

U 169 Björkeby: A Daughter without a Name?

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Abstract

This article suggests that the sequence of runes **uku** on U 169 Björkeby should not be interpreted as an adjective *ungu* ‘young’, heading the phrase *ungu møy sīna* ‘their young daughter’, but as a name, followed by the appositive phrase *møy sīna* ‘their daughter’, which would be more in line with the normal way to present a person that is to be commemorated in a runic inscription. There are also strong linguistic arguments, outlined in detail, not to take **uku** as an adjective. First, the word order of a phrase such as *ungu møy sīna*, adjective–noun–possessive, is atypical for the Viking Age language. Further, *ungu* must be construed as a so-called weak inflectional form of the adjective, but a weakly inflected adjective is highly improbable in the given context. Two possible names are proposed, *Unga* (from the adjective *ungr* ‘young’) and *Auga/Øga* (from the noun *auga/øga* ‘eye’).

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The Uplandic runestone U 169 Björkeby is erected in memory of a son and a daughter. A puzzling point in the interpretation of the inscription given in *Sveriges runinskrifter* (SRI, 6: 257 f.) as well as the Scandinavian Runic Text Database is that only the son, but not the daughter, is assigned a name.

The beginning of the inscription is somewhat damaged, but its latter part is well preserved and leaves no room for doubt as regards the reading of the runes. The end of the inscription is quoted below together with the English interpretation presented in the Scandinavian Runic Text Database.

...**ṭin** × **pina** × **iftir** × **frustin** × **sun sin** × **uk** + **iftir** × **uku** + **my sina** ×

... [s]tæin þenna æftir Frøystæin, sun sinn, ok æftir ungu møy sīna.

‘... this stone in memory of Freysteinn, their son, and in memory of their young maid.’

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The fact that the daughter lacks a name is not discussed in *Sveriges runinskrifter*. Nor is it, to the best of my knowledge, mentioned elsewhere in the literature. However, the runes **uku** could just as well be a name, instead of the adjective *ungu* ‘young’. Several circumstances speak in favour of this hypothesis.

First, it is very unusual that a commemorated person in a runic inscription is not mentioned by name,¹ and here it is even more remarkable since the brother’s name is mentioned. The only good reason to leave out the name of the girl that I can think of in this case is that she died at such a tender age that she had not yet been given a name.

Further, taking **uku** to represent a name would make the inscription follow a standard pattern of memorial runestones and the presentation of the boy and the girl more parallel: ... *æftir Frøystæin, sun sinn, ok æftir uku, møy sīna*. The parallelism would also apply to the punctuation; **uku** is surrounded by punctuation marks, just as the name of the boy, *Frøystæin*, is, whereas the phrases *sun sinn* and *møy sīna* are not internally divided by any punctuation marks.

Finally, the parallel would be complete (in accordance with the interpretation of U 169 in *Sveriges runinskrifter*) if we may also change the translation of the word *møy* from ‘maid’ to ‘daughter’. In fact, this adjustment seems well motivated. In a discussion about the place-name *Möjbro*, Staffan Fridell (2008, 46) argues convincingly that ‘daughter’ is the earliest meaning of this word. According to Fridell, ‘daughter’ is the intended meaning not only for *møy* on U 169, but also for the instances of *mār* (i.e. the nominative of the same noun) on U 29 (which *Sveriges runinskrifter* translates *flicka* ‘girl’) and ÖgFV1958;252 (which the author of the article in *Fornvännen*, Sven B.F. Jansson, translates *ungmö* ‘maid’).

These remarks do not, of course, carry enough weight just by themselves to force a new interpretation of **uku**. But there is also very strong linguistic evidence to support the idea that **uku** is not an adjective, but a name. We may scrutinize the word order of the phrase *ungu møy sīna* as well as the form of the putative adjective *ungu*.

I have systematically excerpted noun phrases containing adjectives in the Scandinavian Runic Text Database, searching for the adjectives given in *Svenskt runordsregister* (Peterson 1994; 2006). This primary search was supplemented by checking the Danish and Norwegian runic inscriptions

¹ There are, however, counter-examples, e.g. G 112: *Sibba(?)/Simpa(?) lēt gæra stæin æftir döttur sīna ok Hröðþiuðar*, ‘Sibba(?)/Simpa(?) had the stone made in memory of his and Hröðþjóð’s daughter’.

in order to find also noun phrases with adjectives not covered by *Svenskt runordsregister*. About 400 noun phrases with adjectival attributes (reasonably well preserved and interpreted) were found. Ninety-eight of these noun phrases contained a possessive attribute as well. (The number includes the phrase *ungu møy sīna* on U 169.)

The predominant word order in Viking Age noun phrases consisting of a head noun, a possessive attribute and an adjective is noun–possessive–adjective, as e.g. in the common phrase *faður sinn gōðan* (acc.) ‘his good father’. Eighty-seven of the noun phrases with adjectives and possessives mentioned above represent this type.

There are some phrases with the word order adjective–noun–possessive. If we retain the idea that **uku** in U 169 is an adjective, then the noun phrase *ungu møy sīna* would belong to this group, together with another four phrases. (I here disregard *allir postolar hans* ‘all his apostles’ in N 11; the word *allr* is labelled an adjective in *Svenskt runordsregister*, but here and most often it is a totality-marking determinative pronoun, which may have its own slot in the noun phrase, i.e. the very first position, cf. Modern English: *all his (good) apostles*—not **his all (good) apostles*.) The adjective–noun–possessive word order is according to Lars-Olof Delsing (1994, 101) common in early medieval Swedish, whereas the Viking Age pattern noun–possessive–adjective is rare in medieval texts.

Three other word order patterns are represented by one single or a couple of examples each, including two instances of possessive–adjective–noun, which is the prevailing word order in Modern Swedish and Modern Danish, as it is in English. Modern Icelandic and Modern Norwegian use possessive–adjective–noun and adjective–noun–possessive side by side.

So far we have not enough evidence to rule out the possibility that **uku** is actually an adjective. We do find other instances of the word order adjective–noun–possessive. However, they are few, and in each case there might be some explanation of the deviation from the more common noun–possessive–adjective pattern. One of these phrases is found in an early medieval inscription, NB448 (c. 1200): *sanna vingan vára* (fem. sing. acc.) ‘our true friendship’, thus fitting the diachronic pattern well. Two phrases (quite similar to one another) are stylistically marked with alliterating adjective and head noun, Sö 70: *sniallir synir Ólafar* (masc. plur. nom.) ‘Ólǫf’s able sons’ and Sö 88: *sniallir synir Holmlaugar* (masc. plur. nom.) ‘Holmlaug’s able sons’. The last instance is found on G 138: *æiniga sun þæira* (masc. sing. acc.) ‘their only son’, where the word *æiniga* has somewhat unclear word class status. It is not a prototypical adjective but rather a kind of determinative pronoun. Thus, it is not self-evident that we

should expect it in the same position(s) within the noun phrase as we find ordinary adjectives.

It is also interesting to take a closer look at the form of the putative adjective *ungu* in U 169. Since the noun phrase is in the accusative case and the head noun is of feminine gender and singular, we can conclude that *ungu* represents the so-called weak declension of the adjective *ungr*. However, I claim that the strong form *unga* would actually be the expected one here.²

Attention is not always paid to the fact that the weak forms of adjectives were less used in Old Scandinavian than in the modern Scandinavian languages. Weak forms of adjectives show up in Viking Age inscriptions after definite articles and demonstratives, e.g. in Sö 125: *hinn hælgi Krístr* (masc. nom.) ‘the holy Christ’, Vg 105 and Vg 122: *sū hælga Sankta Maria* (fem. nom.) ‘the holy Saint Mary’ and U 219: *þenna fagra stæin* (masc. acc.) ‘this fair stone’. They may also appear (without a definite article) after proper names, in most cases probably as so-called bynames, as in U 643: *Andvētt Rauða* (masc. acc.) ‘Andvettr (the) Red’. Bynames could also have their origin in strong adjectives, cf. NB 246: *Erlingr Rauðr* (masc. nom.) ‘Erlingr (the) Red’. It has been observed that bynames of adjectival origin were inflected as nouns (Seim 1987).

However, weak forms of adjectives are not found with possessives until rather late. Lars-Olof Delsing (1994) has investigated the development in Old Swedish. In sum, there is a shift in word order from mainly noun–possessive–adjective (Viking Age) over mainly adjective–noun–possessive (early Middle Ages) to possessive–adjective–noun (later Middle Ages). Weak forms of adjectives were not found at all in noun phrases following the two earlier patterns, and the use, nowadays obligatory, of the weak form of the adjective between a preceding possessive and a following noun was not settled until the 1400s.

It may also be of interest to consider the later development of adjective–noun–possessive phrases in Scandinavian varieties that have maintained this word order, where we nowadays find the weak form of adjectives. However, to judge from Modern Icelandic, one may suspect that the shift from strong

² Attributive adjectives in old Germanic languages do not only agree with the head noun in gender, number and case; every combination of gender, number and case also shows up in two guises, a strong form and a weak form with different distribution. In modern linguistics, the strong form is sometimes called indefinite and the weak form definite. There has been a considerable reduction of adjectival forms in Mainland Scandinavian, chiefly as a result of the loss of case-marking. The strong–weak distinction as such, however, remains in these languages. Modern Icelandic adheres fully to the old system.

to weak forms was dependent on the introduction of definiteness-marking on nouns. Modern Icelandic adjective–noun–possessive phrases normally have the adjective in the weak form and the noun in the definite form: *ungu meyjuna sína* (acc.) ‘his/her/their young maid’. But there is also a somewhat more literal alternative, which may give a hint of what to expect in Viking Age Swedish, a combination of the strong form of the adjective and the indefinite form of the noun: *unga mey sína* (acc.) ‘his/her/their young maid’.³

Let us, finally, take a closer look at the adjectives in the noun phrases from runic inscriptions with adjective–noun–possessive word order already quoted above. We can then confirm that the phrases *sanna vingan vára* (fem. sing. acc.) ‘our true friendship’ (NB448), *sniallir synir Ólafar* (masc. plur. nom.) ‘Olaf’s able sons’ (Sö 70) and *sniallir synir Holmlaugar* (masc. plur. nom.) ‘Holmlaug’s able sons’ (Sö 88) all have, in accordance with Delsing’s findings, the strong form of the adjective. But what about *æiniga* in G 138: *æiniga sun þæira* (masc. sing. acc.) ‘their only son’? It may look like a weak form, but the weak–strong distinction is relevant only if there is a corresponding strong form. I do not think there is. As I have already remarked, *æiniga* is probably not an ordinary adjective, but a determinative pronoun, and most pronouns do not have both strong and weak forms.

There are another two instances of the same word in runic inscriptions: ÖL 39 has *sunn æinigi* (masc. sing. nom.) ‘the only son’ and U 69 has *sun sinn æiniga* (masc. sing. acc.) ‘her only son’. None of these instances represents a noun phrase where a weak form of the adjective is expected; compare e.g. *sun sinn æiniga* (acc.) with *sun sinn gōðan* (acc.) or *faður sinn gōðan*; the latter phrase types always have the strong form *gōðan*.⁴

Söderwall’s dictionary of Old Swedish lists the forms *enugha/eningä* and *ening/enigh*. The latter form has the flavour of a strong feminine form, but is used also with a masculine head noun: *min ening sun* ‘my only son’. Schlyter’s dictionary of the language of the Old Swedish laws (1877) marks *enunga* as indeclinable, with the exception of (a couple of) instances of the strong ending *-um* in the masculine dative. Thus, the medieval sources give

³ Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson (2006, 200 n. 3) remarks that phrases such as *nýja plata Bjarkar* ‘Björk’s new record’, where the adjective is in the weak (fem. nom. sing.) form and the head noun in the indefinite form, are sometimes heard in modern colloquial Icelandic. I take this pattern to be a recent novation.

⁴ Theoretically, there is one possible counter-example on DR 394, where the confusing sequence of runes **ruþur isiin : kuþa** is found. Normally, it is taken for a miswriting of *bröpur sin gōþan*. Personally, I am inclined to believe that neither *bröpur sin gōþan* nor *bröpur sin gōþa* was intended by the carver, since he does not practice bad spelling otherwise in the inscription.

a somewhat confused picture, but they certainly give no evidence of an ordinary adjective with full sets of strong and weak forms. (No comparison with Old Norse can be made; Old Norse *einigr* means ‘anyone’/‘whoever’ or ‘no one’.)

To conclude: The interpretation of **uku** in U 169 as the adjective *ungu* ‘young’ forces us to presume a unique instance of a weak form of an ordinary adjective (characterized by full sets of strong and weak forms) in a noun phrase consisting of the adjective, a head noun and a possessive, the only alternative being that the carver made a mistake, so that an intended **uka** became **uku** by accident. In both cases, we must assume a marked word order, rarely practiced in Viking Age inscriptions.

I find neither of these ideas satisfying, especially since there is a good alternative: interpreting **uku** as a name. One possibility, perhaps the most probable, is that the girl was called *Unga*, in which case *Ungu* is the expected accusative form, as names are inflected as nouns. If so, we most certainly have an instance of a former byname with adjectival origin (*unga* ‘the young’), which has become a real name, cf. the female name *Kāta* (nom.)/*Kātu* (acc.) from the adjective *kātr* ‘cheerful’ found in DR 277 and in Vg 79 (Peterson 2007, 148).

No other instance of *Unga* as a full name is recorded. However, there are (late) medieval instances of the male name *Unge* from Sweden and Denmark. *Unge/Ungi* is also recorded as a byname in medieval texts all over Scandinavia, and the female byname *Unga* is found in Old Norse documents (Peterson 2007, 243; Knudsen et al. 1941–48, 1532; Lind 1921, 391; SMP Archive).

Another possible name is *Auga/Ǫga* with an origin in the neuter noun *auga/ǫga* ‘eye’. (The carver represents old diphthongs monographically.) Used as a name we can maybe expect a shift to feminine inflection to explain an accusative form *Augu/Ǫgu*. There is runic evidence of this name; Vg 77 is erected by a person, male or female, named *Auga*. *Auga* is also found as a male byname in Old Norse (Lind 1920–21, 9).

I will not speculate further on the question which name **uku** might be. My point is that it most certainly is a name. Not only would an interpretation of **uku my sina** as e.g. *Ungu, møy sīna* ‘Unga, their daughter’ fit very well into the normal pattern of memorial runic inscriptions. It is also, from the linguistic point of view, most unlikely that the interpretation hitherto maintained, that **uku** means *ungu* (fem. sing. acc. weak) ‘young’, is correct.

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