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Two Recent Runic Finds from Orkney

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Abstract
This article provides accounts of OR 22 Quoys and OR 23 Naoversdale, two runic inscriptions recently found in Orkney. There is discussion of the find circumstances, followed by a description of the object bearing the runes (the former a folded lead plaque, the latter an irregular stone fragment), a transrunification, transliteration, and commentary on the reading. Thereafter comes an interpretation of the text. In the case of OR 23 this is straightforward enough since the text consists of a sequence from the Pater Noster, the first instance of a Latin-language runic inscription from Orkney. OR 22 provides more of a challenge, and various suggestions are offered.

Keywords: Scandinavian runes, Orkney, lead plaques, rune-stones, magic formulas, Pater Noster, inscriptions in Latin

Since the publication of The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain (Barnes and Page 2006), the corpus has been augmented by a number of new discoveries. From England we have a second graffito on the walls of Carlisle Cathedral, E 17 Carlisle II (found 2008; cf. Barnes 2010), E 18, a lead spindle-whorl from Saltfleetby, Lincolnshire (unearthed 2010; cf. Hines forthcoming; the authenticity of this inscription has been questioned), and E 19, a stone cross fragment from Sockburn Hall, Durham (found 2014; publication planned by Eleanor Rye and others). No new discoveries have been reported from Shetland or Scotland. Orkney, on the other hand, like England, can boast three: OR 21–23. OR 22–23 are presented here; the earliest of the three finds, OR 21 Brough of Deerness (on a copper-alloy strip unearthed during archaeological excavations in 2009), appears to consist of rune-like characters rather than actual runes, although at a “Rune Rede” meeting held in Orkney in May 2015, Sonia Pereswetoff-
Morath made a valiant attempt to find a text among its confused collection of vertical and oblique lines.

OR 22 Quoys

This lead-plaque inscription was unearthed at Quoys farm on the Deerness peninsula of the Orkney Mainland. It was discovered in May 2011 by a metal detectorist close to the surface of the ground. Nearby and at roughly the same depth was found a fragment of a metal (bronze?) seal, possibly of ecclesiastical provenance. The plaque is 18 mm long and 12 high (maximum measurements); it is folded once, bent over in the middle of its original c. 25 mm height, and in that state has a thickness of some 2½ mm. It is currently in the keeping of the Orkney Museum, Kirkwall.

Both the exposed faces of the plaque bear a sequence of runes covering virtually the whole of the surface; the length of each sequence and the height of the characters therefore correspond closely with the length and height of the plaque. The bases of rr. 1–7 are adjacent to the tops of rr. 8–14, so the plaque has to be flipped over in order to position each sequence the right way up. The graphs are in the main clearly cut and well preserved, but a few details are unclear (fig. 1). There is no indication of the order in which the two sequences should be read, so the choice made here is arbitrary. The fold is above the first line and thus below the second.

A faint line as of the branch of \( \Upsilon \) runs between rr. 1 and 2, connecting with both, but it is unclear whether or not this is part of the inscription. A similar line, slightly more definite, rises towards r. 7, connecting with it at about mid-height; conceivably this character should be read as \( \text{a} \). The branch of r. 9 appears to cross the vertical, though the left side is weaker than the right; the height of this line could indicate either \( n \) or \( l \), but if a
crossing branch was intended, n would, of course, be the only possible reading. A nick left of the centre of r.12 seems to stem from a slip of the tool, perhaps while the carver was working on the bow of r. 11. Rune 14 is a half-length vertical, but placed rather low down for s; nor is it dotted as r. 4. This could be a line signalling the end of a sentence or word division, but it could also be an incomplete rune.

**Interpretation**

Neither sequence of writing makes obvious sense. It may be there are further runes in the fold that would cast light on the meaning of the text as a whole, but so far no attempt has been made to open the plaque up for fear the object could be irreparably damaged.

Runes 8–14 look slightly more susceptible of interpretation than rr. 1–7. In þik it is possible to recognise the accusative of the 2nd singular Old Norse personal pronoun ‘you’, which suggests that y(n)i could be a Norse verb governing the accusative. Conceivably we have here the past subjunctive of vinna ‘[to] master; [to] overcome’, but what could have motivated the past subjunctive ‘[that X might] overcome you’ is impossible to say. Formally y(n)i could also be past subjunctive of unna ‘[to] love’, but that verb governs the dative, which should give þér ‘you’ rather than þik.

On the other side of the plaque we have the sequence (i)rasa, which could be taken as Old Norse er Ása ‘Ása is’ or ‘which/whom Ása...’.

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demonstrative sá ‘that [nom. m. sg.]; he’. Runes 6–7 could begin a new word, since [b] does not normally appear in medial or final position in Old Norse, but b can also stand for [β] and [p], both of which occur medially and finally. Neither *bi nor *ba is a discrete lexical item, so if b does denote [b], and the text is meaningful, we would have to reckon with a continuation under the fold: rr. 8 ff. can hardly complement 6–7. The possibilities are many, and it would be unrewarding to speculate further along these lines.

In total over eighty lead plaques with runic inscriptions are now known (almost all larger than the Quoys example), and twelve or so lead crosses. The oldest appear to be from the twelfth, the most recent from the fifteenth century. About half of these lead objects bear texts that have proved uninterpretable. Those that give meaning, or at least partial meaning, appear to be in Latin or corrupt Latin (sometimes almost entirely garbled Latin). That makes it tempting to suggest that the sequence (i)rasab(i) might not be Old Norse but rather Latin ... iras abi ... ‘... outbursts of anger [acc. pl.]. Go away! [imp. sg.] ...’. However, y(n)ipik is difficult to fit into a Latin mould, not least with the occurrence of y and ð, although in medieval Scandinavia post-vocalic Latin [t] is often written þ in runic inscriptions. There is perhaps a superficial similarity between y(n)ipik and part of a lead amulet inscription from Munkegård, Povlsker, Bornholm (DR NOR2003;8 M), which runs: næþi(n)gort, æþ rendering Latin et and i(n)gort possibly giving the name of an elf or demon that causes illness (cf. Düwel 2001, 250; McKinnell, Simek and Düwel 2004, 159–61), but we have then to assume that ik stands for [ing] (quite possible), and the y, presumably denoting [y], remains unexplained.

The lead plaques that give meaning suggest a context of “Christian magic”: Christian formulas (and others, e.g. abracadabra) are employed with the apparent aim of harnessing supernatural powers. Often the purpose seems to be to cure or ward off illness, and to that extent such plaques can be regarded as amulets. If we suppose the postulated phrase y(n)ipik to have been negated, giving ‘[that X might not] overcome you’, we could cast the Quoys plaque in the role of an amulet designed to help against illness—and likewise if we understand (i)rasab(i) to mean ‘outbursts of anger [acc.]. Go away’, with the outbursts of anger taken as symptoms of illness. Such interpretations do, however, rely rather heavily on the imagination—and it would be unexpected to have a text partly in Norse, partly in Latin. That difficulty is of course removed if we understand ipik as et Ing... , but such an understanding requires a fair bit of interpretative licence.
OR 23 Naversdale

The Naversdale rune-stone fragment was found in September 2013 at Naversdale farm, Orphir, on the west Mainland of Orkney. It was a chance discovery, made by John Grieve, the farmer’s father-in-law, while building up the side of a door opening. The stones he was using came mostly from a stackyard on the premises, although some had been collected from surrounding fields. The object is currently in the keeping of the Orkney Museum, Kirkwall.

The Naversdale inscription is carved on an irregularly shaped piece of red sandstone (fig. 2). Maximum measurements are c. 30 cm (length), × c. 24.5 cm (depth, i.e. from front to back), × c. 8 cm (height). The length of the runic narrow edge is c. 27 cm, and of the inscription (measured from the first damaged vertical to the final bow) 12.3 cm. The beginning of the text has been lost with the breaking away of part of the stone, and this has also removed most of r. 1. The runes are otherwise well preserved, and read (fig. 3):

```
*, 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | (1) | R
1   5  10  15  20
*  s i n s i l i s a n t i f i t s (i t) o r
```

There are no framing lines and the graphs cover most or all of the runic edge, tending to increase in height as the inscription progresses. Rune 7 ᚴ, for example, is 2.5 cm tall, while r. 21 ᚱ measures 4.7. The first character is now no more than the top of a vertical, and can only be identified from context (see below). Rune 2 is clearly ᚻ: the half-length vertical stops a little way short of the broken edge of the stone. Neither this, nor the other examples of ᛦ in the inscription end in a dot; the slight widening of the cut at the base of r. 17 does not appear to be deliberate. Runes 18 and 19 are hard to disentangle. Rune 18 has the shape of ᵀ, while r. 19 with its ascending left branch placed well below the top of the vertical can hardly be other than ᴏ. But something seems to have gone wrong with the carving of r. 19. A deep gash at the top may have been caused by splintering of the stone during an initial attempt to cut the ᴥ-branch, and the carver may then have gone on to incise a second, more satisfactory branch lower down. On the other hand, it is not entirely clear that the higher branch connects with r. 19, while it most certainly does with r. 18. The carver does not appear to have made use of separation points. There
are one or two dots that might be taken as such, as between rr. 2 and 3 or rr. 5 and 6, but these are hard to distinguish from the pock marks that abound on this surface.

**Interpretation**

The inscription reveals itself to be in Latin, part of the opening of the Lord’s Prayer:

... *es in caelis, sanctificetur* ...

‘... art in heaven, hallowed be ...’

We may surmise that the lost beginning of the text ran: *Pater noster, qui* ‘Our Father, which’, but it is unclear whether the carver ever got as far as the *nomen tuum* ‘thy name’ we would expect to follow *sanctificetur*. There is room on the surviving surface for a continuation, but no sign of any carving. If the writer did add more, it seems likely to have been on a different stone. Some thirty-five *Pater noster* inscriptions are known from Scandinavia, and commonly these contain only the opening words (though some are complete, cf. N 53 Ulstad, inscribed on a lead plaque, and A 123 Osen in Gaular, on a lead cross). A partial parallel to OR 23 is A 173 (N 816), a runic stick from Trondheim dated c. 1150–1200, on which can be read: **bater·nuster·kuiesinseli·santibisetur** together with a rune carver’s signature and the first seven runes of the *fuþark*. (On vernacular and Latin Christian prayers in Scandinavian runic inscriptions, see Zilmer 2013.)
There are a couple of indications that OR 23 may belong in the early part of the Middle Ages. There are no dotted runes, as one might have expected in a later medieval inscription (e.g. Ǽ rather than signin r. 6), and the whole text seems to be written without word separation — indeed, r. 9 marks both the final sound of caelis and the opening of sanctificetur.

Runes 16–17 ts imply a [ts] pronunciation of original Latin /k/, in contrast to r. 5 s, which presumably indicates simplification of [ts] to [s] (both instances of course occur in palatal environment). If by any chance r. 18 is to be read k, we have to assume that the writer was trying to render both medieval pronunciation and Latin spelling: ts gives the former while k renders Latin ‘c’. But the [e] of sanctificetur is then left undenoted. That the expected [u] towards the end of the same word appears as Ío may indicate a lowering in the pronunciation of this unstressed vowel.

The Naversdale find gives us our first runic inscription from Orkney in Latin. The appearance of this language should occasion no surprise: it is widely used in medieval Scandinavian runic writing (cf. Gustavson 1994; Ertl 1994; Knirk 1998). Written prayers, especially in Latin, are often associated with ecclesiastical sites, but that is by no means always the case. OR 23 has a fairly informal appearance, and may have been carved for a variety of reasons and in a variety of places. Naversdale is not associated with any ecclesiastical building, but the primary context of the inscription is wholly unclear. The runic edge does not appear to have suffered weathering, so it is a reasonable supposition that the stone was not exposed to the elements for long after the carving of the inscription.

Fig. 3. The OR 23 Naversdale runic inscription. © Frank Bradford, Orkney.
Possibly it was kept indoors or built into a wall; indeed, it could already have been part of some structure at the time the inscription was made.

**Bibliography**

A + number = preliminary registration number in the Oslo Runic Archives of runic inscriptions found in Norway outside Bryggen in Bergen.


N + number = inscription published in *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer*, by Magnus Olsen et al., 6 vols to date (Oslo, 1941–).
