

# Runes and Christianity: Practices in the Viking Age and the Middle Ages

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The theme of the Seventh International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions is “Runes in Context”. When we discuss ways of contextualizing the runic evidence, it is obvious that an extensive part of the runic tradition in Scandinavia in the Viking Age and the Middle Ages belongs within the context of Christianity – either reflecting the phase of converting to the Christian religion during the late Viking Age or expressing the established Christian practices of the Middle Ages. Links with Christianity have been highlighted in numerous studies analyzing runic inscriptions in relation to their broader cultural setting or using the runic material as authentic complementary evidence when exploring problems of historical, archaeological, etc. orientation. To name but one example, the runic material was included into research projects dealing with the Christianization of Sweden and Norway; see Williams (1996a, 1996b), Knirk (1996). Runic inscriptions have been treated as individual signs of conversion as well as reflections of the social process of Christianization. A comprehensive list of corresponding studies cannot be provided here, but for a short overview of some of the main approaches with references, see e.g. Williams (1996a: 47-50).

One way of bringing runes and Christianity together is to explore problems of literacy and religion – then we focus upon runes as a functional writing system that could be made to work together with the practice of Christianity. The non-confrontational – in fact, rather productive – coexistence of native runic literacy and the Christian religious practice in Scandinavia over several hundred years has been underlined on numerous occasions. More particularly, various features of runes and runic inscriptions have been explored in relation to Roman letters and the Latin language, linguistic tools that were directly connected with the introduction of Christianity and which, to start with, were used almost exclusively with the purpose of communicating the Christian faith. Regarding the two writing systems, the emphasis has often been laid upon their complementary character and separate areas of applications, although it has also been demonstrated that the division between the two domains was not necessarily absolute and that there occurred important overlaps (see e.g. Gustavson 1994, Palm 1997).

Another central approach to runes and Christianity concentrates upon the actual messages of what could be labelled “Christian runic inscriptions”. Verbal and visual expressions of Christianity lie in focus, but the label can also be extended to include other ways of expressing links to Christianity, such as the association of runic objects to sites of religious significance and certain social customs. Traditional groups of Christian runic inscriptions include: Christian rune stones; late Viking and medieval runic churchyard monuments (the monuments may also carry complementary or parallel texts in the Latin language and/or in the Roman script); various inscriptions occurring in churches and on ecclesiastical items; and inscriptions on different types of smaller objects that reveal Christian motifs and influences. Corresponding runic evidence allows us to trace the introduction and advancement of Christianity in Scandinavia. At the same time, the function and meaning of Christianity-related features and quotations in the runic material remains ambivalent – especially when it comes to amulet-like items and protective formulae that leave the line between religion and magic vague or to inscriptions that remind us more of informal and casual graffiti than conscious demonstrations of one’s religious devoutness. An overall complication is that the nature of the runic evidence casts light only upon limited aspects of the religious practice of Christianity.

In this paper I intend to synthesize and reflect upon some key ideas on runes and Christianity that have occupied previous research as well as to look at additional strategies for interpreting the runic material in the context of Christianity. Three keywords are found useful in the analysis of runes and Christianity – these are: (a) textuality; (b) materiality; and (c) settings. These three concepts cannot at the same time be isolated from each other; they should instead be understood as complementary elements of study. In addition to that I wish to underline the importance of discussing dynamics and change. In the focus here are not so much isolated periods of time and clearly separated groups of inscriptions, but an argument is made that the study of runes and Christianity should attempt to trace changing as well as

continuous aspects of the tradition as a whole – to the extent this is possible on the basis of the preserved material. The theoretical concepts that are followed will be connected throughout the paper to the empirical material in terms of discussing the features and practical implications of various types of runic inscriptions.

## **Runes and Christianity – textuality, materiality, settings**

We shall start with the textual experience of runic inscriptions and verbal expressions of Christianity. As texts of varying purposes and motivation, runic inscriptions lend themselves easily to contextual analysis; but runic textuality also has some specific features that have to do with the physical and epigraphic nature of the inscriptions. A common way of approaching runic inscriptions as texts has been to focus upon their characteristic components, including the repetitive use of particular formulations that often have to do with the function of the object that carries the runes. Such an emphasis has sometimes resulted in the experiencing of certain types of runic inscriptions – such as those on rune stones – as formulaic and even stereotypical. In the meantime, a closer analysis of the textuality of runic inscriptions also reveals built-in ways of how to vary structure and content independent of the material object; in fact, even small variations in the topicalization of different elements can be considered significant (see e.g. Wessén 1965: 201-225, Zilmer 2009).

Similar considerations apply to the textual communication of Christianity in runic inscriptions. On the one hand, we can identify typical patterns of expression that reoccur in different settings; on the other hand, inherent variations are visible. In the centre of attention here lies the tradition of Christian prayers and invocations as it can be traced from the inscriptions; the starting point is the customary runic prayer of the kind “God help his spirit/soul” that emerges in inscriptions on rune stones. Previous research has devoted much attention to the theological content analysis of such invocative formulae, as well as searching for the sources of origin for the runic prayer language. It has thus been discussed to what extent the prayers may reflect direct quotations and borrowings from the Latin death liturgy (see e.g. Beskow 1996). On the other hand, the manner in which the prayers are manifested in the inscriptions shows them to be formulae that were circulating in the vernacular tradition, also characterized by elements of popular religiosity (see e.g. Gschwantler 1998). The question as to the exact source of origin of the common prayer “God help his spirit/soul” has so far remained unanswered. When choosing to concentrate upon the native use of corresponding prayers, we can look at the practices that were dominant in the Scandinavian context. In connection with this we find, for example, that the runic material demonstrates an oral context around the prayers. Prayers in runic inscriptions are reminiscent of spoken utterances, and as such they reflect the oral tradition of reciting prayers (Palm 2006, Zilmer 2009).

Furthermore, in order to understand the dynamics of the Christian prayer tradition in the runic material we have to examine the use of prayers in various types of inscriptions belonging to different settings and originating from different periods of time. Naturally, it is complicated to assert that all such cases were necessarily connected to each other as links within an overall tradition. However, a comprehensive overview may reveal something about the broader significance of different types of prayers as well as about the strategies of recording prayers in runes. Two main categories of prayers can be distinguished in runic inscriptions: a) prayers and invocations that have been (re)formulated in the vernacular and as such, reflect a vernacular practice of praying, with its potentially varying regional or local and individual applications; b) prayers and invocations that provide witness to direct Latin input – fully or partly quoted, and adapted to the runic context in various forms. In addition to these two categories, we can also identify some hybrid cases.

One point to make is that the earlier identified runic prayer of the type “God help his spirit/soul” is not only limited to the medium of raised rune stones and does not completely vanish from use when the main era of rune stones is over. Prayers of the so-called traditional style can still make their appearance in medieval inscriptions, for example on grave monuments and in churches. This adds support to the continuing significance of the vernacular prayer tradition. The fact that the basic prayer (alongside its modifications) emerges in settings that have not influenced each other directly, and in inscriptions that date from different periods of time, also tells us that this pattern of praying must have been known over

a relatively wide area. A possible line of development is that in the medieval runic material we find a more institutionalized prayer language alongside explicit references to the broader community of Christians. On the other hand, there also occur more frequent individualized references in medieval prayers, in terms of inserted personal names.

The vernacular and the Latin prayers in runic inscriptions can be contextualized in different ways in order to explore practices that must have influenced the runic material. One problem from the textual point of view is that it is hard to determine whose formulations and (conscious) choices the runic prayers reveal. The role of custom as well as regional variations have to be taken into consideration besides possible individually anchored features; an example of the latter can be carver-related traits in the rune stone material in combination with specific variations that are visible in the prayer language. Another matter concerns the very fact that we are dealing with specific runic textuality. It is of interest to take a closer look at such inscriptions that, besides mediating a Christian message, also place emphasis upon or demonstrate some kind of awareness about the use of runes as a tool of communication. In extension to that, the mixed use of two different script cultures – i.e. runes and Roman letters – that occurs in some inscriptions can be consulted. Is this simply a matter of using parallel tools of literacy or does there occur functional interaction, and what kind of consequences (if any) does this have for the prayers recorded in the inscriptions?

Secondly, we turn to the materiality of runic inscriptions – connected to concrete physical items that carry the epigraphic texts. A point of discussion concerns the items and materials that were used for expressing the Christian prayer tradition in runes. Earlier I outlined a possible list of Christian runic inscriptions that at the same time illustrates the varying materiality of relevant inscriptions. In terms of contextualizing the runic prayer tradition further we can examine possible connections between the choice of material, medium, and variants of vernacular and Latin runic prayers. Another aspect to explore has to do with forms of interaction between textual and material aspects, as these can for example be traced on the basis of visual strategies used on monumental runic items. Possible connections between the textual manifestation of runic prayers and the visual depiction of cross ornamentation on rune stones and runic grave monuments form one illustrative case to discuss.

It is usually pointed out in runic scholarship that the content of inscriptions is to a great degree defined by the function of the object (with the possible exception of runic sticks that function more as media for messages than independent items). Nevertheless, we may wonder about instances when identical or more or less similar sounding texts – such as prayers – appear on various types of items. Does this practice change the nature of the text or the item or perhaps both? Some universal elements of Christianity make their appearance on items that in themselves may appear to have rather different functions. For instance, the Latin prayers *Ave Maria* and *Pater Noster* are known from various settings and have been given alternative interpretations, including that of Christian magic. Such prayers can obviously demonstrate different motivation in inscriptions that have a monumental and permanent character as opposed to casual recordings on church walls or notations on small items that could be used as amulets, or even simply thrown away. In this manner the different functionality of some core messages of Christianity that had become widely known in Scandinavia is reflected.

This brings us over to our third point. The runic prayer tradition also needs to be contextualized according to various physical settings in which the prayers appear; this includes the spatial dimension of runic inscriptions alongside varying spheres of application. To start with, the very choice of using runes in particular settings is noteworthy. In the following step, we can analyze the ways in which runic prayers are recorded in different settings – comparisons can be drawn between the public/official and the private/individual sphere. However, different spheres do not necessarily have to be fully separated; cases of interaction and overlap can be identified. In connection with Christian practices a natural step is to examine the use of runic prayers in what may be determined as the ecclesiastical/clerical and the popular settings. At the same time, inscriptions that occur within the same physical space can be part of various settings. For example, in the case of runic inscriptions recorded in churches, we find both clearly individual notations and more official inscriptions. That is to say, different spheres of application could co-exist and interact within the same liturgical space.

Textuality, materiality, and settings are in this paper applied as tools for analyzing the broader role and dynamics of the runic prayer tradition. In terms of illuminating general

perspectives on runes and Christianity, different groups of inscriptions will be discussed throughout the paper – these are considered on their own and in relation to each other. Characteristic examples concern rune stones, grave monuments, stave church and stone church inscriptions.

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