and I have discussed this and she agrees that the alternative reading I offer is plausible. I suggest:

A (1) **sigmoþʀị...**
   (2) **...?arnsmo**
   (3) **þiʀsị...**

B (1) **suaristaʀ...**
   (2) **...akireistbị-rkrunaʀauk...**
   (3) **...ạʀheilị**

Irrespective of the order in which the runes are read, the fragmentary state of the Østermarie inscription means that a complete interpretation is impossible. On side B **reist** can be identified with certainty as the Old Norse verb *reist* 'carved'. Stoklund takes the following **bị-rk** as the Old Norse noun *bjarg* 'help' and sees this as the object of *reist*. 'Carved help' is not a frequent statement in runic inscriptions, where the object of *reist* is most usually *rúnar* 'runes', but the (very complex) text on the Swedish Kvinneby amulet may support her interpretation (cf. Stoklund 2000, 288, with reference to Westlund 1989, 43). In addition, a Swedish amulet inscription from Öland (Solberga) contains the Old Norse verb *bjarga* 'help, save' (Gustavson 2004, 63–66).

My new reading makes it possible to identify a compound *bjargrúnar* 'help-runes' as the object, known from the Eddaic poem *Sigrdrífumál*, and this provides securer motivation for the sequence **bị-rk**. *Bjargrúnar*, together with the compound *bótrúnar* 'runes of help and recovery', are also found at the beginning of an apparently formulaic inscription from Bergen, Norway (B 257): *Ríst ek bótrúnar, ríst ek bjargrúnar* .... This particular object is dated to approximately 1335 (Liestøl 1964, 40–50).

A recent copper find from Skänninge in Östergötland can perhaps cast light on both the Østermarie and the Roskilde amulets. This copper amulet is also a fragment, presumably from the late Viking Age/early medieval period, and parts of the inscription are missing. Helmer Gustavson has suggested the reading (side A) **luf-unarị...** (side B) **...kbutrunaʀ** and reconstructed the text as follows (normalised as Old Norse): *Lyf[r]únar rí[st] [e]k, bótrúnar* (Gustavson 2003, 32) 'Healing runes I cut, runes of help and recovery' (my translation). In a later publication Gustavson has suggested (side A) **...kbutrunaʀ** (side B) **luf-unarị...** and reconstructed: *Rí[st e]k bótrúnar, lyfrúnar* 'I cut runes of help and recovery, healing runes' (Björkhager and Gustavson 2004, 193; my translation).

The Old Norse verb *lyfja* 'heal; cure' and the noun *lyf* 'charm, magic remedy' are words associated with the practice of magic. The inscription on a copper amulet from Sigtuna, for example, contains the request: *Njót*

lyfja 'Make good use of the healing (charms)' (cf. Nordén 1943, 172), and the contents of the inscription appear to be related to the healing of a fever. The inscription on the medieval wooden Danish amulet known as the Ribe healing-stick contains the sequence (normalised as Old Norse): *ok lyf-tungu at lyfja* 'and a healing tongue to cure' (Moltke 1985, 494). Although written in Old Danish (and containing a few Jutlandic forms), the text is considered to stem from a Norwegian original. This inscription also appears to have been intended to cure a fever. The amulet is not least remarkable for the fact that the text betrays a considerable measure of Christian influence.

In the light of these considerations the inscription on side B of the Roskilde amulet may well be interpreted as containing the magic healing element *lyf* (as also suggested by Ivar Lindquist 1932, 66 f.). The first runes **lufr** are perhaps to be seen as an abbreviation of *lyfr[únar]*.

The Østermarie and Roskilde amulets both contain a personal name, possibly those of the persons they were meant to heal or protect. The sparse wording does not indicate Christian influence. The text of the Østermarie amulet seems to come from Old Norse literary tradition and the words *bjargrúnar*, *bótrúnar* and *lyfrúnar* can be seen as indicating that the use of runes had a particular status in healing rituals. Possibly, too, the use of runelike characters on the Roskilde amulet reflects the fact that the healing procedure was meant to work in an atmosphere of secrecy. This notion is perhaps supported by the large number of nonsensical runic amulet inscriptions.

Linguistically meaningful inscriptions in Latin

The majority of amulets with legible texts contain Latin or pseudo-Latin words and phrases. The earliest example from Denmark is most probably the late eleventh-century inscription on an Arabic silver coin from Bornholm. The contents of these Latin inscriptions are related to religious prayers of the Roman Church and religious practice in general (on their background, cf., e.g., Gjerløw 1955; Gustavson 1984; 1994; Ertl 1994; Knirk 1998). They often exhibit combinations of several different quotations. Some are short, consisting of only a few runes, while others contain complete formulas from prayers or blessings. The longest runic inscriptions from Denmark are to be found among those written in Latin.

Of very frequent occurrence is the word *agla*, which is considered to be an acronym of Hebrew origin and not therefore a Latin word as such. It occurs in Latin environments, however, often as part of the formula *agla gala laga*, with the runes transposed in the second and third elements. The

frequency of the word in magical contexts indicates that it was considered to be powerful; seven of a total of ten amulet inscriptions in Latin/pseudo-Latin contain the word *agla* or *agla* formulas (Odense lead tablet, Glim lead fragment, Viborg lead strip, Selsø lead strip from Zealand (Stoklund 1996, 284 f.), Tårnborg lead tablet no. 1 (Stoklund 1987, 203–05), Blæsinge lead tablet from western Zealand (Stoklund 1987, 204–08), and the find from Lille Myregård — see below). More sporadically the names of evangelists are mentioned in runic inscriptions, e.g. on the Selsø lead strip and the Glim fragment. Otherwise we find, for example, *Ave Maria*, *Pater noster*, *Christus vincit*, and *In nomine Patris* formulas. In addition, an instance of *Alfa et Omega* is found on lead tablet no. 3 from Tårnborg, which also contains the magic formula *abracadabra* (Stoklund 1989, 205).

The recent find from Lille Myregård on Bornholm revealed a long version of *Ave Maria* together with the sequence (normalised as classical Latin): *Increatus Pater*, *Immensus Pater*, *Aeternus Pater*, which occurs in the Catholic Athanasian creed. A parallel can be found in an inscription on a wooden stick from Bergen (B 619, see *NIyR*, 6: 239) apparently formulated specifically against an eye disease. This particular use is also supported by occurrences in other medieval sources (Ohrt 1917, 220 f., 224–26). In general, the evidence from late medieval medical books makes clear that specific Latin phrases were used in rituals of protection and for the healing of fevers, eye diseases, boils, and so on.

Personal names also occur now and again in the Latin texts. The Odense lead tablet was meant to deliver a woman called *Ása* from evil and lead tablet no. 3 from Tårnborg was apparently meant to liberate one *Andrés*. The Roskilde (Hedegade) lead stick also contains a woman's name, *Kristína*, but both *Andrés* and *Kristína* can of course refer to saints.

Lead tablets with Latin inscriptions in roman letters are also known from the Danish area, but unfortunately they have not been systematically registered. I am aware of the existence of small metal fragments with roman script from Randers, Tårnborg and Bornholm, but the most important find in the present context is the lead tablet from Romdrup in Jutland (Christiansen 1981), since the content of this inscription forms a close parallel to that of the runic Blæsinge lead tablet (Stoklund 1987, 205). Roman-letter inscriptions from Schleswig and Halberstadt in Germany present further obvious parallels (Düwel 2001, 227–52). If the majority of metal amulet finds in Denmark turn out to be runic, we may perhaps conclude that runes were considered more effectual than roman letters, but this is still an open question

Medieval pronunciation of post-classical Latin seems to be reflected to at least some degree in runic inscriptions. Certain spellings point to fricative

pronunciations that are not documented in manuscripts, in particular the use of the *þ*-rune for roman *t* in final position after unaccented vowels. Very often the Latin conjunction *et* 'and' is spelled **eþ** or **æþ**. A striking example is **ræhnaþ** for *regnat* 'rules', found in both the Selsø lead strip (Stoklund 1996, 284 f.) and the Østermarie lead amulet inscriptions (Stoklund 2004, 4–6). The use of the *h*-rune for the roman letter *g* doubtless also reflects a fricative sound. The Selsø inscription contains further indications that those who wrote Latin using runes might perform a rudimentary phonetic analysis rather than copy directly from an original (cf. Stoklund 1996, 285). In contrast, the Blæsinge lead tablet substitutes runes for letters mechanically, as is clear from the use of special characters to correspond the roman letters *c*, *q* and *x*.

The inscription on the lead tablet from Kävlinge, Skåne, contains both elements: phonetic spellings and special characters for *x* and *c*, and is thus difficult to categorise. It does not consist of random quotations, but is a blessing on a household formulated for a specific occasion and is as such unique.

In order to make a plausible analysis of runic texts written in Latin it is important to be able to compare different features within one and the same text, not least runic typology, spelling and morphology. This is unfortunately impossible in most cases given the brevity of the inscriptions and the limited number of words they contain.

Amulet inscriptions and literacy

Medieval runic amulets also have something to contribute to the debate on literacy. The inscriptions on the folded amulets cannot be seen as written communication between individuals, however, which rather complicates matters. The often casual appearance of the inscriptions indicates that the writing was primarily functional — not aesthetical as in manuscripts. And the carvers of the meaningful texts and those able to reproduce Latin correctly must have had some literary skills and were most probably members of the clergy. In many cases, however, it seems to have been of no importance that the inscriptions made sense. The members of church congregations, who were probably the users (and buyers) of the amulets, would hardly have been able to distinguish runes from runelike symbols or read Latin aloud (correct or not); and those who bought folded amulets will have had difficulty in gauging their content or judging their quality. So the process of writing itself, perhaps together with an oral realisation, was presumably what made the magic effective. The fact that some amulets are cut from

larger—already inscribed—tablets, with obvious disregard for the existing text, implies a degree of mass production, and this is certainly supported by the number of finds.

Final remarks

The evidence from Denmark points to a continuous use of runic amulets from the late eleventh to the late fifteenth century (perhaps even stretching into the sixteenth). Some amulets were probably kept close to the persons or the things they were meant to protect, while others were deposited in suitable (occult/sacred?) places. Some must have been commissioned work (cf. the personal names and the blessing on the Kävlinge lead tablet), but most seem to have been manufactured for general use—by anyone who felt the need for protection.

Amulets underwent several changes during the period they were in use, all closely related to the Christian religion. The folded and inscribed lead type was most likely introduced as a Continental, Catholic practice (cf. Düwel 2001, 252–55), but interestingly enough the local, runic, script was not replaced, though the vernacular language and the traditional textual contents soon were. The medieval runic amulet in Denmark seems to be a hybrid, containing both traditional and novel elements.

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B + number = Preliminary registration number of runic inscriptions found at Bryggen in Bergen.

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