Chapter 7

Visibility of runic writing and its relation to Viking Age society

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Introduction

Runes are the writing system of the Germanic peoples and the oldest artefacts attesting runic writing date back to the second century AD. As it was an epigraphic script, runes were carved mainly into objects of various materials such as metal, wood or stone. The Viking raid on the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793 conventionally marks the beginning of the Viking Age, which lasts until the Norman conquest in 1066. This period is characterised by the Viking expansion to western and eastern Europe for raiding and trading. It is also the time when the kingdoms which would later be known as Denmark, Norway and Sweden were developing. During that time, Vikings came in contact with the Christian faith, manuscript culture and the Latin script (cf. Sawyer, B. 2000, 16–23; Sawyer, P. 2003).

Despite the introduction of the Latin alphabet, runes were not dismissed at once and were not fully replaced before the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The runic writing system underwent some major changes at the beginning of the Viking Age in the North. The old system, which consisted of 24 characters, developed into the so-called Younger Futhark of only 16 characters. The reduction came hand in hand with a simplification of the single runic characters, which resulted in an easier carving process, but at the same time the degree of difficulty in deciphering the inscriptions became higher (cf. Düwel 2008, 88–94; see also Schulte 2009; 2011).

The majority of the inscriptions from the Viking Age are carved into stone, which marks this period as the great age of rune-stones. Around 220 rune-stone monuments from the period 750–1050 can be found within the area of Viking Age Denmark, which also included part of East Sweden for historical reasons (cf. Düwel 2008, 98). Sweden counts far more rune-stones – around 2600 – the majority of which were erected during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries (cf. Düwel 2008, 113).

In this paper the focus will be on the Danish rune-stones. These inscriptions display a formulaic style, reading 'N.N. raised this stone (monument) in memory of N.N.' Moltke (1985, 184) states, that '[r]une stones are monuments to the glory of men who erected them and of the men they commemorate; they are not gravestones lamenting the dead.' The text on the inscription can occur in different reading directions and does not follow a normalised orthography. According to Sawyer (2000, 146–152) rune-stone monuments had different functions. They commemorate the dead individuals, but also serve as memorials for the living sponsor(s). Furthermore, they display wealth and status. Sawyer (2000, 151) also suggests that runic monuments were 'a symptom of crisis' and 'their uneven distribution in Scandinavia … is a good reflection of the political and religious transition that took place during the tenth and eleventh centuries.' In accordance with Sawyer, Danielsson (2015) argues that rune-stones act as mnemonic agents. She takes the view, that '[b]y raising stones, both carved and uncarved, long-term social memory was created.' (2015, 80).

The questions of how the knowledge of runic writing was transmitted and who was able to carve runes in the first place are still unresolved. Some inscriptions include references to rune masters, and according to Axelson (1993, 5) over 100 rune carvers in Sweden are known by name. By analysing orthographical and typological features, inscriptions that do not contain an individual's name can be assigned to known carvers; this is the case of Öpir, one of the more productive carvers from Sweden (cf. Stille 1999, 148–199; for Öpir cf. Åhlén 1997; Källström 2010). Concerning their social standing, Källström (2007) notes that rune carvers did not belong to a special social class but were, rather, part of the 'normal' Viking Age population. Furthermore, he outlines the relationship between the sponsor family and the rune master and determines three different types of rune carvers: firstly, the 'professional' with no relation to the family, secondly the carver who is identical with the sponsor or belonged to the same family and finally carvers who were subordinate to the sponsor (cf. Källström 2007, 245–291). Recent studies using 3D-scanning and multivariate statistical analysis on rune-stone inscriptions discovered new findings about the relationship between rune carver and sponsor. In the case of the Danish island Bornholm results show that 'rune carvers were linked to particular families, and that the individual rune carvers were following the different fashion currents of the time' (Åhfeldt and Imer 2019, 17). The study suggests that on the island each family was probably connected with a rune carver and that there is 'indirect evidence that the culture of runic writing was more widespread at the start of the Middle Ages than … hitherto assumed' (Åhfeldt and Imer 2019, 17).

This paper looks at Viking Age rune-stone inscriptions and writing in general from a different perspective, combining different disciplines. The aim is to investigate the role runic writing played in Viking Age society in Denmark. The concept of visibility of script is introduced by Strätling and Witte (2006) who consider script in a dichotomy of visibility and invisibility, calling it the paradox of *sichtbare Unsichtbarkeit*

(roughly translated as 'visible invisibility'). Script has to be visible to be recognised, but simultaneously always carries the invisible information of the content of its text. Using this statement as a starting point, the paper explores the particular role visibility of both script and the archaeological artefact plays concerning the effect runic writing had on society.

Visibility and materiality of script

Thinking about the materiality of script, Ehlich (2002, 92) states the conditions that led to the development of this medium. The relationship between written and spoken language – script and speech – has been discussed by multiple scholars and can be seen in different ways, depending on the focus (cf. de Saussure 1983; Paul 1995). In a merely neutral sense writing can be described as an inventory of characters (cf. Dürscheid 2006, 19).

The starting point of Ehlich's analysis (cf. Ehlich 2002, 92–97) is – as he puts it – 'materiality', *i.e.* the transfer of speech or spoken language into a material form. The main problem of speech is its cursoriness and transience. Memory is one method to overcome this obstacle, though it also poses difficulties because of one's limited capacities of memorisation. The consequence is the need for a new medium that eliminates these limitations of oral tradition. Script adds a factor of permanency, but is always bound to materiality in the literal sense of the word. In simpler terms it means that writing does not exist without the presence of a writing surface and characters with their representative function (cf. also Waldispühl 2013, 47–60). As Ehlich (2002, 92) puts it 'diese [Schrift] aber war auf unübersehbare Art an die Sichtbarkeit gebunden – und damit an Materialität in vielfältiger Weise und Form.'[1]

The German term *Sichtbarkeit* (in the following English 'visibility') is understood in terms of visible perception and materialisation. In the introduction to the conference proceedings about writing *Die Sichtbarkeit der Schrift,* Strätling and Witte (2006, 7–18) present their concept of what 'visibility' of script entails. They postulate (2006, 7) that writing can be considered in a dichotomy of visibility and invisibility, calling it the paradox of *sichtbare Unsichtbarkeit*. This paradox is the crucial point when thinking about the characteristics of script. Starting from this perspective, three levels of distinct visibility are mentioned. The first and basic level is linked to the materiality of writing and corresponds to Ehlich's observations. The act of applying a character on a suitable writing surface makes it become script. Accordingly, visibility is the fundamental condition for writing. The writing surface needs to comply with certain conditions: it demands a certain size in order to fit the characters on the surface, the ability of affixation and, as already mentioned, permanency. The latter condition is crucial for overcoming the cursoriness of spoken language (cf. Ehlich 2002, 96–97).

[1] 'Script was bound to visibility in an evident manner and thereby bound to materiality in a number of ways and forms' (my translation).

In addition, visibility at the basic level attracts the recipient's attention. A last point which has to be mentioned here is that visibility implies not only literal visibility, but also includes a form of haptic visibility such as embossed printing (cf. Strätling and Witte 2006, 7–8).

Apart from the dichotomy of visibility and invisibility, script features another opposition, between the two attributes *visibility* and *readability*. The visual perception of writing at the same time refers to its intended message. Defining reading as the mere cognitive perception of writing, the act of seeing script leads simultaneously to 'reading' script, even though the beholder may not grasp the actual content of the written text. This means that even illiterates are able to perform this form of 'reading', *i.e.* perceiving script, since it triggers the awareness of information encoded in the writing. Relating to the paradox of *sichtbare Unsichtbarkeit*, the writing for the beholder is visible, whereas the specific content – *i.e.* the message the writing bears – is invisible (cf. Strätling and Witte 2006, 8).

The third level of visibility refers to the actual reading process, *i.e.* the awareness that writing is encoded speech and the process of understanding the writing's content. The individual characters of a writing system transform into words, sentences and text and by that become invisible. The only thing that is now perceived is the content and the information that are encoded by the script itself. (cf. Strätling and Witte 2006, 9–10)

To sum up, writing can be characterised by its different features, which are materiality, visibility and readability, as well as by its central paradox of visible invisibility. These attributes are all dependent on each other and form various dichotomies. Script's materiality is closely connected to its visibility, whereas visibility and readability in the sense of cognitive perception of writing are also linked. This suggests that writing is not only meant for the literate part of society, but could also affect the illiterates in their perception of visible script. In the following, the Viking Age rune-stones are analysed focusing on the different levels of visibility to confirm this hypothesis. The following sections concentrating on various aspects of writing on rune-stones shall offer examples of those levels.

Carving and painting runes

Since runes are an epigraphic writing system, characters are chiselled or carved in metal, stone and wood. The only exception are manuscript runes, so called *Runica manuscripta*, which are usually scribbled with ink into the margins of manuscripts.[2] This tradition continued in Iceland until up to the beginning of the twentieth century. Regarding the Viking Age, runes are mainly carved in stone. From today's point of view, the inscriptions are often difficult to see and read. This is due to the fact that

[2] There exist one manuscript and one manuscript fragment written entirely in runes. The Old Danish *Codex runicus* (AM 28 8vo) dates to ca 1300 and contains the Scanian law texts. The fragment SKB A 120 contains a Marian Lamentation dating between 1400 and 1500. Both are individual attempts to use runes as bookscript (Bauer and Heizmann forthcoming).

most of the stone monuments, especially those which still stand in their original place, are weather-worn. This problem was already noted in the sixteenth century by Olaus Magnus in his *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* ('Description of the Northern Peoples'). In Book One, chapter 29 'On the military obelisks and upright stones of the Götar' he states, that '[a]lthough many letters at the bottom of the stones have been damaged and eroded by rain and mud because of their immense age, other similar records of achievements can be quite clearly read.' (Foote 1996, 66). Especially since the beginning of industrialisation, deterioration due to weathering has accelerated (cf. Åhfeldt 2002, 20–21). To preserve the monuments and to make them accessible to a wider audience, runes and decorative lines on the stones are painted, mostly in red. Otherwise 'they would become anonymous and lose their cultural heritage value, thereby becoming more vulnerable to damage' (Åhfeldt 2002, 22, see also Burström and Zachrisson 1996, 8).

In doing so, modern archaeologists seem to follow an ancient custom: both material and textual evidence shows that during the Viking Age, carved rune-stones were also painted. Traces of colours have been found on stones and some inscriptions directly mention the painting of runes. The Swedish rune-stone Överselö (Sö 206) in the province Södermanland dates to the Viking Age and its inscription reads:

> **: hir : skal : stenta : staena : þisiʀ : runum : ru-niʀ :·· raisti : k---auk : at syni : sina : auk : hielmlauk : at bryþr : sina ·**[3]
>
> *Her skal standa stæinaʀ þessiʀ, runum ru[ð]niʀ, ræisti G[uðl]aug at syni sina, ok Hialmlaug at brøðr sina.*[4]
>
> Here shall these stones stand, reddened with runes: Guðlaug raised (them) in memory of her sons; and Hjamlaug in memory of her brothers.

The phrase 'reddened with runes' refers explicitly to paint. Düwel (2008, 35) states ON *rjóða* 'to make something red' (cf. Old English *reodan* for 'make something bloody') is used in literary sources mostly in the context of blood rites. Two more inscriptions from Södermanland, the Gersta stone (Sö 347) and the Nybble stone (Sö 213), also offer epigraphic evidence for the painting of rune-stones (cf. Düwel 2008, 125; Jansson 1987, 154–156).

In addition, ON *fá*, originally meaning 'to paint', links painting and runic writing in the early language. The verb derives from Germ. **faihjan* (cf. de Vries 1977, 108) and is already used in the earliest runic inscriptions, even though more in the sense of 'write' (Jansson 1987, 156).[5]

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[3] Transliteration is a one-to-one correspondence between runic signs and roman letters. It does not imply the reproduction of a grammatical correct text, which is given with the transcription. The transliteration is rendered according to edition of the Danish Runic inscriptions (DR) and Swedish Runic inscriptions (Sö) respectively.

[4] The transcription of all runic inscription is according to *Samnordisk runtextdatabas* (rundata 2.5) and displays the normalisation to Old Scandinavian, meaning a normalised form of Runic Swedish and Runic Danish respectively.

[5] The verb can be found for example on the Vetteland stone (KJ60) or the Einang stone (KJ46).

Beside linguistic and epigraphic evidence, the literary sources also hint at the painting of runes. In the Eddaic poem *Hávamál* three stanzas, namely 80, 144 and 157, mention the painting of runes.[6] For these instances *fá* is used in the sense of 'painting' (cf. Düwel 2008, 125; Jansson 1987, 158; La Farge *et al.* 2019, 696). In stanza 144 the narrator, probably Odin, asks:

> *Veiztu hvé rísta skal?*
> *Veiztu hvé ráða skal?*
> *Veiztu hvé fá skal?*
>
> 'Do you know how one must carve them?
> Do you know how one must construe them?
> Do you know how one must tint them?'
>
> (Dronke 2011, 31).

Besides *Hávamál*, the phrase of 'reddened runes' also appears in another Eddaic poem, *i.e.* in stanza 22 of *Guðrúnarkviða ǫnnur*. Yet, as Jansson (1987, 158) clearly points out, 'these literary references to the painting of runes have, of course, their own special interest, but they cannot supply any detailed information about the appearance of monumental stones when fresh from the hands of the rune-master.'

In 1953/54 an archaeological find was made in Köping church on the Swedish island Öland. Around 60 fragments of Viking Age rune-stones were found, which retained colour both in the carved lines of the inscriptions as well as on the intervening surface. Four main colours were identified: black, red, blue and brown. The black paint consisted of soot, while the red was lead-based (cf. Jansson 1954, 86). Additionally, in Denmark two coloured rune-stone inscriptions were found. This shows that the painting of runes was not a solely Swedish practice. During the restoration of a church in Bjerring (Jutland, Denmark) a rune-stone (MJy 10) was found, placed facedown to be used as a base for the Roman columned doorway. On the stone's back a carved mask was discovered, which was painted in red lead (cf. Imer 2016, 71–72).

The question whether all rune-stones were painted still remains unanswered. An overall analysis of possible paint residues on Viking Age rune-stones has not been carried out yet. And it is uncertain if there are traces detectable with today's technical methods on those stones which have been exposed to weathering and were painted over many times with modern paint. Nevertheless, this shows that runic inscriptions were in some cases made visible in two ways, that is to say, by carving them into stone and by additionally applying paint on them.

These two methods differ in their degree of permanence. The carving process represents a certain form of eternity. A carved inscription needs careful planning and chiselling work in order to avoid mistakes. The inscription is literarily 'set in

[6] *Havamál* is documented in the main manuscript for the Poetic Edda *Codex Regius* (GkS 2365 4to) from ca 1270. It teaches about wisdom, the way of living and proper behaviour. The narrator in these poems is Odin himself, but this is first mentioned in stanza 111 (cf. La Farge *et al.* 2019).

stone' and modifications are very difficult to implement. Evidence shows, however, that not every inscription was carefully planned beforehand. The handling of the writing space was in many cases not determined in advance. For instance, there is a considerable amount of space left at the end of the Langå stone 3 inscription (DR 85). Other cases show the opposite, so that remaining words of the inscription had to be added somewhere else or the space between the runes becomes narrower, as for example on Skårby 1 stone (DR 280) in Scania (Jacobsen and Moltke 1942, col. 820).

Simple carving mistakes can also occur. Some of the runes have similar forms that can be mixed up by the carver. The **ɑ**- and the **n**-rune differ only in the slope of the twig: While the **ɑ**-rune consists of a vertical stave with the twig sloping up (ᚬ), the **n**-rune has the twig sloping down (ᚾ). The Skivarp stone inscription (DR 270) displays such a carving mistake, where Old Danish *sten* 'stone' was written with an **ɑ**-rune instead of an **n**-rune at the end. But there is a simple solution as Jansson (Jansson 1987, 159) suggests:

> By painting in the runes, the writer also had the opportunity to correct errors he might have made with his chisel. If, for example, he had contrived to cut a ᚬ-rune instead of a ᚾ-rune, he would, after noticing his mistake, cut the correct diagonal stroke over the faulty letter. The result would be a **h**-rune (ᚼ), but when he came to paint the inscription, he would pick out only the correct form of the rune and his error had vanished.

In this case the paint would have made the permanence of the carving mistake – at least temporarily – invisible. Of course, this is purely speculative since there exists no evidence. Those stone inscriptions which contain carving mistakes are not painted (any longer) and among the coloured stones no carving mistakes could be identified.

The question that remains unanswered is in what way the colouring of runes occurred. There is little to no evidence of the practices involved, whether it was something ritual-related and included a ceremony, or if it was mainly pragmatic. The same question applies to how the runes themselves were carved into the stone.

Nevertheless, since there are painted rune-stone monuments, one has to think about the effect these inscriptions had on people. Jansson (1987, 153) assumes, that 'the use of colour must have meant a remarkable addition to the beauty and artistic effect of the monuments'. This means that rune-stones must have been visible from a great distance. This proposition can be supported also by the position rune-stones had in the landscape. As Stille (2015, 138) puts it, the placing of rune-stones is the key to understanding the purpose of a rune-stone and to understanding the context in which the inscription itself was produced. The problem is that a lot of rune-stones do not stand in the location where they were originally erected. Some were used as church building material and some are lost altogether (cf. Stille 2015; Klos 2009). Another difficulty is the archaeological reconstruction of the Viking Age landscape. Nevertheless, several studies have shown that rune-stones appear to 'mark a manor or the boundaries of a manor or perhaps larger administrative areas. They point to roads and bridges built or maintained by persons with resources' (Stille 2015, 149).

This implies that rune-stones were not erected in hiding, but openly and in exposed terrain, where they were visible for everybody. Subsequently, the runic script was also visible for everybody.

The materiality of runic script was therefore twofold. They have a permanence, stemming from the carving of rune characters into stone. The writing is unchangeable and obtains a suggestion of eternity. Their other aspect is the painting of the carved runes. Painting is less permanent, but makes the inscription more visible to the beholder and attracts attention.

'Reading' the runes

The following section deals with the 'readability' of runic writing. As mentioned above, 'reading' is understood in the sense of the cognitive perception of writing. It implies the awareness about one of the main functions of script: writing encodes content. On this level the individual runic characters are still to the fore, meaning they are visible, while the content of the inscription, *i.e.* the text encoded in writing, is hidden and invisible. This is the level of script's *Sichtbarkeit*, which is crucial for the illiterate part of Viking Age society.

Usually the inscriptions are carved on the broad side of the stone. In some cases, the Viking Age rune-stones in Denmark show different forms of how the inscription is arranged on the stones. The edition of Danish rune-stones *Danmarks runeindskrifter* (=DR) distinguishes between three designs (cf. Jacobsen and Moltke 1942, col. 820–825). The most common layout for Danish rune-stones according to DR (cf. col. 821) is *parallelordning*, *i.e.* the parallel design. The runes are arranged in vertical lines and are read either top down or in wavy lines. Among the parallel design two main types can be distinguished. This design is typical for inscriptions which were created before Christianisation set in but it can be found on stones throughout all periods. The benefit of this design is that the whole writing space is usable since it fits the largest number of signs. According to Imer (2016, 64), this design makes a rune-stone monument more monumental. Evolving from the parallel design is *konturordning* – contouring design – which can be found on the majority of Viking Age rune-stones. The inscription follows the shape of the stone. In most cases the text starts in the lower left corner. Sometimes the inscription is too long to fit the stone's shape, so that additional text sequences are added horizontally either at the bottom of the stone or inside of the curve. Another design, which is rather uncommon in Denmark, is the *slangeordning*. The text is written inside a carved body of a winding snake. This kind of design is characteristic for Swedish rune-stones, wherefore stones with snake design point to Swedish rune carving influence (cf. Jacobsen and Moltke 1942, col. 821).

Bianchi's analysis of rune-stones in the Swedish landscapes of Uppland and Södermanland shows that the ways in which the runic characters are arranged on the writing surface have semiotic meaning. By comparing the inscription's text with the ornamental band, he states two things: 1) in most cases the runic inscription starts

in the lower left part of the surface and 2) there is a relation between the visual and syntactic structure of the runic text (cf. Bianchi 2010, 52–115). This shows that the inscriptions were not applied in a random way, but rather with a specific aim. Some of the late Viking Age rune-stones contain so called non-lexical inscriptions or nonsense inscriptions. Stones associated with these kinds of inscriptions contain all features of a typical rune-stone except for the fact that the runes or rune-like signs carved on it do not resemble any known words or text (cf. Bianchi 2010, 165).

> Kategorin otolkningsbara inskrifter utgörs av dem som aldrig har varit avsedda att uttrycka ett språkligt meddelande och därför är icke-lexikala. Till dessa hör skrivövningar, nedteckningar av ramsor eller icke-lexikala sånger samt inskrifts-eller skriftimitationer. (Bianchi 2010, 168)[7]

Some scholars have interpreted the non-lexical inscriptions simply as a product of illiterate rune masters or an imitation of Viking Age rune-stones (cf. Musset 1965, 253–254; Meijer 1997, 104). According to Bianchi those explanations are too simple for two reasons. Firstly, the number of rune-stones with nonsense inscriptions are high enough to see them as more than 'accidents' or exceptional case of one illiterate rune carver. Secondly, some of the inscriptions date to the same time period as the 'regular' rune-stones. Taking a closer look, Bianchi states (2010, 221–222) that the rune-stones with nonsense inscriptions connect fully to the runic tradition apart from the verbal component. This is strengthened by the fact that runes in the inscriptions are used in the same way as in semantically meaningful inscriptions: they start in the lower left corner. But there are also some features that differ from 'regular' rune-stones. Some typical features, like the carving of crosses, are overrepresented in non-lexical inscriptions. Additionally, the ornamental features are carved partly in lower quality. Despite this, Bianchi (2010, 228) concludes that those stones still function as a semiotic resource and that a lexical and meaning producing inscription was not a requirement for interacting with the medium rune-stone. It was however important that there was writing on the monument even if it did not convey content. This fact suggests that rune-stones were not just for the elite of Swedish Viking Age society, but also for the illiterate part.

Conversely, rune-stones with non-lexical inscriptions are very rare in Viking Age Denmark. The nonsense inscriptions Bianchi analysed are mostly a Swedish and late Viking Age phenomenon. So, it is a bit challenging to compare the Late Viking Age Swedish rune tradition with the Viking Age Danish tradition, the latter being older and also different in their ornamental feature. The question arises why the situation in Denmark was different and whether runic monuments were meant mainly for the literate part of society. Assuming Danish rune-stones had informational value for the illiterate as well, I will take a closer look at stones which bear writing on several

[7] 'The category of non-interpretable inscriptions is made up of those which were never meant to express a verbal message and are therefore non-lexical. These include writing exercises, writing down of rants or non-lexical songs and imitation of inscriptions or writing' (my translation).

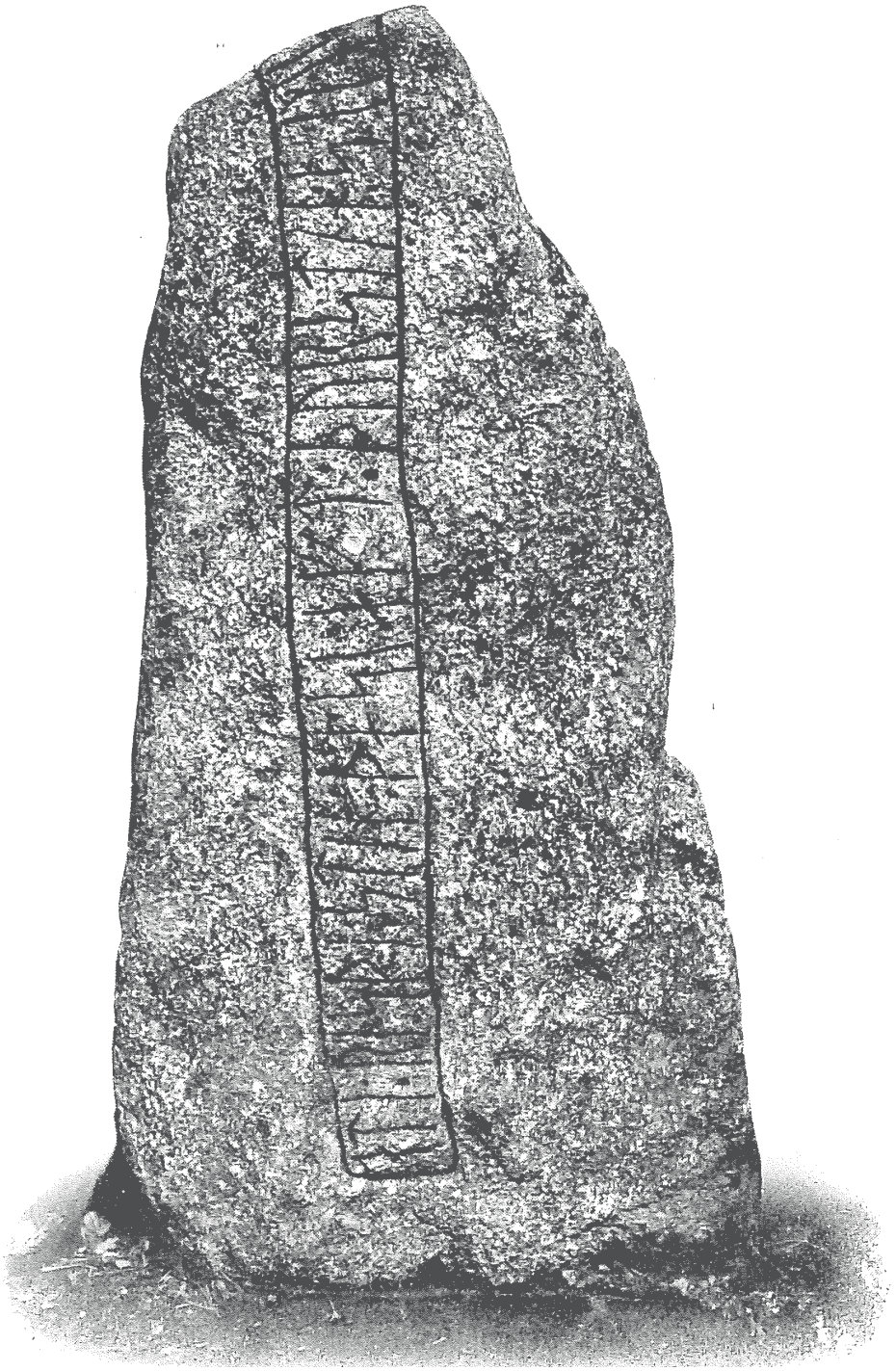

Fig. 7.1. Fuglie 2 (DR 260), side A (Jacobsen and Moltke 1937, 240).

sides, especially on the top side of the stone. The reason behind that lies in the assumption that even though part of the inscription is not readable at first (or at all), the monument still functions as a rune-stone.

Fuglie 2 (DR 260) was found in 1876 by Ludvig Wimmer. The stone's height is around 121 cm and the runes are carved in a single line on the long side and they extend to the top (cf. DR col. 314). Because of its relative short height, the observer is able to see all runes, but not all at once (Figs 7.1 and 7.2). Unfortunately, the stone was not found at its original location. It was assumed by Christoffersson that it was originally placed on top of a Bronze Age burial mound (cf. Jacobsen and Moltke 1942, col. 314). Jacobsen and Moltke (1942, col. 314) argue that it is questionable whether a stone would have been carried for several hundred metres to be put into a stone wall, where it was found. They propose that the original location is unknown. To place a rune-stone on top of burial mounds was not uncommon during the Viking Age. Fuglie 1 (DR 259), which is one of the few rune-stones outside Bornholm with Christian elements is one of them. The stone was set by Ønd in memory of his brother Øde, who died on the island of Gotland. According to Moltke, the burial mound might have served as a cenotaph for the dead brother (cf. Moltke 1985, 240–241).

Fig. 7.2. Fuglie 2 (DR 260), top (Jacobsen and Moltke 1937, 240).

In addition to Fuglie 2, there are other Danish rune-stones where the inscription extends on to the top of the stone. The two stones Haithabu 2 and 4 (DR 2 respectively DR 4) were found near the Viking Age trading centre Haithabu and both bear very similar inscriptions. They are raised in memory of King Sigtryggr by his mother Ásfriðr. Haithabu 2 is partially carved with Swedish runes, whereas Haithabu 4 used Danish runes. The layout of Haithabu 2 is especially interesting. The stone is over 2 metres high and the inscription extends over the broad side to the top and the narrow side (Figs 7.3 and 7.4).

§A_1: **᛫asfriþr ᛫ karþi ᛫ kum**
Top + §B_1: **bl ᛫ þaun**
§A_2: **᛫aft ᛫ siktriku ᛫**
§B_2: **sun [᛫] (s)in ᛫ ᛫ui ᛫ knubu**

Asfriþr gærþi kumbl þøn æft Sigtryg, sun sin ok Gnupu.

Ásfriðr made this monument in memory of Sigtryggr, her son and Gnupa's.

Fig. 7.3. Haithabu 2 (DR 2), side A and B (Jacobsen and Moltke 1937, 4).

The broad A-side is laid out in parallel design. The inscription starts at the bottom at the left line ($§A_1$), but then extends over to the top side to the B-side ($§B_1$). The second part starts at the bottom right line ($§A_2$) and the third can be found at the B-side and begins at the bottom ($§B_2$) (cf. *Danske Runeinskrifter*).[8] As a result of this layout, Imer (2016, 156) points out that the first line of the inscription, which contains the name of the sponsor *Ásfriðr,* is placed in the middle of the entire inscription. But one has to note that it is almost impossible to read the content of the inscription. Due to its height and the fact that part of the text is carved on top of the stone, it is difficult to see every character. It is doubtful that the whole text was meant to be read. One could assume that rather the simple fact that something was carved into the stone was enough, especially since the runes carved on top of the stone are of lower information value. The demonstrative pronoun *þaun* 'this' and the two last letters of the

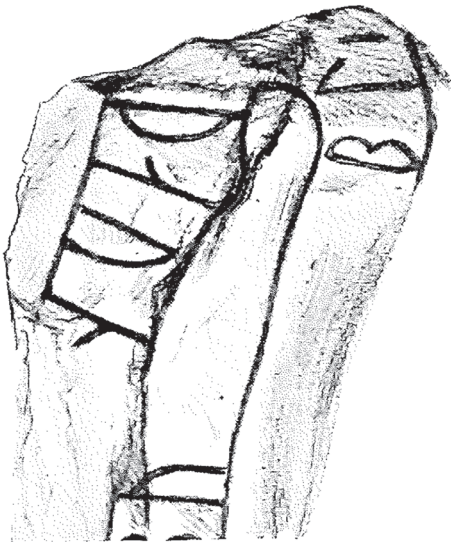

Fig. 7.4. Haithabu 2 (DR 2), top (Jacobsen and Moltke 1937, 5).

[8] http://runer.ku.dk/VisGenstand.aspx?Titel=Haddeby-sten_2 (consulted 10 December 2019).

word *kumbl* 'monument' are from minor importance compared, for instance, with the name of the sponsor.

A last example of rune-stones which contain their inscriptions on several sides is Lund 1 (DR 314), which was found in the ruins of an old monastery in Lund, Scania where it was probably used as construction material. It is almost 4 metres in height and thus the tallest preserved rune-stone in Denmark (cf. *Danske Runeinskrifter*).[9] The inscription is placed on two opposing sides, while on the remaining two sides images are carved into the stone. One side shows a mask and the other a mask in between two animals (cf. DR, cl. 362).

§A: + **þu(r)[kisl : sun : i]sgis : biarnaʀ :sunaʀ : risþi : sti[ną : þisi] : (uf)tiʀ : bruþr** +
§B: **: + siną : baþa : ulaf : uk : utar : lanmitr : kuþa** +

Þorgisl, sun Æsgis Biarnaʀ sonaʀ, resþi stena þæssi æftiʀ brøþr sina baþa Olaf ok Ottar, landmænnr goþa.

Þorgísl, son of Ásgeirr Bjǫrn's son, raised these stones in memory of both of his brothers, Ólafr and Óttarr, good landholders.

The reading direction on both sides is upward. While the characters on the A side reach almost the top of the stone, the B side and the side with the two animals are empty in the uppert third part. Similar to the Haithabu 2 stone, parts of the inscription are not easy to read because of its great height (Figs 7.5 and 7.6).

The 'reader-unfriendly' way the runes are arranged on the monuments, *i.e.* on top of the stone, up at a great height, on different sites or in wavy lines might lead to the assumption that actually reading the inscription was not particularly important. Especially when having the nonsense inscriptions in mind, it could be postulated that the importance of writing being on the stone was greater than its content. On this level of *Sichtbarkeit* the beholder acknowledges writing, *i.e.* in the sense of individual characters, but the actual content of writing in this scenario is of lesser importance. This means that both illiterate and literate people are able to interact with writing and that the rune-stone monument addresses everybody.

Fig. 7.5. Lund 1 (DR 314), side A (Jacobsen and Moltke 1937, 286).

[9] http://runer.ku.dk/VisGenstand.aspx?Titel=Lund-sten_1 (consulted 10 December 2019).

Fig. 7.6. Lund 1 (DR 314), side B and C (Jacobsen and Moltke 1937, 287).

Grasping the meaning

We have established in the previous section that the content – to some extent and for some part of society – did not play a very important role for the function of rune-stone monuments. But there is the undeniable fact that the inscriptions of these monuments do carry concrete information and content, otherwise there would be only nonsense inscriptions. In this section we are going to show that also the content of rune-stone inscriptions mattered. On the third level of *Sichtbarkeit* of writing, the writing – meaning the singular characters – becomes invisible, while the content comes to the fore.

First, to the text of an inscription itself. As already mentioned, the majority follow the typical memorial formula 'N.N. raised this stone (or monument) in memory of X.Y.', and thus reveal the relationship between the commemorator and the commemorated (cf. Sawyer 2000, 146). There can be additions, of course; for example how or where the respective person died. This information is only available for those who are able to read and understand the runes. That does not mean that the illiterate part of society did not know at all what was written on the stones. The formulaic style suggests that the inscribed content or the formula itself respectively was known, but the actual names of the sponsor and the commemorated person were not available to the illiterate. There is no evidence on whether the content of rune-stones was transmitted in another way than writing. One possibility could be that inscriptions were read aloud for the public so that everybody was able to grasp the content. Yet, the relatively unspectacular and pragmatic content does not invite reading aloud, and we do not even know who could have been in charge of it. Since the sources do not tell anything about how and if the texts were read aloud, this is all purely speculative.

The fact that the inscription's content was of importance can be witnessed on the stones themselves. Erecting a rune-stone was a sign of both social and economic status. Especially those who sponsored multiple monuments belonged to the most important families (cf. Sawyer 2000, 92–93). The person who raised the stone connects themselves to the person who was commemorated on the stone. Imer (2016, 68) notes that there are several cases that the

beginning of a rune-stone text is placed in the middle of the stone. In this way, the sponsor was highlighted, by setting him in the centre of the events in the literal sense (cf. Imer 2016, 68). The already mentioned Haithabu 2 stone is one example. The name of queen *Ásfriðr* who acts as sponsor is placed in the middle of the inscription, while the rest of the text flows around it. Beside *Ásfriðr,* who has raised two rune-stones in honour of her late husband, there are several other sponsors of elite status in Denmark. One of them is Tue, who sponsored four stones, Toke the smith, Esbern, and Fader (cf. Sawyer 2000, 93). Another example is the Glavendrup stone (DR 209), which is carved on three sides. The stone contains the longest inscription of the Danish rune corpus with 210 runes (Johnsen and Moltke 1942, col. 251). It was found at its original location as part of a ship-setting (Moltke 1985, 524). The inscription says:

§A: **raknhiltr ᛫ sa|ti ᛫ stainþ̣nsi ᛫ auft | ala ᛫ sauluakuþa | uial(i)þshaiþuiarþanþia | kn**
§B: **ala ᛫ suniʀ ᛫ karþu | kubl ᛫ þausi ᛫ aft ᛫ faþur | sin ᛫ auk ᛫ hn̥s ᛫ kuna ᛫ auft | uar ᛫ sin ᛫ in ᛫ suti ᛫ raist ᛫ run|aʀ ᛫ þasi ᛫ aft ᛫ trutin ᛫ sin | þur ᛫ uiki ᛫ þasi ᛫ runaʀ**
§C: **at ᛫ rita ᛫ sa ᛫ uarþi ᛫ is ᛫ stain þansi | ailti ᛫ iþa aft ᛫ n̥n̥n ᛫ traki**

Ragnhildr satti sten þænsi æft Alla Solwa, goþa wea, liþs heþwærþan þægn. Alla synir gærþu kumbl þøsi æft faþur sin ok hans kona æft wær sin. Æn Soti rest runaʀ þæssi æft drottin sin. Þor wigi þæssi runaʀ. At ræta(?) sa wærþi æs sten þænsi ælti(?) æþa æft annan dragi.

Ragnhildr placed this stone in memory of Alli the Pale, priest of the sanctuary, honourable þegn of the retinue. Alli's sons made this monument in memory of their father, and his wife in memory of her husband. And Sóti carved these runes in memory of his lord. Þórr hallow these runes. A warlock be he who damages(?) this stone or drags it (to stand) in memory of another.

The text of the inscription gives a lot of information. First, it tells about a woman named Ragnhildr who commissioned the stones and according to Moltke (1985, 224) belonged to a mighty family. Her name appears on another rune-stone, the Tryggevælde stone (DR 230) on which she is described as the sister of a man named Ulf and the wife of the eloquent Gunnulfr of Zealand, before she is later married to Alli the Pale, who is described as honourable. Additionally, the carver of the stone, Sóti, is both mentioned on Tryggevælde and Glavendrup stone. Both inscriptions end with a curse to protect the stones of any damages. The curse is preceded by a 'Thor hallow' formula, which puts the monument in a pagan context (cf. Moltke 1985, 224–228).

That Ragnhildr was an important person is accentuated by the fact that her name is carved into the centre of the inscription at Glavendrup stone (Fig. 7.7). This emphasises the fact that she was the one who raised the stone. The rest of the inscription is carved around her name. To emphasise even more this fact, the runes spelling out *Ragnhildr* are bigger than the rest of the runes and are spaced. With the help of the text's layout the content was made clear to the reader. Imer (2016, 68) even assumes that the name was painted in a different colour. In that way nobody was able to escape the information of who commemorated the monument.

Painting runes was therefore not only means to attract attention, but it also helped to grasp the content of the inscription. In some cases, single words were probably painted in different colours so that it was easier to decipher the inscription (cf. Jansson 1987, 159–160). As Jansson (1987, 153) puts it:

> The use of colour must have meant a remarkable addition to the beauty and artistic effect of the monuments. Painting also served a practical purpose, for without colour the runes themselves would in the most cases have been all too difficult to pick out and the often intricate ornament difficult to follow.

Fig. 7.7. Glavendrup (DR 209), side A (Jacobsen and Moltke 1937, 185).

Finally, there would be the fact that most of the inscriptions contain features like word division. They appear in forms like colons, three vertical points or crosses. In my opinion this points to the assumption, that the inscription was meant to be read, and the content written on the stone was important.

Conclusion

By using Strätling and Witte's concept of the *Sichtbarkeit* of writing, and of three different levels of visibility, the following conclusions can be drawn about the visibility of the runic script and how rune-stone monuments were perceived in Viking Age society.

At a basic level, there is a form of double visibility of runic writing. On the one hand, characters are carved into stone but are additionally made visible by colouring. The carving process granted the runes a permanence. Once carved, they can only be removed with considerable effort. The painted runes, on the other hand, can help mask carving mistakes, although they are not as permanent as their carved counterparts. Weathering can wash them out and they probably needed to be renewed every now and then. Nevertheless, a painted rune-stone attracts attention and by placing them in exposed position they were visible to everybody.

The second level sees writing just as signs on a writing surface, while the content of the inscription stays hidden. 'Reading' means only the visual perception of writing

and the recognition that script is present. The ways runes can be laid out on the writing surface are manifold. The inscription can either follow the shape of the stone, be applied in vertical lines or the more Swedish design in the form of a snake that winds across the stone. This is the level which applies foremost to the illiterate part of society, because even though they did not know what was written on the stone, they were aware of its importance. That the rune-stone was a medium also for the illiterate is emphasised by the fact that especially in Sweden nonsense inscription are not an uncommon phenomenon, as shown by Bianchi.

The last level deals with the inscription's content, which is written in a formulaic style. The text was probably only accessible to a small part of society, the 'literate' elite, but nevertheless it mattered. It was an expression of demonstrating power and commemorating oneself and one's kin. The layout helped in this aim, for instance by using different colours for different words, using word division and highlighting the sponsor's name by putting it in the centre of the inscription, the content is made even more visible.

To conclude, rune-stones and runic writing were able to address all social levels of Viking Age society, from the illiterate up to the rune carver and the elite. As Bianchi has stated, runes are part of a visual composition; they are multimodal and convey meaning by their visual and linguistic features. The rune-stones and their level of *Sichtbarkeit* had their specific importance for each social group – meaning the literate and illiterate parts of society. The rune-stone could be seen – to say it in modern words – as a democratic medium. It was something for 'everybody'. Even though the runes could not be read by every person, nevertheless everybody could come in contact with them. Rune-stones were not only a status symbol for the elite. The most important aspect was perceiving the script. Carving runes into stone in a certain way with a certain formula made a rune-stone a rune-stone. Only then can it take its place in Viking Age society and become a feature where people could interact with each other and the object.