

## *Bandrúnir* in Icelandic Sagas

Mindy Macleod

Institutionen för språk och kultur, Högskolan i Kalmar

Runic echoes permeate saga literature; the runes of divine origin, *rúnar reginkunnar*, of the Sparlösa and Noleby stones recur in *Hávamál*, while the evocative Swedish Skarpåker runestone (*Jörð skal rifna ok upphiminn*) or the Danish Ribe stick (*Jörð bið ek uarða ok upphiminn*) are strongly reminiscent of Germanic poetry (cf. Jansson 1987: 140f.). References to elves and trolls, and even invocations to pagan deities occur in medieval runic inscriptions, attesting to a continuing appreciation of Norse legends (Liestøl 1964: 37; Hagland 1994: 132), while runic poetry in the metres of dróttkvætt, hrynhenda, ljóðaháttir and galdralag testify to the continuance of the scaldic and eddic literary tradition. There are several runic inscriptions reminiscent of poems known from the Edda or other Norse literature (Liestøl 1964: 29ff.) and, more significantly, fragments of identifiable Norse poetry recur among the medieval runic inscriptions.<sup>1</sup> The runic corroboration of saga verse is an important historical record of the survival of this literary tradition. From Trondheim comes a rune-stick (A 142)

---

<sup>1</sup> These include B 249, containing part of a *lausavísa* in dróttkvætt, *Gamanvísur*, known from three manuscripts and attributed to the Norwegian king Haraldr Harðráði (cf. Seim 1986: 30f). The opening three words are found on a further Bergen stick, N 606.

bearing a paraphrase of a verse by the greatest of all Icelandic skalds, the incomparable Egill Skallagrímsson. This text closely resembles Egill's poetic tirade against incompetent rune-carvers (Knirk 1994).

In some respects, the Trondheim stick is hardly unique in containing the runic approximation of a poem known from other sources: the same kind of familiarity is demonstrated by the close correspondence between some runestones and manuscript texts. Nevertheless, snatches of poetry familiar from the sagas and also recorded in runic inscriptions provide a sort of evidence very different to the use of runes in saga literature.<sup>2</sup>

Two parallel texts known from runic records as well as manuscript sources are of particular interest to my talk today. The runes of the recurrent *mistil* curse featured in the saga of Bósi and Herrauð, and the *launstafir* deprecated by the ubiquitous Egill in his saga came to my attention through my interest in runic ligatures or bind-runes, which have often been regarded as runes of magical property (MacLeod 1999: 38; 122f.; 225f.). My doctoral thesis disputes this assertion, which rests on flimsy evidence from different runic periods, primarily the modern one. Nevertheless, saga evidence is also sometimes invoked to equate bind-runes or monograms with the practice of runic sorcery, and it is this material which I should like to consider today. Is there any evidence from the sagas of the practice of using *galdrastafir* or any kinds of magical runic monograms?

The magical rune-like glyphs attested in late medieval Icelandic charms are often termed *galdrastafir* or *bandrúnir*.<sup>3</sup> Their use is sometimes traced back to early runic monograms or simple bind-runes,<sup>4</sup> but this is tenuous in the extreme, as is any real connection with runic writing. Nevertheless, there are at least three instances sometimes adduced as written evidence of the magical manipulation of bind-runes. These are found in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, the saga of the warrior-poet Egill Skallagrímsson, *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, the saga of the foster-brothers Bósi and Herrauð, and from the eddic poem *Skírnismál*.

I do not intend to consider this last here, as it is neatly excluded by my title, 'Runes in Sagas'.<sup>5</sup> The idea that runic monograms were employed for magical

<sup>2</sup> They may show the recording of verses transcribed hundreds of years after their original composition (cf. Seim 1986: 35f.) or nearly contemporary with the saga in which they are found but probably based on sources older than the familiar saga composition (cf. Knirk 1994: 418f.).

<sup>3</sup> examples in Magnúsen (1841: 164); Árnason (1862: 445ff.); Daviðsson (1903: 279ff.); Kålund (1907: 367f.); Olrik (1918: 32ff.), Lindqvist (1921: 4ff.).

<sup>4</sup> refs in MacLeod (1999: 38, 123, 399).

<sup>5</sup> A wealth of runic erudition has nevertheless been expended upon *Skírnismál* verse XXXVI, the meaning of whose *Þurs rist ek þér ok þrjá stafí, ergi ok æði ok óþola* will probably never be resolved to general satisfaction. Suffice it to say, the interpretation of the *þrjá stafí* as complicated bind-runes is somewhat far-fetched, and the connection of this passage with runes has even been cast into doubt by Bæksted (1952: 75f.). Early runic scholars (e.g. Magnúsen 1841: 138; Lüning 1859: 237, n. 26) believed that Þurs referred to the rune þ (named Þurs in the Scandinavian rune

purposes seems then to find most support in the short saga of Bósi and Herraud. In the fifth chapter of this romantic tale which probably dates from the fourteenth century, Bósi's foster-mother Busla utters a long curse upon King Hringr of East Götaland, culminating in the powerful *syrpuvers* which may not be recited after sunset.<sup>6</sup> This ends with the exhortation to interpret the names of six men (*seggir sex*): *Seg þú mér nöfn þeira öll óbundin*, 'Tell me all their names unbound'. The thirty-six runes which occur in the three medieval manuscripts of the tale<sup>7</sup> are simple runes, not bind-runes, viz

R. Ʀ. Þ. Ʒ. Ƴ. Ɔ. ⅃⅃⅃⅃. ǫǫǫǫǫ: 111111: ⅃⅃⅃⅃: ⅃⅃⅃⅃⅃⅃:

which might be interpreted as the confused beginning of a *fupark* (Jónsson 1910: 289; Moltke 1936-7: 256, DR col. 814; Bæksted 1942: 218) or as the runic *rað þú mik* (both discounted by Thompson 1978: 51). In any case, the opening runes are clearly followed by an encoded 'istil' (see Thompson 1978: 51ff., who reads a rhyming formula of 'sonorous nonsense': *ristil, oistil, þistil, kistil, mistil, and uistil*), paralleled by the 'tistill, mistill' formula known from several earlier runic inscriptions (see appendix). As is clear from the context, it is the words formed by the runes rather than the characters themselves which must be unbound or deciphered and the formulation originally has no association with bind-runes. Comparison with the runic monograms of other medieval inscriptions is not justified;<sup>8</sup> only in one post-Reformation paper manuscript from the eighteenth century (Lbs 423 fol. x, cf. Heizmann 1998: 519) do we find actual runic monograms illustrating six names (mainly Óðinsheiti, e.g. *Fiðlner, Feingur, Þúndur, Þeckur*, as well as *Freyr* and *Þrúmur* etc., which do not occur in the original text). This text is anomalous in many respects, not least because it renders the entire Buslabæn in runes and

---

poems), and that the three staves must refer to three (or one) similarly threatening bind-rune(s) encoding the following words, but there is no compelling reason to follow their reasoning here. The three staves could equally well refer to three single staves, i.e. standard runes. The significance of the whole phrase remains uncertain, but there is no support for any suggestion that the three staves must refer to a runic monogram or bind, or the tripled **þ** found mainly in unintelligible medieval inscriptions. In modern academic parlance, if the runes mentioned in the eddic poetry do not 'disconfirm' the idea of bind-runes of magical property, they can hardly be said to confirm it either. A runic parallel to the phrase occurs on a stick from Bergen: *ek sendi þér, ek sé á þer, ylgjar ergi ok ópola* (Liestøl 1964: 41ff.).

<sup>6</sup> Whether the essentials of the saga are derived from Norse tradition (Jiriczek 1893), French romance (cf. Schröder 1928) or High German epic poetry (Haggerty Krappe 1928), the motif of the step-mother threatening with runes remains unparalleled.

<sup>7</sup> AM. 510 4:o; AM. 577 4:o; AM. 586 4:o, from the fifteenth and sixteenth century (cf. Moltke 1936-7: 255; Bæksted 1942: 217; Heizmann 1998: 519).

<sup>8</sup> Olsen (NIyR 3: 58) compares the task of the saga reader with that faced by the decipherer of a runic cryptogram in Storhedder, Norway: "Han skulde jo vikle de tre 'bundne' runer ut av binderunen og vise dem frem 'alle ubundne'".

complements it with several other curse formulae (Heizmann 1998: 520).

Thus this example of ‘magical bind-runes’ finds no support in the actual texts; instead, runic monograms were added at a later date, presumably to illustrate the text when it was no longer understood that the unbinding referred to a transposition of runes. The modern idea of ‘unbinding the runes’ seems to be based on a conflation of the original idea of unbinding the runic anagram, and the much later puzzle requiring the resolving of runic monograms. The original story contained no reference to bind-runes whatsoever.<sup>9</sup>

The ‘istil’ formula encoded here and on several runic inscriptions throughout mainland Scandinavia has been fully dealt with elsewhere (Thompson 1978). The hag Busla’s lengthy curse, the so-called ‘Buslabæn’ might be compared with that of Freyr’s emissary Skírnir in the afore-mentioned *Skírnismál*, which also climaxes with a somewhat obscure runic threat which has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Ellis (1943: 180) has pointed out that the form of the two curses is similar, invoking physical misery, mental anguish, sterility, an appeal to supernatural powers and finally runes. With the production of the ultimate runic trump-card, both of these threats become effective: the king agrees to spare the life of Busla’s step-son Bósi, and Gerðr also yields to Skírnir’s entreaties and curses, agreeing to surrender her love to the god Freyr. Clunies Ross (1994: 139, n. 34) suggests that Skírnir’s curse (comprising bribe, threat and imprecation, here involving sorcery) shows what may be a conventional tri-partite structure, and suggests parallels in Saxo’s work. Also obvious are syntactical similarities with a fourteenth-century Bergen runic verse with echoes of several Eddic poems (cf. Liestøl 1964: 41ff.). Busla’s curse is menacing and effective, but it certainly does not evidence any use of *galdrastafir* or *bandrúnir*.

The next instance of bind-rune enchantment is sometimes supposed to be found in Egill Skallagrímsson’s saga. This monumental work is set in the tenth century, although it was written down in early thirteenth-century Iceland, in all likelihood by the indefatigable Snorri Sturluson. The pagan hero Egill is a rather unlikeable, but undeniably heroic, saga prototype, often identified with an ‘Óðinn figure’, and his runic powers can be linked to this connection, as can his military and poetic ability.

There are several examples of runic magic in Egill’s saga, but I shall begin by examining the one that is often regarded as evidencing magical manipulation of bind-runes. In this episode in chapter LXXII of the saga, Egill arrives at the sick bed of Helga, a Värmland peasant girl who is suffering from *vanmátt* and

<sup>9</sup> Similarly metaphoric descriptions of ‘unbinding’ runes can be found in *Beowulf* 501, where Unferð is said to have ‘unbound’ the runes of war (*onband beadurune*). Bede also, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (IV: 22), refers to ‘loosening runes’ (*litteræ solutoriae, alysendlecan rune*): here also the context makes it clear that it is not bind-runes in the sense of runic ligatures which are being referred to but runes or magic spells which cause fetters to fall off (cf. also *Grógaldr* st. 10 and *Hávamál* st. 149 for bond-breaking magic).

has lost her mind, bewitched by misapplied runic spells. A local lad, trying to win the love of the maiden, had carved runes to this effect on a piece of whale-bone placed in the girl's bed, but erroneously, so that they instead cause the girl's illness to worsen. Egill quickly grasps the situation and realises that the runes have been written wrongly. He burns the bone and lays a new, beneficial inscription under her pillow. In other words, he fixes the spell, and the grateful girl recovers swiftly.

In this instance, Egill rails against runic incompetents, describing ten secret staves carved on the runic spell on the bone:

Skalat maðr rúnar rísta,  
nema ráða vel kunni,  
þat verðr mörgum manni,  
es of myrkvan staf villisk;  
sák á telgðu talkni,  
tíu launstafi ristna,  
þat hefr lauka lindi  
langs ofirtrega fengit.<sup>10</sup>

The compound *launstafir* used to describe the runes does not, to the best of my knowledge, recur in saga literature. Its meaning thus remains somewhat obscure, although 'secret runes' need hardly imply monogram runes.<sup>11</sup> The expression *launstafir* is in all likelihood a poetic compound spontaneously coined to alliterate with *lauka*, *lindi* and *langs* in the following lines. Nor have the several other compounds with *-stafir* in Norse literature (*líknstafir*, *herstafir*, *blundstafir*, *feiknstafir*, *bölstafir*, *helstafir*, *flærðarstafir*, *lastastafir*, *meinstafir*, *leiðstafir*, *kveinstafir*, refs in Bæksted 1952: 70) been singled out as evidencing magical monograms. In any case, the importance of this incident is unlikely to be a preoccupation with runic imprecation. Rather, it shows Egill in his familiar guise of rune-master, i.e. ingenious conquering hero. The 'secret' of runic writing is something mastered by few of Egill's contemporaries; those with limited competence are usually not sufficiently skilled to avoid botching the message. It seems that in the saga society, few are *fullrýninn*.

There is simply no need to associate the nonce word *launstafir* with magical bind-runes: it is clear that the view of Egill's healing powers as evidencing the magical manipulation of bind-runes rests on no solid foundations whatsoever. The runes or staves are necessarily 'secret' if most do not understand how to carve them, and, as Dillman (1996: 55) points out, the masculine *stafr*, 'stave' could also signify 'word' or even 'lore', so the expression could in fact apply to

<sup>10</sup> Knirk (1994: 418f.) argues that the second half-stanza of this poem was created by the saga writer while the first half is a re-working of an older poem.

<sup>11</sup> Magnusen (1841: 166f.) associates the *launstafir* with runic monograms: "Af denne Art vare da uden Tvivl de i det hedenske Norden saakaldte *hemmelige eller lønlige Stave*, (*Launstafir*), der ikke forstodes saa almindelig (eller af de fleste) som de simple Runer, og derfor gjerne anvendtes til Hexerie", cf. Bæksted (1952: 81): "Om her er tale om eller tænkt på egentlige trylletegn eller på en skreven formel eller et trylleord kan ikke ses".

ten secret words.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the significance of the number 10 in erotic rune-magic promoted by Olsen (1909) is discredited by Bæksted (1952: 195ff.).

The Värmland expedition is commonly regarded as an incredible adventure thought up by the saga writer who was probably influenced by similar romantic tales or motifs (e.g. de Vries 1967: 344; 347 note 26; Einarson 1975: 265). Einarson (1975: 259f.) points out some inconsistencies in the runic episode,<sup>13</sup> and also finds some rather forced similarities between this incident and the evangelists' description of Jesus' healing of the daughter of the synagogue ruler Jairus (Mark V, 21-43; Luke VIII, 41-56).

If the other celebrated examples of rune-magic in this saga are examined, it becomes clear that Egill's author has used runes as a kind of literary motif, an attribute appropriate to a conquering hero. The fantastic practices of rune-magic encountered in the saga serve more to illuminate the imagined qualities of the warrior protagonist, who can extract himself and others from seemingly impossible situations, rather than to cast any light on traditional practices involving secret rune-staves.

The most vivid description of runic sorcery is Egill's discovery of poison in a drink intended for him, by carving runes reddened with his own blood:

Egill brá þá knífi sínum ok stakk í lófa sér; hann tók við horninu ok reist á rúnar ok reið á blóðinu. Hann kvað:

Rístum rún á horni,  
rjóðum spjöll í dreyra,  
þau velk orð til eyrna  
óðs dýrs viðar róta;  
drekkingum veig sem viljum  
vel glýjaðra þýja,  
vitum, hvé oss of eiri  
öl, þats Bárðr signdi.

Hornit sprakk í sundr, en drykrinn fór niðr í hálm. (Egill XLIV).

The 'magic' runes cause the drinking vessel to shatter and the poison to escape. The episode is clearly fictitious, unless one imagines a prosaic, and somewhat far-fetched, explanation whereby the actual carving of runes caused the horn to break and spill the drink contained therein. Dramatic as the incident is, it would

<sup>12</sup> These are sometimes further compared (e.g. Magnúsen 1841: 166f.; Thorsen 1877: 34; Jónsson 1910: 298) with the indecipherable *stafkarlalettr* encountered by Snorri in *Sturlunga Saga* (II, 241); here, as with Egill's *launstafr*, the supposition seems to have arisen from the uncertainty surrounding the interpretation of the word *stafkarla-lettr*, cf. Cleasby-Vigfusson (1857: 586), 'a kind of Runic letters'. The term is applied to various types of coded runes from a much later period (Thorsen 1877: 35, n. 37; Snædal 1998: 27).

<sup>13</sup> Einarson (1975: 259f.) believes that the runic episode illustrates a change of mind by the saga writer in the meaning of the runes written by the local. On Egill's return, he is informed that the whalebone runes were carved by the boy to make the girl fall in love with him rather than to effect her recovery (chap LXXXVI). Einarson (1975: 260) also points out the inconsistency in having a girl described as 'hamstoli' talk with Egill (in a reasonable manner, presumably) before his erasure of the offending runes, whereupon 'henni þótti sem hon vaknaði ór svefni'.

be far more exciting if Egill's runic exploits involved carving a tombstone for a fallen kinsman, or scribbling down an order for salt – something (anything!) which could not so easily be dismissed as a literary fraud. The modern reader who does not subscribe to the school of thought which regards runes as small pebbles for solving life's dilemmas and forecasting the future will appreciate that carving runes on a drinking horn (a use that is only attested with thoroughly mundane owner inscriptions from the medieval period) would hardly lead to the shattering effects described above.

The motif of colouring runes with one's own blood recurs in other early Norse literature (cf. Dillman 1996: 66f.), and the Eddic *Guðrúnarkviða II* even mentions a horn with 'reddened' runes.<sup>14</sup> It is also worth noting that many episodes and characters from Egill's saga find close parallels in contemporary Icelandic literature (see especially Einarsson 1975, *passim*). Einarsson (1975: 174ff.) notes several correspondences between this hostile drinking competition and a similar set of circumstances encountered by *Orkneyinga saga's* Sveinn Ásleifarsun when he attends a royal feast.<sup>15</sup> But even outside the Scandinavian spectrum parallels may be found. Boyer (1973: 18f.) suggests that Egill's rune-carving on the horn is borrowed from a similar story in the *Dialogues* of Pope Gregory the Great, one of the most influential authors of the Middle Ages and certainly known in Iceland (Turville-Petre 1975: 135f.). Several motives taken from these moral tales were re-used in Norse literature, and Boyer regards the situation where Egill engraves runes on the fateful horn as a conscious imitation of the miraculous tale of St. Benedict in Gregory's dialogues (II: 3): upon being offered a bottle of poisoned wine, Benedict makes the sign of the cross, whereupon the bottle shatters into pieces.<sup>16</sup> The resemblance between the stories is clear and it does indeed seem as if runes have replaced the cross in the Icelandic version of the tale.<sup>17</sup>

The other instances of runic imprecation in Egill's saga can be covered more swiftly. *Níð*, i.e. "gross insults of a symbolic kind" (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983: 32), was proscribed by Icelandic law, and in the celebrated incident in chapter LVII of Egill's saga, Egill defiantly sets up a hazel pole topped with a decapitated horse head and pronounces a curse, which he subsequently records in runes on the pole, on Eiríkr blóðøx and his wife

<sup>14</sup> These also occur epigraphically. 'Ölrúnar' and other magic runes associated with drinking-horns are also mentioned in *Sigrdrífomál* (cf. Bæksted 1952: 64ff.).

<sup>15</sup> Einarsson (1975: 176, n. 7) notes a further analogy in *Flateyjarbók* (III, 272) where King Magús góði escapes death from Queen Alfífa's poisoned drink by first offering it to the unlucky King Knútr.

<sup>16</sup> A further similarity between a later episode involving Egill and saint Benedict is noted by Nordal (ÍF II 183, n. 1).

<sup>17</sup> Much as the *ægishjalmr* replaced the cross in certain Icelandic spells (cf. Lindqvist 1921: 46, n. 4).

Gunnhildr.<sup>18</sup> Egill's raising of a rune-inscribed *níð* pole with a defamatory message is another standard literary device, closely paralleled in at least one other saga (*Vatnsdælasaga* XXXIV), while timber *níð* of a somewhat different kind, without verse or runes, is also a feature of several other sagas.<sup>19</sup>

The most credible use of runes seems to occur in chapter LXXVIII of Egill's saga with the recording by Egill's daughter Þorgerðr of the celebrated poem *Sonatorrek* on a rune-stick, as a palliative remedy to alleviate Egill's despair at the death of his son Böðvarr: "svá at þú mættir yrkja erfikvæði eptir Böðvar, en ek mun rísta á kefli". Such use of runes is often regarded as anachronistic (e.g. Jónsson 1910: 292) and although it used to be thought that the runic descriptions prominent in the sagas predated the actual using of runes by Icelanders, this thesis, with the recent discovery of the tenth or eleventh century runic tablet from Viðey, has been disproved (Snædal 1998: 17f.). The act of writing poetry on rune-sticks is also recorded in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (chap LXII) of the hero Grettir and the half-giant Hallmundr; this last, like Egill, dictates his poem to his daughter who records it on a rune-stick.<sup>20</sup>

It seems most likely that Egill's saga employs runes primarily as literary devices, regarding them as attributes fit for heroes. They have the stamp of the unfamiliar, the exotic, which is hardly unexpected when they were probably not widely used in Iceland at this time. Egill, it may be noted, is not described using runes to mark his possessions or to order wares, but to deal with well-nigh impossible situations. Runes here function in much the same way as the magic spider-webs or bat-mobiles employed by modern comic-book super-heroes to defeat seemingly impossible odds.<sup>21</sup> It is also notable that Busla's curse similarly invokes runes only as a last recourse, after she has threatened elves, trolls, goblins, giants etc.; the same situation is manifested in *Skírnismál*.

It is perhaps worth remembering Barnes' 'runological health warning' pertaining to the reliability of runic tradition deriving from Iceland.<sup>22</sup> It is also noteworthy that the most celebrated runic events of Egill's saga take place

<sup>18</sup> On speculations concerning this runic curse, cf. ÍF II: xviii f.

<sup>19</sup> cf. ÍF p. 171, n. 1; Bæksted (1952: 207, who makes a further comparison with Saxo). Nordal (loc. cit.) also compares Egill's curse to *Hávamál* 155 while Meulengracht Sørensen (1983: 30f.) compares the runic *níð*-formula on the *Vatnsdæla* pole to verbal ritual challenges occurring in other sagas. For further references to *níð*-poles, see Dillman (1996: 60, n. 28) or Meulengracht Sørensen (1983: 51ff.).

<sup>20</sup> Other saga parallels are discussed by Bæksted (1952: 94ff.) and Dillman (1996: 60f.).

<sup>21</sup> On the tendency of Norse authors to credit the poets or socially elite with runic skills, see Dillman (1996: 82f.).

<sup>22</sup> Barnes (1991: 229): "A virtually runeless society is the most likely one, in my view, to have spawned notions about rune magic, gifts from Óðinn and similar objects of wonder. It is hard to imagine that the people of medieval Bergen, for example, with their two-script culture, would have taken such ideas seriously enough even to use them as literary motifs."



outside of Iceland, where the runic tradition, as far as it existed at that time, was presumably far more prosaic. Egill's healing of a sick girl belongs to the Swedish peasant culture of Värmland; his shattering of the poisoned horn to the court of Norway; likewise his raising of a taunting pole against King Eiríkr Bloodaxe. The sagas, which often deal comfortably and plausibly with episodes located within their home boundaries, were not averse to detailing lovesick princesses, ugly monsters and incredible events which usually took place in other Scandinavian territories (cf. Turville-Petre 1975: 230; Pálsson & Edwards 1985: 8). Egill is an Icelandic hero, but much of the saga describes his exploits abroad where his adventures are often highly unrealistic.

In any case, most of the fantastic runic episodes from Egill's saga find parallels in other literary sources, and may be regarded as literary borrowings rather than as records of actual historical events. As literature, Egill's saga may be a masterpiece; as a historical document it is often at variance with other written sources and, while remarkably accurate in some of its descriptions, is demonstrably false in several places (de Vries 1967: 342ff.). The runic episodes often have the air of anachronistic and unrealistic interpolations designed to enhance the hero's prestige. The (rune-inscribed) taunting pole is a saga commonplace; the shattering of the virago's horn is reminiscent of a foreign (Christian) miracle motif, and the healing of the damsel in distress is a further heroic embellishment, which may be modelled on a gospel story. Nor is Busla's runic curse unique: the same runic formula recurs on runic inscriptions all through Scandinavia.

The runic episodes described in these Icelandic sagas are of literary rather than historical interest and of little help in uncovering the extent of medieval runic practices. There seems in any case little cause to regard the saga evidence as supporting any notion of the 'magical' properties of runic monograms. Not one concrete reference to a runic monogram or bind-rune is found in the literature. This accords well with the epigraphic evidence, where few bind-runes can be supposed to have occult significance.<sup>23</sup> 'Magical' runic episodes and runic imprecations occur in the two sagas examined here, but these are not linked to magical monograms, and are in any case of such a generally outlandish nature, with runes employed as an exotic weapon, that little credence can be attached to the descriptions, which can hardly have been believed by the saga authors themselves, or their audiences.

Saga runic episodes are often patently artificial, often adapted from foreign literary motifs and describe romanticized applications of runic sorcery. Yet despite this pre-disposition towards the irrational, fantastical employment of runes, the 'runologiske bisarrerier' of the sagas do not involve the magical monogram binds so beloved of latter-day runologists. Neither in the literary evidence discussed here, nor in the epigraphic evidence investigated in my

---

<sup>23</sup> cf. MacLeod (1999, *passim*).

thesis, is there any definite suggestion of the magical manipulation of bind-runes for occult purposes.

### References:

- Árnason, Jón, 1862: *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* I. Leipzig.
- Barnes, Michael P., 1991: 'New Runic Studies', *Scandinavica* 30, pp. 223-32.
- Boyer, Régis, 1973: 'The Influence of Pope Gregory's Dialogues on Old Icelandic Literature', in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*, ed. Peter G Foote, Hermann Pálsson, Desmond Slay. London, pp. 1-27.
- Bæksted, Anders, 1942: *Islands runeindskrifter*. Bibliotheca arnamagnæana II. København.
- 1952: *Målruner og trolldruner: Runemagiske studier*. Nationalmuseets skrifter, Arkæologisk-Historisk Række, IV. København.
- Cleasby, Richard & Gudbrand Vigfusson, 1957 [1874]: *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford.
- Daviðsson, Ólafur, 1903: 'Isländische Zauberzeichen und Zauberbücher', *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* 13, pp. 150-67, 267-79.
- Dillmann, François-Xavier, 1996: 'Les runes dans la littérature norroise. Á propos d'une découverte archéologique en Islande', *Proxima Thule* 2, p. 51-89.
- DR = *Danmarks runeindskrifter*. Lis Jacobsen, Erik Moltke et al. København, 1942.
- Einarson, Bjarni, 1975: *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga*. Reykjavík.
- Ellis (Davidson), Hilda, 1943: *The Road to Hel*. Cambridge.
- Flowers, Stephen E., 1986: *Runes and Magic. Magical Formulaic Elements in the Older Runic Tradition*. New York.
- Hagland, Jan Ragnar, 1994: 'Les découvertes d'inscriptions runiques de Bergen et Trondheim. Marques de propriété, relations commerciales et croyances magico-religieuses', *Proxima Thule* 1, p. 123-34.
- Heizmann, Wilhelm, 1998: 'Runica manuscripta: Die isländische Überlieferung', in *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung* (Eingänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, Band 15), ed. Klaus Düwel. Berlin, New York, pp. 513-535.
- Jiriczek, Otto, 1893: *Die Bósa-Saga in zwei Fassungen nebst Proben aus den Bósa-Rímur*. Strassburg.
- 1893: *Zur Geschichte der Bósa-Saga*. Breslau.
- Jónsson, Finnur, 1910: 'Runerne i den norsk-islandske digtning og litteratur', *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, pp. 283-308.
- Jónsson, Guðæni (ed.), 1936: *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. Íslenzk fornrit VII. Reykjavík.
- Knirk, James E., 1988: 'The Corpus of Old Norse Metrical Texts in Runes from Bergen', in *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages. Preprints from The Seventh International Saga Conference, Spoleto, 4-10 September 1988*. Spoleto, pp. 173-8.
- 1994: 'Runes from Trondheim and a Stanza by Egill Skalla-Grímsson', in *Studien zum Altgermanischen. Festschrift für Henrich Beck* (Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, Vol 11), ed. Heiko Uecker. Berlin, New York, pp. 411-20.
- Krappe, Alex H., 1928: 'The sources of the *Saga af Herraúði ok Bósa*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 29, pp. 250-56.
- Kålund, Kristian, 1882: 'Islands fortidslævninger', *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, pp. 57-124.
- Liestøl, Aslak, 1964: *Runer fra Bryggen*. Bergen: Bryggens Museum.
- Lindqvist, Natan, 1921: *En isländsk Svartkonstbok från 1500-talet*. Uppsala.
- Lüning, Hermann (ed.), 1859: *Die Edda. Eine Sammlung altnordischer Götter- und Heldernliedern*. Zürich.
- MacLeod, Mindy, 1999: *Runic Ligatures. An Investigation of Bind-Runes in Runic Epigraphy* (diss.). University of Melbourne.
- Magnusen, Finn, 1841: *Runamo og runerne. En committeeberetning til det kongelige danske videnskabers selskab, samt trede afhandling angaaende rune-literaturen, Runamo og*

- forskjellige særegne (tildeels nylig opdagede) oldtidsminder. København.
- Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben, 1983: *The Unmanly Man. Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*. Trans. Joan Turville-Petre. Odense.
- Moltke, Erik, 1936-7: 'Runologiske Bidrag', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 11, pp. 252-262.
- Neckel, Gustav & Hans Kuhn (eds), 1962: *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*. Heidelberg.
- NlYR = *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer*. 6 vols., ed. Magnus Olsen et al. Oslo, 1941-1990.
- Nordal, Sigurður (ed.), 1933: *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Íslenzk fornrit II. Reykjavík.
- Olrik, Axel, 1918: 'Gudfremstillinger på Guldhornene og andre ældre mindesmærker', *Danske studier* 15, pp. 1-35.
- Olsen, Magnus, 1909: 'Fløksand-inskriften', *Bergens Museums Aarbog*, pp. 15-44.
- 1917: *Om Trolldrøner* (Fordomtíma II, Skriftserie utg. av Oskar Lundberg). Uppsala.
- Pálsson, Hermann & Paul Edwards (eds), 1985: *Seven Viking Romances*. London.
- Ross, Margaret Clunies, 1994: *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse Myths in medieval Northern society*. Volume 1: The myths. Odense.
- Schröder, Franz Rolf, 1928: 'Motivwanderungen im Mittelalter', *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* XVI, pp. 7-13.
- Seim, Karin Fjellhammer, 1986: 'Fragment av Harald Hardrådes Gamanvísur Overlevert i Runer på Bryggen i Bergen', *Maal og minne*, pp. 30-41.
- Snædal, Þórgunnur, 1998: 'Íslenskar rúnir í norrænu ljósi', *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags*, pp. 5-33.
- Sveinsson, Einar Ólafur (ed.), 1939: *Vatnsdæla saga*, Íslenzk fornrit VIII. Reykjavík.
- Thompson, Claiborne, 1978: 'The Runes in Bosi saga ok Herrauds', *Scandinavian Studies* 50, pp. 50-6.
- Thorsen, P. G., 1877: 'Om Runernes Brug til Skrift udenfor det monumentale', Tillæg till Codex Runicus - Det Arnemagnæanske Haandskrift No 28, 8vo, udgivet i fotolitografisk Aftryk af Kommissionen for det Arnemagnæanske Legat, Kjøbenhavn.
- Turville-Petre, Gabriel 1975 [1953]: *Origins of Icelandic Literature*. Oxford.
- de Vries, Jan, 1967: *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, Band II. (Grundriss der germanischen Philologie). 2nd ed. Berlin.

**Appendix: Possible references to runic monograms in saga texts**

From *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* (*Buslabæn*):

Komi hér seggir sex,  
seg þú mér nöfn þeira  
öll óbundin,  
ek mun þér sýna:  
getr þú eigi ráðit,  
svá at mér rétt þykki,  
þá skulu þik hundar  
í hel gnaga,  
en sál þín  
sökkvi í víti.

r.o.þ.k.m.u iiiiii:sssssttttt:iiiiii:lllll:

Some parallel runic texts (cf. Liestøl 1964: 18f.; Thompson 1978; Heizmann 1998: 519):

Gørlev, Denmark (DR 239): Þjóðvé reisti stein þenna ept Óðinkár,  
**fuporkhniastbmlR**, njót vel kumls! **þmkiiisssttiiiilll** ek setta rúnar rétt. Gunni,  
Arnmundr.

Ledberg, Sweden (Ög 181): Vísi/Risi setti stein þenna ept Þorgaut 1, föður  
sinn ok þau Gunna bæði **þmk:iii:sss:ttt:iii:lll**

Lomen, Norway (NIyR 75): r:þ:k:iiisssttiiiilll

Bergen, Norway: mtpkrbiiiiiissssstttttiiiiiiilllllll

Borgund, Norway (NIyR 364): **tistilmistilok-nþiriþipistil** (= *Tistill*, *mistill*  
*ok*, *hinn þriði*, *þistill*).

\*

From *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (chap. LXXII):

Skalat maðr rúnar rísta,  
nema ráða vel kunni,  
þat verðr mörgum manni,  
es of myrkvan staf villisk;  
sák á telgðu talkni,  
tú launstafi ristna,  
þat hefr lauka lindi  
langs ofrtrega fengit.

cf. rune-stick A 142:

Sá skyli rúnar rísta,  
er ráða (?) vel kunni;  
þat verðr mörgum manni,  
at ...