

Defining Contexts

Lisbeth M. Imer

Contextual runology is often regarded as an archaeological discipline, *i.e.* researchers working with the external factors of a runic inscription in the quest for gathering information on the dating and the function of writing where – so to say – the outer problems of an inscription is dealt with. Contexts, however, are also used on different levels when dealing with the initial reading and interpretation of finds. This lecture takes its point of departure in defining the contexts that runologists use when dealing with different aspects of runological research. The definitions will be accompanied by various examples and illustrations.

Two types of context

Contexts can be divided into two types; external and internal contexts. Internal contexts have an immediate connection to the reading of the inscription, whereas external contexts connect to the interpretation of the inscription. Sometimes, though, there is a mix-up of these two overall types of context, *e.g.* in cases where the inscription is so damaged that it cannot be fully read, unless we compare it with other inscriptions of the same type. In other cases the external context or the comparing with other objects can help us recognize an inscription *as* an inscription, *e.g.* when the rune carver has been so poor that the inscription he (or she) has written is full of flaws and errors.

Internal contexts: the reading of inscriptions

The object, on which the inscription is placed, should be regarded as a context of its own, as the construction or fragmentation of the object has great importance for the outline of the runes, and for the reading of the inscription.

For example, on the shield handle from Illerup it seems that the **o**-rune in the **nipijo**-inscription is an **o**-rune of half height, whenever one takes a quick glance on a photo of the object. But it is important to bear in mind that the construction of the handle has impeded the carving of the runes, as the rosette has been placed on the handle before the runes have been carved.

The consequence of wear when reading an inscription is obvious regarding the fibula from Gårdlösa, where the upper strokes of the runes have been worn so much that they are barely visible. This has for many years led to the conclusion that the last rune, now visible as ʝ, was interpreted as ʝ, the rune carver having forgotten the left stroke. But a thorough investigation of the piece showed that the top of the pin-casing was worn so much that the top of the runes had vanished or were only slightly visible. This led to the conclusion that the last rune was not to be read ʝ and then interpreted ʝ, but instead to be read Ʀ, the top stroke worn off by the use of the fibula. Of course, this new reading has an impact on the interpretation of the whole inscription, which will be explained in the lecture.

External contexts: the tradition of writing

It is obvious that external contexts, like the date of the objects, the provenance etc., are important to the interpretation of the inscriptions, as are the position of the inscription and the material/object, on which the inscription is placed. However, when working with the tradition of writing, all these contexts must be placed in a frame of the prehistoric society, in which the runic inscriptions were used. Contextual features must be analyzed and interpreted on the basis of the cultural society in which the inscriptions are written and used. Cultural shifts may lead to shifts in the use of writing, or it may lead to a different use of materials or objects. Writing was part of the prehistoric (or historic) society, and must be analyzed as an intertwined part of it, if we are not to end up with more or less inaccurate or detached interpretations of the traditions of writing.