Man karikerar inte särskilt mycket om man sammanfattar situationen sålunda: alla vet vad som står på Rökstenen, men ingen förstår något. (Ralph 2021, 12)

‘It would hardly be a misrepresentation if one summed up the situation as follows: everyone knows what the Rök stone says, but no one understands any of it.’

The two books discussed here are not easy to review. The subject matter—the famous Rök rune-stone—requires understanding of early Viking Age language and culture, of runes and their development and uses, of Norse mythology, of philological method, and much besides. Add to this the fact that the stone bears the longest and probably the most complex runic inscription known to mankind, and it will be readily understood that the task both of authors and reviewer is daunting.

The Rök inscription has been known since the early 1600s and many have tried their hand at interpreting it—with varying results. Williams
and Ralph, it will be no surprise, find all previous interpretations wanting, and seek to replace them with interpretations of their own.

Let us begin with Williams’s *Rökstenen och världens undergång* (‘The Rök stone and the end of the world’). His principal criticism of earlier attempts at understanding the inscription is that they leave so much unexplained: they fail to mould the different parts of the text into a unified whole that presents a coherent message, picture, world view, or what you will. One might of course question the premise: is it certain there is a unified whole to be found? But methodologically it seems a sound starting point to assume the existence of a central theme running through the inscription. The task of the interpreter is then, if possible, to discover what that central theme is.

Williams does not seek merely to offer a new and more satisfactory interpretation of the Rök inscription. His aim is also to present it in a manner that can be understood not only by fellow runologists, but equally by the interested layman (pp. 25 f.). He stresses the importance of making one’s thoughts and arguments accessible to as wide a public as possible, not least by avoiding unnecessary jargon and structuring the book in a transparent and user-friendly way. And by and large I think Williams succeeds in bridging the gap between scholar and layman. Most helpful in this respect is the compartmentalised structure of the work, a structure that assists both the professional and the more casual reader.

First comes a general introduction, “Inledning”, which sets the scene, and underlines the uniqueness and importance of the Rök inscription. It is accompanied by five good, clear, colour photographs of the stone, which show the complete (painted) text. There follows a section explaining the basics of runic research and introducing some of its foremost practitioners (“Runforskning och runforskare”). Next Williams describes how he and three other non-runologist scholars (experts in the fields of Swedish language, archaeology, and the history of religion respectively) held regular meetings at which they went through the inscription line by line and bounced ideas off each other. With a hint of humour this section is entitled "De fyras gång och världens undergång" (‘The gang of four and the end of the world’). We then move on to “Språk och kultur under vikingatiden” (‘Language and culture in the Viking Age’), a heading that allows for a variety of content—the Viking Age itself and how the term is to be understood, contact between Scandinavians and the cultures with which they crossed paths, Viking Age Swedish, runes as a writing system and its limitations. “Tolkning och tradition” (‘Interpretation and tradition’) follows.
This offers a potted history of Rök scholarship, in particular what Williams distills as the four best known theories concerning the overall sense of the text. Next comes “Konsten att tolka en runsten” (‘The art of interpreting a rune-stone’). This section poses the question why the Rök inscription has proved so difficult to get to grips with, and considers general principles of interpretation. As part of the discussion, uncertainties about the dating of Rök are aired, and also the order in which different parts of the text are to be read. The last of the introductory sections bears the title “Fornnordiska föreställningar” to be translated literally as ‘Old Scandinavian concepts’ but more loosely and perhaps more helpfully as ‘The world of ancient Scandinavian beliefs’. For this is in large part an introduction to Norse mythology, in particular as it manifests itself in the art of rune- and picture-stones and in the Icelandic Eddas. The section includes suggestions about how Christian missionaries to Scandinavia may have adapted their message to make it accord better with pre-existing heathen concepts, not least notions about the after-life and the end of the world.

The introductory sections just described provide the lay reader with an essential tool for understanding the core of the book. This core comprises a detailed, often word-for-word and sometimes even rune-for-rune, interpretation of the Rök stone’s text. The relevant section is entitled “In i ristningen” (‘Into the inscription’) and spans 124 pages. Given that there have been widely differing interpretations of most parts of the text, what the reader is presented with here are Williams’s arguments in favour of his reappraisal and his reasons for believing that he has hit on better solutions than his predecessors. A point he stresses in particular is that earlier interpretations often leave much unexplained. The so-called “standard” interpretation, that in a great many respects goes back to a monograph by Elias Wessén (1958), suggests that much of the Rök stone’s text deals with disconnected legends and myths which we have no hope of capturing or properly understanding since they have over time been irretrievably lost. Williams finds this approach unsatisfactory, lacking as it does in explanatory power. He thinks Varinn, the carver or commissioner of the Rök stone, must have had clear and pressing reasons for raising such an imposing monument, and that they ought to be discoverable through analysis of the text. Since early Viking Age Sweden has bequeathed us virtually nothing in the way of literary remains, Williams falls back on material preserved in medieval Icelandic manuscripts. He draws particular attention to the Eddaic poems Völuspá and Vafþrúðnismál, and the panegyrical lays Eiríksmál and Hákonarmál, in which he finds much that throws light on the Rök text.
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\textit{Völuspá}, as is well known, deals with Ragnarök, the final battle between the Norse gods and the forces of darkness, a battle in which the old world is destroyed and a new world rises from the deep. As part of the catastrophe, the sun grows dark and there is talk of ill winds and a succession of sunless summers. \textit{Vafþrúðnismál} mentions a \textit{fimbulvetr} ‘terrible winter’, while \textit{Eiríksmál} and \textit{Hákonarmál} deal with Óðinn’s gathering in of outstanding warriors to Valhöll so that they can assist at the battle of Ragnarök. Williams connects these references with the memory of a gigantic volcanic eruption in AD 536, which appears to have had fatal consequences for large parts of the globe, not least the Nordic region (p. 11). This gives him an entry to the Rök text, whose mysteries are explained through comparison with relevant West Norse mythological sources, chiefly those to do with Óðinn and Valhöll and their role in Ragnarök, and with the Fenris wolf, who in the course of the battle swallows Óðinn and—according to Williams’s interpretation of Rök—extinguishes the sun. An important link in the chain is the stone’s reference to a being who, as Williams has it, ‘för nio åldrar (= generationer) sedan förlorade livet bland redgoter (= österut)’ (‘lost his/her life nine ages [= generations] ago among the Hraið Goths [= in the east]’, p. 160). That being, we are urged to believe, is in fact the sun, which nine generations prior to the setting up of the Rök monument failed to rise in the east—because of the dust clouds caused by the eruption. At roughly 30 years per generation this yields a time span of some 270 years from the catastrophe of 536 to the carving of the stone, which takes us neatly to the beginning of the 800s—a date commonly attributed to Rök. The c. 800 dating thus no longer has anything to do with the moving of a statue of the Gothic ruler Theoderic the Great to Aachen at the beginning of the 800s, as has been widely canvassed. Indeed, Theoderic plays no part in Williams’s interpretation, the sequence \textit{rauípaúrikra} being taken not as ‘Theoderic ruled’ or ‘Theoderic rode’, but (following Bo Ralph, see below) as \textit{raið iau} [or: \textit{iō} \textit{rinkr}] ‘the warrior rode the horse’ (pp. 161–67).

Without appreciation of the highly detailed analysis the author offers, it is impossible to do full justice to his interpretation. But to enter deep into the detail would more than break the bounds of a modest review. Suffice it to say here that the Rök text is understood first and foremost as Varinn’s memorial to his dead son Vāmōðʀ, but a memorial which sets Vāmōðʀ’s premature death in the context of early Viking Age eschatology (see further below). As noted at the outset, Williams believes his interpretation is to be preferred to earlier attempts because he integrates each element of the text into an overarching theme. I agree this is a decided
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advantage, and the fact that he by and large achieves his aim of presenting a coherent narrative might perhaps be taken as evidence that he is on the right track.

And yet. To some readers certain of his notions may seem a little forced. Mention of the Hraðgutaʀ and Hraðmarr, for example, are taken to be references not to a people and a sea, but to the eastern horizon (cf. above)—because it is in the east (roughly speaking) the Hraðgutaʀ and Hraðmarr are to be found, and that is where the sun rises (pp. 158–60, 166). The sequence satintsiuluntifiakurauintura has according to Williams nothing to do with ‘four winters’ during which twenty kings remained on Zealand (or some other, less easily identifiable, place), as most have supposed, but means rather ‘remained at the spark grove of the four directions’, supposedly a kenning for ‘the extensive battlefield’ (siulundi ‘spark grove [dat.]’ = battlefield; fiagura vindrāa ‘of the four directions [gen. pl.]’, i.e. in every direction, widely extended; pp. 177–82). While this explanation seems to me far-fetched, it is also undeniable, as Williams stresses, that the traditional understanding of the sequence is not without its problems. And some of the ideas he advances have a certain intuitive appeal, for example that the inscription’s portrayal of four groups of five kings, each lot of five bearing an identical name, is not to be taken literally, but rather in the sense that the groups are identified by the name of the most prominent member; thus Hraðulfʀ fim does not mean ‘five with the name Hraðulfʀ’ but ‘five identified by reference to Hraðulfʀ’ rather as þeir Guðmundr means ‘Guðmundr and the others’ (pp. 184 f.). Equally appealing is the suggestion that the repetition of the phrase sakumukmini at least in part serves the purpose of providing a key to the type of runes that follow (p. 119). Thus, for example, the sudden switch from short-twig runes to a variety of the older futhark is heralded by this very phrase written with the type of runes in which the next bit of text is composed; and the pattern is repeated in two other places where the carver switches to different varieties of runic cipher.

Here and there Williams can seem to overcomplicate matters. He claims, for example, that runaʀ in the opening statement aftuamuþ stãnta runaʀþaʀ means not ‘runes’ ‘runic characters’, as one might think, but rather ‘rune-written message’. He points to the use of the singular runo on the older runic Einang, Noleby and Björketorp stones with this postulated sense (p. 124). To that it must be said it is far from agreed that the runo of these three early stones is either singular (Björketorp’s runo is surely genitive plural?) or indeed the same word as Rök’s runaʀ. It appears that wherever plural runaʀ occurs in the Viking Age or later, it
means, or is highly likely to mean, simply, ‘runes’. It is true, as Williams emphasises (p. 124), that runes are not otherwise said to ‘stand’ in Viking Age memorial inscriptions, but very few of them employ a formula that gives prominence to the deceased in the way Rök’s introductory statement does, so there is little in the way of comparative evidence. The usual formula is of course ‘NN raised this stone in memory of MM’, where it is the raiser who has pride of place. Williams appeals to the olrúnar ‘ale runes’, bjargrúnar ‘helping runes’, sigrúnar ‘victory runes’ etc. of the Eddaic poem Sigrdrífumál for confirmation of the sense ‘rune-written message’, but I wonder if this nomenclature represents more than speculative thinking on the part of Sigrdrífumál’s composer. It is at the very least of uncertain import.

What then, the reader may ask, does Williams deem to be the overarching theme of the Rök inscription? As I understand Rökstenen och världens undergång, he sees the monument not just as a memorial to Vämöðr, but one that provides a rationale for his early death. Like the heroes of Eiríksmál and Hákonarmál, Vämöðr has died at the behest of Öðinn so he can assist at the battle of Ragnarök. There is a chance he will survive to become part of the brave new world that arises after the battle. This hope gives some meaning to Vämöðr’s death and offers consolation to Varinn and his family (pp. 271–75).

The book is not at an end with the detailed analysis of the Rök text that “In ristningen” provides. Two further sections “Bakom ridån” (‘Behind the curtain’) and “Avslutning” (‘Conclusion’) sum up succinctly much of what has gone before and contribute a number of additional thoughts. The reader is then presented with the complete text of the inscription—in transliteration, as edited text, in fairly literal, and in free Swedish translation. This section concludes with a four-page summary outlining Williams’s interpretation of the inscription as a whole. There follow detailed endnotes for the reader keen to discover more. These are not numbered in the main text (so as not to put off the layman), and are identified by page number. Matters are not even finished here. Swedish translations of the complete texts of Völuspá, Vafþrúðnis mál, Eiríksmál and Hákonarmál are provided, followed by reproductions of fifteen earlier interpretations of the Rök inscription. Completing Rökstenen och världens undergång is a select bibliography and an index.

According to the blurb on the back of the book’s dust jacket, no one has managed to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation of the Rök stone’s text in spite of the scholarly endeavours of more than 150 years—until now (my emphasis). This unvarnished claim that the author, unlike his
predecessors, has finally unlocked the secrets of Rök is presumably to be blamed on the publisher. For while it is true that Williams's interpretation is more coherent than most, it is not therefore necessarily correct. And if one harbours doubts about certain elements of his analysis, as I hope I have shown one may, the coherence can begin to unravel a little. It must in any case be self-evident that certainty about the meaning of a lengthy and involved runic inscription from ninth- or tenth-century Östergötland is unlikely ever to be achieved. All this having been said, there is no doubt that *Röksstenen och världens undergång* offers a wealth of valuable new insights into one of the most enigmatic of runic inscriptions. It is a definitely a book it is better to have than not to have.

We now turn our attention to Bo Ralph’s equally impressive attempt to grapple with the Rök enigma. His study bears the title *Fadern, sonen och världsalltet*, rendered into English by the author as ‘The Father, the Son, and the Cosmos’ (p. 883). Although relatively jargon-free, Ralph’s book will be less accessible to the general public than Williams’s because it assumes more than a nodding acquaintance with runology, Old Norse language and literature, philological methodology, Indo-European mythology, and indeed much else besides. It also offers a considerably greater level of detail, to which its 954 pages bear striking testimony. For those who do not have the time or peace of mind to attack the complete text, the author helpfully provides a summary in English which covers the basics (pp. 883–913). The main body of the work is so wide-ranging and comprehensive that an average length review can in no way do it justice. In the following I will therefore limit myself to a brief snapshot of what the book contains, to which will be appended a few critical comparisons with Williams’s opus.

Of considerable help to the reader is the organisation of *Fadern, sonen och världsalltet*. There is a primary division into four sections: “1. Utgångsläge” (‘Starting point’); “2. Kritisk granskning” (‘Critical examination’); “3. Nytolkning” (‘New interpretation’); “4. Konsekvenser”, literally ‘consequences’, but perhaps better translated ‘results’ or ‘conclusions’. Within each of the first three of these sections we are offered a phrase-by-phrase or word-by-word analysis of the Rök stone’s text. All three analyses follow roughly the same format, but present the text from different standpoints. Section 1 discusses what Ralph dubs ‘the official version’ (p. 33), his term for the hitherto most widely accepted reading and interpretation of the Rök inscription—a ‘version’ that has its origin in Elias Wessén’s seminal 1958 exposition (cf. above). This
reading and interpretation, Ralph asserts, was given a powerful boost, and effectively a seal of approval, with the publication of an account by Helmer Gustavson (1991), which appeared under the imprint of Riksantikvarieämbetet (The Swedish National Heritage Board). Indeed, Wessén, Gustavson and Riksantikvarieämbetet can at times seem to be cast as an establishment mafia, against which the plucky individual truth-seeker, attempting to assert a divergent view, faces unequal odds (see, e.g., p. 9 and the following). Section 2 demonstrates the many weaknesses and uncertainties inherent in ‘the official version’. To my mind this part of the book makes up its most valuable contribution. It is an unusually effective work of demolition, highlighting the extreme shakiness of the foundations on which much current understanding of the Rök inscription rests. In Section 3 the author then introduces his ‘new interpretation’, built over the ruins left by Section 2—rather as the new world of Völuspá stanza 59 rises out of the devastation of Ragnarök. Section 4 takes us on a long journey through the ‘consequences’ of the demolition and rebuilding exercises of Sections 2 and 3. Comparisons are drawn between motifs Ralph identifies in the Rök text and parallels he finds in Old Indic Vedic literature; the identity of Varinn, the carver and/or commissioner of the Rök monument is sought—not as an individual but rather as a literary and cultural figure; the language of the Rök stone—in the widest sense—is analysed; the validity of Ralph’s new understanding of the text is assessed and found to pass muster; various loose ends are revisited (rather than actually tidied up)—for example the dating of the Rök stone, now no longer fixed at around 800, but possibly to be moved forward to the 900s; and finally the principal findings of the study are presented and justified.

This skeletal account of the structure and contents of Fadern, sonen och världsalltet masks the painstaking labours of the author and the wide range of learning he deploys. Furthermore it fails to get to the heart of the book’s essential purpose, which is to present a total reappraisal of the Rök inscription and explain the reasoning that underpins it. As I understand Ralph, he argues that Vāmōðr’s untimely death—the son expiring before the father—has upset the regular balance of nature, which needs to be restored. The father, Varinn, seeks through his text to re-establish some kind of equilibrium. He compares Vāmōðr to the sun, the heavenly body that according to the natural order of things daily accepts its fate and at nightfall gives way to darkness. To get across the various points he wishes to make, Varinn employs a series of riddles—true riddles according to Ralph, in which a reality parallel to the one intended is outlined and clues are offered towards the solution. The Rök creator also makes use of meta-
phors and kennings, we are told, as for example in the fornyrðislag stanza (see pp. 368–74, 908), where raipiaurikr is to be segmented raip iau rikr, edited into runic Swedish as Raĩð iau [or: iō] rinkr ‘Rode on a horse (did) the man’, and understood to mean ‘Sailed on a ship (did) the man’—on the grounds that in comparable contexts in Old Norse and Old English poetry references to a horse are usually allusions to a ship. Similarly, the phrase akutasinum (ā goto sinum ‘on his steed’ further on in the stanza really means ‘on his ship’ and the image conjured up is of a ship sailing over the heavenly sea with the sun on board (cf. the comparison of Vāmōðr to the sun).

Here, it seems to me, we begin to perceive some of the difficulties readers may find in accepting not only Ralph’s new interpretation of the Rök inscription, but possibly any interpretation. According to Wessén and others, the fornyrðislag stanza deals with the Gothic king Theoderic the Great. Both Williams and Ralph raise strong linguistic (and other) objections to this idea. Instead Williams sees a warrior (of uncertain identity) on his horse, appearing like the sun over the eastern horizon, while for Ralph the stanza has a wholly nautical theme. Wessén, Williams and Ralph cannot all be right, but how is the reader to choose? Much will depend on whether s/he accepts the fundamental premise or premises on which each of the three interpretations is built. Is the author of the Rök inscription indeed mulling over memories of the devastation caused by a volcanic eruption in AD 536? Or is he trying to come to terms with the death of his son, rather as Egill Skalla grímssonr in Sonatorrek? Or is he after all perhaps alluding to heroic legends and stories as a way of adding lustre to the dead Vāmōðr? For my part I find it hard to decide. I acknowledge the problems with Wessén’s interpretation, but am not sure they are insurmountable; Williams’s approach seems to me crisp, clear and cogently argued; Ralph is the more impressively learned of the three, but ranges so far and wide in his search for supporting evidence that the reader can almost drown in the detail, and may be left wondering how far any of the myriad thoughts, ideas and literary techniques he claims to recognise in the Rök inscription can in reality have percolated down to ninth- or tenth-century Östergötland.

Williams and Ralph agree that the Wessén/Gustavson interpretation of Rök (‘the official version’) raises all manner of philological problems, but they seldom arrive at a common solution. Nor do they always recognise that there might be a problem. Williams, as we have seen, thinks Wessén is wrong to translate the opening sentence of the inscription ‘Till minne av Vāmod stå dessa runor’ (‘In memory of Vāmod stand these runes’), on
the grounds that while stones stand, runes do not. He prefers ‘Till minne av Våmod förblir dessa budskap’ (p. 269), which I take to mean something like ‘In memory of Våmod will this message/these words remain’. For Ralph there is no problem here: the plural form runar refers to written characters and “verbet standa passar ihop med den uttydningen” (‘the verb standa fits in well with that interpretation’, p. 139). This is perhaps a rare case where Ralph has failed to perceive that there could be a difficulty with the traditional understanding of the text.

Ralph argues forcefully that the oft-occurring word sakum cannot be a form of the runic Swedish verb meaning ‘say’ (pp. 148–54), but is rather the first person plural past tense of Old Swedish sēa/sē ‘see’ (p. 317), meaning ‘we saw’. This interpretation, he argues, fits in neatly with his view that much of the Rök text consists of riddles: “Det är mycket som talar för att former av verbet ‘se’ är en flitigt utnyttjad inledning till gåtformuleringar” (‘There is much to suggest that forms of the verb “see” are frequently used as a way of introducing riddles’, p. 317). Williams skirts around the sakum problem, but ends up with the translation ‘Jag säger’, or more freely, ‘Jag berättar’ (‘I say’, ‘I relate’, p. 269). According to Ralph, interpreting sakum as a part of the runic Swedish verb ‘say’ lacks any sound philological basis, so, riddles or no riddles, it is much more satisfactory to take it as sāgum ‘we saw’, which raises no linguistic problems. In a recently published article, however, Staffan Fridell and Williams demonstrate, to my satisfaction at least, that sakum could indeed be a form of the Old Swedish verb ‘say’ (Fridell and Williams 2022). Once again, the only way for the reader to choose between these rival interpretations is seemingly through acceptance of their proponents’ understanding of the Rök inscription as a whole.

Crucial for Williams’s overall understanding is his interpretation of the sequence huaʀfurniultumānurþirumhraiþkutum ‘vem som för nio åldrar (= generationer) sedan förlorade livet bland redgoter (= österut)’ (‘who nine ages [= generations] ago lost his/her life among Hraið Goths [= in the east]’, p. 160). As we have seen, he reasons that this is a reference to the sun which nine generations ago “died” in the east (i.e. failed to rise and spread light because of a catastrophic volcanic eruption). If the sequence does not mean what Williams thinks it means, the clear connection with the climate catastrophe of 270 years or so earlier is lost. According to Ralph, the relevant passage conjures up a totally different scenario: ‘vem som för på nio vågor (= havet) men skrapade mot stranden med redhästarna (= hästarna med redet, dvs. skeppen)” (‘which travelled on/over the nine waves [= the sea] but scraped against the beach [i.e.

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landed on the other side of the sea] with the nest-horses [= the horses with the nest, i.e. the ships’], pp. 328–42). Gone is the loss of the sun’s light nine generations ago and instead we have an image of the sun being borne on ships sailing across the heavenly sea; on reaching the other side the ships run up against the beach and darkness falls. This is all coherent enough, provided one accepts the basic premise that any reference, or assumed reference, to a horse or horses is in fact to a ship or ships, and one is willing to believe that *hraipkutum* ‘nest-horses’ is a kenning for ships with nests, i.e. ships that provide a home. But how is the reader to judge whether Williams or Ralph has arrived at a true understanding of this or indeed other parts of the Rök text? S/he may well reflect on the improbability that a runic inscription giving rise to such wildly differing interpretations will ever fully yield up its secrets.

To illustrate the problem further let us consider one other extract of the inscription—*satintsiluntifíakurauintura*—where the Williams and Ralph interpretations go asunder. Williams points out that the spelling *siulunti* has been considered a hindrance for those who wish to see here a reference to the island of Zealand; it is a spelling “som … inte stämmer med etymologin till Själland” (‘which … does not conform to the etymology of [the name] Zealand’, p. 178). Although, oddly enough, Williams dismisses these concerns with little more than a wave of the hand: “men det är inget oöverstigligt problem” (‘but that is not an insurmountable problem’), he finds, as we have seen, other reasons for preferring a radically different approach. To Ralph, however, the form *siulunti* does represent an insurmountable obstacle: “Att troget återge de belagda formerna för ‘Själland’ med Rökstenens runografiska system erbjuder inga svårigheter, men det kan aldrig bli *siulunti*” (“To represent faithfully the documented forms of “Själland” using the runographic system of the Rök stone presents no difficulties, but the result can never be *siulunti*’, p. 219). Continuing to pursue his hunt for riddles with nautical images, Ralph determines that the sequence in question means ‘sat by a sea-tree (= ship) of the four wind-doors (= cardinal points, i.e. a celestial ship)’ (pp. 400 ff., 909). Aiding him in arriving at this interpretation is his conviction that in *fiakurauintura* we have a genitive plural rather than the accusative masculine plural *fiakurauintur* assumed by many. While it has to be admitted that Ralph’s linguistic objections to the “Zealand” and accusative plural explanations are well-founded and cogently argued, it requires a big leap of faith to accept his alternative exposition. For sure, ‘a sea-tree of the four wind-doors’ accords with the Rök stone spellings and with linguistic forms we expect to find in ninth-/tenth-century eastern Scandinavian, but unless
we buy into Ralph’s overall understanding of the inscription, this interpretation is likely to strike the reader as somewhat fanciful. A possible choice for Williams and Ralph’s readers is then between ‘remained at the spark grove of the four directions (= the extensive battlefield)’ (cf. above; Williams pp. 177–82) and ‘sat by a sea-tree (= ship) of the four wind-doors (= cardinal points, i.e. a celestial ship)’. Alternatively (and once again) readers may reasonably conclude that a sequence that can evoke two such wholly different responses is unlikely ever to be amenable to an interpretation that commands widespread acceptance.

In seeking to grasp the meaning of problematic runic inscriptions there is much to be said for invoking the wider corpus. Thus, older futhark inscriptions in stone that sport single names have by many been assumed to commemorate the individual named, on the grounds that less laconic inscriptions of a similar age and type are demonstrably commemorative. The difficulty in applying this procedure to the Rök stone is the lack of comparative material. There are few runic stones from the 700s and 800s, and not a great many from the period 900–950. Such as there are tend to be brief, and for a large part seemingly commemorative in nature. The Rök inscription is of course also commemorative. It begins: aftuamupstånta runarparinuarinfapifapiraftakaikiânsunu ‘In memory of Vâmôðr stand these runes/will this message remain, but Varinn made [them/it], a father in memory of a dead son/a son doomed to die’. But instead of concluding there, or simply adding a few words in praise of Vâmôðr, or explaining how and/or where he died, the inscription takes us into uncharted territory. Possibly the closest parallel is the Malt stone from southern Jutland, discovered in 1987. But alas, what the lengthy runic text on this stone has in common with the Rök inscription is its inscrutability. In the thirty-six years since it was unearthed it has given rise to interpretations at least as varied as the two Rök expositions we have been discussing here (cf. Thomas Birkmann’s detailed juxtaposition of four different attempts to make sense of Malt, 1995, 361–72).

In my view the usefulness of Williams and Ralph’s exhaustive studies of the Rök inscription is twofold. Both authors sow serious and justified doubt about the validity of earlier interpretations, and both toss new ideas and fresh perspectives into the debate. There is clearly much more to discuss than had been thought. To me it is doubtful, though, whether we will ever arrive at an interpretation of the inscription all can agree on.
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