

THE ERECTION OF RUNE-STONES IN VIKING-AGE SCANDINAVIA; THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Birgit Sawyer

Department of History, Gothenburg University

In many disciplines the rune-stones have been used as a source of knowledge about the Viking Age; they can throw light on such varied matters as language and orthography, art and poetry, place-names and personal names, kinship and settlement, communications and Viking expeditions, and, not least, the spread of Christianity (most stones are Christian). Many of these topics have been investigated or are currently being studied, but much remains to be done, above all within a framework that is both internordic and interdisciplinary. As long as runic studies are limited by modern borders of nations and disciplines, similarities and differences that characterize the material may remain concealed and hamper our understanding of the nature of the evidence. Its potential, however, can only be realized if we take account of all the inscriptions of the period, a requirement that has not hitherto been properly met. So, for example, historians have tended to pay most attention to the rune stones that commemorate men who died abroad, which may give the impression that such inscriptions are typical, when, in fact, they amount to less than 10% of the whole material. Most monuments were for people who lived and died at home and constitute a large corpus of contemporary evidence for the period, that has been largely untapped, at least by historians. It is true that the inscriptions seldom provide information about events or identifiable persons, and it might justly be asked what historical knowledge could be gained from the large number that only tell us that someone we do not know has raised a stone (which is obvious!) after someone else we do not know. The answer must be: not much, if only single stones are considered, but studied as a whole, the rune stone-material is a most rewarding source for social, economic - and political - conditions in Scandinavia of the late Viking period.

The custom of erecting stone monuments with runic inscriptions began in the migration period but flourished most vigorously from the end of the tenth century to the beginning of the twelfth. The approximately 2000 inscriptions of that period in Denmark, Norway and Sweden are very different from earlier and later runic inscriptions and show that there was a distinctive fashion in the monuments of the late Viking period. While most of the older inscriptions

(before the 10th century) are more varied in their contents, sometimes have magic meanings and are not seldom obscure and difficult to interpret, the later inscriptions (from the end of the 10th century), in contrast, are mostly very clear and factual, and everywhere remarkably similar in language, formulation and content. The overwhelming majority of the Viking-Age runestones are erected in honour of dead persons, and almost all their inscriptions begin with a memorial formula, telling us first who sponsored the monument, then in whose memory it was done and most often (in 90% of the cases) how sponsors and deceased were related. Sometimes additional information about the sponsor and/or the dead person follows, e.g. their social status, titles, voyages abroad, military achievements, causes and places of death. Magical spells and invocations of pagan gods are very rare; they occur in Denmark but are exceptional in Sweden where, instead, Christian crosses and prayers are common, especially in Uppland. Many inscriptions end by naming the rune-carver.

Even if many stones have disappeared and new discoveries are made from time to time, there is every reason to assume that the picture we have today corresponds fairly well to the original situation. Therefore, the very uneven distribution of the stones and the short period in which they were erected have long been the objects of discussion. About 50 are known in Norway, about 200 in the medieval Danish area (including what are now the Swedish provinces of Halland, Blekinge and Skåne), and at least 1800 in the territory of medieval Sweden, more than half of them in Uppland. The dating of individual inscriptions is most uncertain, but it is generally accepted that the Danish (except those from Bornholm) are from the late 10th and early 11th century. The inscriptions in Västergötland and Östergötland are considered to be more or less contemporary with the Danish, those in other parts of Sweden somewhat younger; in Uppland (and on Bornholm) rune-stones were not erected until some decades into the 11th century, and in some places they were apparently still being put up well into the 12th century.

In order to use the rune stones as a source we must try to understand why they were erected. There is general agreement that this "fashion" met certain needs, but there is little agreement on what those needs were. Earlier attempts to explain the sudden explosion of runic inscriptions, as due to Viking activity or change of faith, are not satisfactory. It is true that Viking raids are a possible explanation for the stones erected in honour of men who died abroad, but since such stones constitute only a small minority, they clearly cannot explain the fashion. It is nevertheless as "Viking monuments" that many handbooks and general works

refer to the whole rune-stone material of the period, and the reason must be that this was the view of such eminent experts as Erik Moltke and Sven B. F. Jansson. The latter goes so far as to say that "when the great expeditions were over, the old trade routes closed, and the Viking ships no longer made ready each spring for voyages to east and west, then that meant the end of the carving and setting up of rune stones in the proper sense of the term. They may be called the monuments of the Viking voyages, and the sensitive reader may catch in many of their inscriptions the Viking's love of adventure and exploits of boisterous daring" (Jansson, Runes in Sweden, p. 38). Even if it is argued that the "voyage-stones" were the "proper" rune-stones, having set the style and fashion for all the others, it still remains to be explained why so suddenly towards the end of the Viking Age sea-going relatives were honoured in this special way in so many different parts of Scandinavia. Both memorials of different kinds and voyages abroad had been made for several centuries without having resulted in the erection of rune-stones like those of the 10th and 11th centuries. It follows that other factors must be sought to explain the fashion and its distribution.

The process of Christianization is certainly one of them, the fashion reflecting the transition from pagan to Christian burial customs. Some scholars argue that the erection of rune-stones answered emotional needs among the newly converted who, after having buried their relatives in new ways and places, i.e. churchyards, still wanted to honour their relatives in traditional places, at home, by the road or at places of assembly. It is, of course, possible that this was sometimes the case, but the fact is that many rune-stones were moved at an early date from their original sites to stand in churchyards or to be built into the fabric of churches; others may even from the outset have been placed in or close to a church. This indicates that it was rather the lack of churchyards that created the need to erect a Christian rune-stone. In Uppland the building of churches and the consecration of cemeteries was apparently delayed for a long time, and in this province many rune-stones seem to have functioned as Christian grave-stones in pagan grave-fields. (A-S Gråslund, Tor 1987). It is, therefore, likely that this type of monument compensated for the abandonment of grave-goods; the new and simple Christian burial habits must have been perceived as an enormous breach with the old custom that had not only served the purpose of honouring the dead but also of displaying the wealth and status of his/her family. In a transitional period, before churches and churchyards became the natural places for memorials, ostentatious rune-stones in different public places could have served that purpose.

The transition to Christian burial habits cannot, however, be the only reason; it does not explain the uneven distribution, nor why so few women were honoured with stones (only 7%, and in half of the cases together with men). Since the proportion of richly furnished women graves in the Iron Age was much higher than that, this low proportion of stones erected after women indicates that the fashion should only partly be seen in the context of religion and burial practices. Further, the distribution itself suggests that in some parts of Scandinavia rune-stones were not needed, either because circumstances were different or because in those areas the functions that were served by the stones were fulfilled in some other way.

Any attempt to discover these functions must in the first place take account of the fact that they were memorials not merely to the dead but also to the people who raised them; the sponsors always appear first of all in the inscriptions. Another characteristic common to virtually all sponsors is the care they took to define in what way they were related with the deceased, which indicates that the relationship is significant in the context. A systematic study of the whole material has revealed that there were indeed certain principles that determined who commemorated whom, with some significant regional variations. Since the general principle was that people were commemorated by their closest relatives or companions (comrades-in-arms, business or marriage partners) it can reasonably be assumed that the sponsors were people who had an interest in and claims to what had been owned or controlled by the dead person. These claims could have involved either inheritance (one's own or on behalf of minors) - of land, goods, title or status - or a right to a share of what had been jointly owned (e.g. by man and wife, or by partners). Whatever the function of these memorials, the sponsorship pattern can be expected, at least partly, to reflect the inheritance pattern among the stone erectors. There is much to indicate that it was the new conditions - of responsibility and ownership - following the death of a relative that determined not only who commemorated whom but also the way in which the inscriptions were formulated, i.e. the order, in which multiple sponsors were named and the care with which different kinds of relationship were specified.

There are, in fact, two principal patterns, one prevailing in Uppland, the other in Denmark; other regions showing traces of both, but in varying degrees. Since the Uppland pattern is of multiple sponsors, including numerous women, and the Danish pattern is of individual sponsors, few of them women, this raises the question whether (among the stone-erectors) we are dealing with two different systems of inheritance, predominantly partible in Uppland, while

predominantly impartible in Denmark (as well in Norway and Götaland). It is true that impartible inheritance does not occur in the later medieval laws of Scandinavia, but the principle might still have been used in practice in the late Viking Age (as we know it was later), possibly by families who had a particular relationship with the king, in whose interest it was to keep estates intact, thus making it easier to collect the renders and services that were due. It is of course also possible that we are dealing with different kinds of claims, that the individual ones concerned types or parts of inheritances that could - or should - not be divided (e.g. certain land, rights or titles), while the multiple claims concerned the whole inheritance, to which each of the sponsors had his/her specific right. Whatever lies behind the differences, the main question is why, exactly during the 10th and 11th centuries we have this abundant information about conditions of responsibility, inheritance and ownership, which the rune-stone material yields. What had created the need to publicize these conditions, and why was it done in such a uniform way everywhere?

Rune-stones as a crisis symptom - a hypothesis

The uniformity itself indicates one and the same origin, namely Denmark, where the fashion was probably set by King Harald Bluetooth's large stone in memory of his parents at Jelling. That monument was influential for several reasons. Harald himself had great prestige throughout Scandinavia, and the Jelling stone was a symbol not only of the transition from paganism to Christianity, but also of the development of a new form of government. Harald's predecessors had been content to have indirect control over many parts of their kingdom, but he and his son Sven began to bring the whole of Denmark under a more direct form of royal control. It can reasonably be assumed that the great social and economic changes caused by these religious and political developments in effect detonated the explosion of rune-stones. In areas that were most heavily affected, in one way or the other, there must have been a need to acknowledge the acceptance of the new situation (or to resist the changes) and to claim one's rights (old or new), to land, titles or status, and this need could be met by erecting rune-stones.

Royal power was growing not only in Denmark but also in Götaland, and in both areas the stones could have answered similar, political, needs. It is here that we find a high proportion of undivided claims, which is to be expected where royal power was more fully developed. Where royal power was less effective, other factors were very significant; in Uppland the erecting of rune-stones seems often to have been a response to the religious change; there is much to suggest that in this part of Sweden many families registered their acceptance of

Christianity by erecting rune-stones, thus declaring their active support for the new religion - and their loyalty to the local leaders who sponsored missionaries. Christianity was not generally accepted in Uppland until the end of the eleventh century, and as long as there was what has been called a 'free-church system', rune-stones seem to have served as memorials to Church benefactors, both sponsors and dead. As the nascent church and its patrons needed material support (alms etc.), it was in the interest of all that claims to inheritances and property should be clearly stated.

A religious motive for sponsoring runic inscriptions does not exclude a political one, namely that they were at the same time a response to attempts to increase royal authority in the Mälars region. The acceptance and promotion of Christianity by leading Upplanders may in some cases have been an act of loyalty to the royal power, but in others a reaction to royal claims to be the exclusive sponsor of the new religion, and it is therefore very likely that the tension between those who welcomed and those who opposed the expansion of royal power created a need to declare loyalties and rights by stating descent and other relevant connections. If runic inscriptions were a crisis symptom, we can expect them to be most common where change was greatest, or most greatly feared. It is therefore significant that the densest concentration of inscriptions in Uppland are in the hundreds immediately around Sigtuna, a royal foundation from the end of the 10th century. There are indications that this town was founded in order to extend royal authority in an area that was in effect ruled by a number of independent chieftains and lords.

The inscriptions in the area immediately west of Sigtuna (the three hundreds of Håbo, Trögd and Åsunda) are very different from those in other parts of Uppland; many of them are, indeed, more like those in Denmark and Götaland. The high proportion of individual claims and the low proportion of explicitly Christian inscriptions suggest that royal power was greater here than elsewhere in Uppland. Where, as in Denmark, conversion was effected by a powerful king, there was no need for individuals or families to proclaim adherence to the new faith - in those circumstances it was declarations of paganism that marked defiance of the accepted norm (there are 20 possibly pagan inscriptions in Denmark, 3 in Västergötland and 3 in Södermanland, apparently pagan protests against the new religion). Conversely, the fact that most rune-stones in the rest of Uppland are ostentatiously Christian indicates that here it was the Christian belief that was a breach with tradition and as such needed to be marked. In the area west of Sigtuna, however, the Christian faith was apparently not an issue, and it is also in this area that the 'lion-stones' occur, i.e. rune-stones with

decoration including the very stylized four-legged animal that is thought to have been inspired by the great Jelling-stone. This animal was used as a symbol by rulers, and sponsors who incorporated it in their inscriptions could perhaps have been expressing loyalty to a king. If so, royal power was clearly more effective in Fjädrundaland (south-west Uppland) than in the others parts of the region; Of the 55 such 'lion-stones' in Uppland almost 80% are in that district, most of them in Trögd and Åsunda.

Perhaps this area was, in effect, a bridge-head for the establishment of a new type of royal authority in the region. Another indication of this is the fact that the 'dreng' title (probably denoting a warrior in the royal 'hird'), more common here than in other parts of Uppland. It is true that runic inscriptions cannot be closely dated, but most of those in Uppland were certainly made after about 1020, i.e. a generation or so after the foundation of Sigtuna. That would have been time enough for royal influence to have had the effect than can be discerned in the inscriptions in what is suggested was a bridge-head west of Sigtuna. It is uncertain how quickly and effectively this new form of royal power was accepted in other parts of Uppland, but it is arguable that the explosion of runic monuments was itself a reaction to the welcoming of and threat posed by, kings based in Sigtuna.

If the hypothesis that rune-stones were a symptom of crisis is right, the distribution pattern reflects well the political and religious transition that took place during the 10th and 11th centuries, a period that was short in some areas but prolonged in others, notably in Uppland, where there was obviously a strong resistance to the new kind of centralized royal power that apparently had its basis in Götaland. Even if the hypothesis needs to be modified, the runic inscriptions of the period can still cast very useful light on social and economic conditions, which, at least partly and in a preliminary way, has already been demonstrated. (see publications listed below). Therefore this paper will end with a brief presentation of the kind of conclusions that can be drawn.

The runic material as a source for social and economic conditions

People who sponsored stones or had stones erected after them all belonged to a class of free property-owners. In most cases it is a question of landed property, and it is among these settled land-owners that we find the 'bönder'. To be called a 'bonde' it was obviously not enough for a man to belong to a land-owning family; our evidence shows that the term also implied responsibility for a family/household. (Examples Sö 208, 72 and 346). In one case, where a mother (together with her daughter) erects a stone after two sons, only one of them is

referred to as the 'bonde' (and heir), and there are other cases where men refer to their dead relative as their 'bonde'.

The connotation 'head of the family' is further abundantly evidenced by all the cases where a widow refer to her dead husband as her 'bonde' (her, indicating that she was lawfully under this land-owner's power, i.e. properly married). For sons honouring their father it was of course unnecessary to refer to him as their 'bonde' and, consequently, this only happens when they can add that he was a 'good bonde'. Instead of interpreting such additions as formulaic expressions of the obvious or praise for some farming skill, there is much to suggest that the phrase marks a special status. It is not very likely that 'good' ('better' or 'best') refers to goodness of heart, competence or skill, for if that was the case, there was a serious shortage of people with such qualities in Viking Age Scandinavia; among the individuals we meet in the inscriptions only ca 10% are 'good'. Almost all those good persons are men (only four good women have been found), in most cases men with titles such as 'thegn' or 'drengr', but the epithet is also used for certain 'bönder' as well as some 'fathers' and 'sons', especially in eastern Sweden, where titles are exceptional.

The interpretation of the epithet as a marker of status is further supported by the fact that in Sweden and Denmark (with one exception, 'good' people are absent in Norwegian inscriptions) the good people seem to be major land-owners; this is indicated by their monuments (sometimes double monuments), which are often very lavish, and by the inscriptions, which inform us where the deceased person had lived, i.e. what he had owned, a type of statement that is relatively rare. Another indicator of status is that many of the bridges, i.e. relatively expensive enterprises, were built for the souls of these 'good' people. An interesting question is by whom these people were acknowledged as good. Their distribution suggests that it could have the king; most of the good people are found in areas where there are other indications of strong royal influence.

The runic material can also cast some light on women's landownership in Viking Age Scandinavia. Admittedly only a few per cent of the inscriptions explicitly refer to property and inheritance but, as has been argued above, the sponsorship pattern yields very useful information. The proportion of stones commissioned by women can show how common it was for them to possess and dispose of property at that time. To raise a stone was a costly business, and women who did so on their own must have had resources, whether inherited or acquired through marriage as dowry or 'morning-gift', and/or a share of the property jointly held by husband and wife.

Since, overall, more than 12,5% of the rune-stones were erected by women on their own, it appears that it was not unusual for women to take full social and economic responsibility. This proportion, however, is only a minimum figure; in a further 15% of the cases women erect stones together with men (e.g. daughters, sisters, wives or mothers together with sons or brothers of the deceased). Even if some of the women in this category were under male tutelage, at least the widows (about half of these women, that is about 7,5% of the whole material) can be supposed to have been economically independent. The minimum figure of women's ownership can, therefore, be raised to about 20%.

As an average, however, this higher figure is somewhat misleading, since the mixed sponsor category is very unusual outside Uppland, Södermanland and Öland. In Uppland 24% of all rune-stones were jointly commissioned by men and women, in Denmark the proportion is only 2,5%, and in Norway there is none. This regional variation coincides with the other variations mentioned above, the reasons for which have to be sought in different kinds of political and religious organization. - Where royal power was stronger, women normally appear as sponsors only when there were no men (husbands or kinsmen) to take the responsibility, while in areas where it was weaker, as in Uppland (apart from the area west of Sigtuna) women could obviously represent themselves (their claims and declarations) even in the presence of male relatives.

In this paper I have necessarily had to generalize and oversimplify; the argument is more fully stated elsewhere (see publications listed below). I realize that my hypothesis may have to be modified in the light of future studies, but the different sponsorship patterns that my investigations have revealed will still have to be taken into account.

Earlier publications on the topic:

Birgit Sawyer,

1. "Property and inheritance in Viking Scandinavia; the runic evidence [Occasional Papers on Medieval Topics, 2], Alingsås 1988.
2. "Familjen, förmögenheten och fromheten" i Manliga strukturer och kvinnliga strategier. En bok till Gunhild Kyle, red. Birgit Sawyer & Anita Göransson, Göteborg 1987, s. 62-78.
3. "Kvinnor som brobyggare; vad runinskrifter kan berätta", Häftan för kritiska studier 1989:2 s.30-46.
4. "Vikingatida runstenar i Sigtuna och övriga Skandinavien", i Avstamp för en ny Sigtunaforskning 18 forskare om Sigtuna. . ., Sigtuna Museer 1989, s.80-87.

5. "... och modern kom till arv efter sin son ..."; runstenarnas vittnesbörd om arv och ägande i det vikingatida Skandinavien", K.A.N. ("Kvinner i arkeologi i Norge") 8, 1989 s. 3-12.
6. "Women as landholders and alienators of property in early medieval Scandinavia", i Female Power in the Middle Ages; Proceedings from the 2. St Gertrud Symposium, Copenhagen, August 1986, red. Karen Glente & Lise Winther-Jensen, Köpenhamn 1989, s. 156-171.
7. "Det vikingatida runstensresandet i Skandinavien", Scandia 1989:2, s. 185-202.
8. "Women and the Conversion of Scandinavia", i Frauen in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter; Lebensbedingungen, Lebensnormen, Lebensformen, Hrsg. Werner Affeldt, Sigmaringen 1990, s. 263-281.
9. "Women as bridge-builders. The role of women in Viking-age Scandinavia" i People and places in Northern Europe 500-1600 eds Ian Wood & Niels Lund, Woodbridge 1991 s. 211-224.

(forthcoming)

10. "Sigtuna och dess omland; runstenarnas vittnesbörd", i rapport från Den XVIII Nordiske Arkeologkongress, Trondheim 28/8 - 1/9 1989, Univ. i Trondheim 1991.
11. "Sigtuna - a border town", i Proceedings of the Third International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions, Valdres 8-12/8 1990, [Runrön], Oslo 1991.