

What Is a *Kona*?

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What is a *kona*? Unlike other ambiguous words from Old Norse, such as *ergi*, for which we cannot seem to find a satisfactory substitute in our modern languages that fully covers the concept, the answer to this question seems to be simple: *kona* means ‘woman’. Although, Cleasby and Vigfusson are slightly more precise and translate *kona* first as ‘woman’ (I) and second as ‘wife’ (II) but add to their dictionary entry that ‘the word is now almost disused in sense I, *kvennmaðr* being the common word, whereas in sense II, it is household word’. (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957: s.v. *kona*)¹. What a ‘household word’ actually entails, I am not quite sure. Pointing to the fact that there are many different types of women, Cleasby and Vigfusson’s definition of *kona* is accompanied by a large number of attested compounds where the element that modifies *kona* narrows or specifies its meaning. However, when taking a closer look at the women that *kona* refers to in its various texts, the differences are noticeable. In an inscription from Hassmyra, Sweden (Vs 24) *kona* refers to ‘the good housewife’ Oðindisa, whereas in an inscription from Jelling, Denmark (DR 41), *kona* refers to the queen Þyrvé who is further acknowledged as *DanmarkaR bot*, ‘Denmark’s salvation’. Indeed, the fact that they are female is likely to be the only aspect these two women would have had in common. To make it more complicated, in a poetic context *kona* can even refer to a man: when the god Þór, the epitome of masculinity in the Nordic pantheon, dresses up as a woman to retrieve his hammer from the giant Thrym in the eddic poem *Þrymskviða*, he sits down for the food and devours *krasir allar þær er konur skyldu*, ‘all the dainties served to the women’ (von See 1997: 561-62).

The aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of the concept and meaning behind the word *kona* in the context of Scandinavian runic inscriptions from Scandinavia and the British Isles. The choice to study the word in the context of runic inscriptions only might come across as limited, and deserves an explanation. Firstly, whereas our traditional understanding of Old Norse, including our understanding of the meaning of *kona*, is primarily based on Icelandic literature from the (Christian) medieval period, the runic inscriptions are the only contemporary literary and linguistic source from the Viking Age and thus present a unique and invaluable corpus. Secondly, the purpose, function and accessibility of runic texts is very different from that of manuscript traditions. Manuscripts, prepared on expensive parchment using the roman alphabet in order to write long pieces of text, were probably only accessible to a lucky few with access to a scriptorium or library. Runic texts, on the other hand, are generally carved or engraved on runestones and portable objects made of wood, bone or precious metals. Due to the nature of the script, the texts are often short. Unlike manuscripts, the runestones are very public in the sense that they are often erected in public spaces, near road sides or bridges for example. The inscriptions on portable objects differ from runestones in that they tend to be of a more personal and intimate nature which would have limited the size of its readers. However, the inscribed objects range from engraved bones and spindlewhirls to elaborately embellished bronze brooches, which shows that, unlike manuscripts, the use of runic script is not limited to a certain milieu or status in society. Thus, runic script is widely disseminated in a variety of material, textual and social contexts which the author of these texts has used to bring across the intended purpose, function and meaning of the message to his or her audience.

In order to understand the ‘intended purpose, function and meaning’ of a text, the reader should not only be able to read the script and understand the language in which it is expressed, he or she will also need to be fully aware of the socio-cultural implications behind the message. As Christine Fell pointed out in her essay on Anglo-Saxon England as a three-script society, the reader of such a message or text will need a “degree of sophistication” (Fell 1994: 125). To come back to the word *kona*: it is one thing to be able to transliterate the runes and translate it to ‘woman’ or ‘wife’: it is quite another to be fully aware of what the Viking Age concept of *kona* entails. How does a runic context affect the meaning of *kona*? Is the meaning of *kona* in one text transferable to other types of texts, and can we see a development in its

¹ The *English Dictionary of Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions* also provides the translation of ‘woman’, ‘wife’.

use over time? In the discussion below, I attempt to answer these questions by analysing *kona* in lexical semantic framework.

Lexical semantics: ‘word’, ‘context’ and ‘meaning’

Studying a word in its context is the key to identifying the meaning of that word. In a recent word study of Viking Age vocabulary for ships and men, Judith Jesch points out that ‘words mean in context and it is through the study of words in their contexts that we can plot the nuances and changes of meaning that represent changes in both material culture and in the ideology and social structures of the Viking Age’ (Jesch 2001: 8-9). ‘Word’, ‘context’ and ‘meaning’ are, however, very hazy terms and need further explaining. ‘Meaning’ is difficult to define: semantic linguists have not yet reached a consensus on the meaning of ‘meaning’, but attempt to construct meaning in terms of lexical units (Lipka 1990: 130-32). A lexical unit is combination of one word and one ‘sense’, or definition. By constructing lexical units it is possible to outline the meaning of a word and plot its semantic development over a period of time. The term ‘context’ is more tangible. Jesch defines context as “the other words with which [a word] makes up a text” together with “the wider context in which a text is produced” (Jesch 2001: 9). This distinction between the textual and linguistic environment of a word on the one hand and the socio-cultural environment that gives the word its lexical value on the other is also recognised by the general principles of lexical semantics.

Although I do not wish to impose on the reader a full methodology of lexical semantics, it is worth explaining the key principles and terminology as I have used these to analyse the meaning of *kona*. Lexical semantics studies the meaning (or ‘sense’) of lexical items, which are all part of the enormous collection of vocabulary called the lexicon. A lexical item is interdependently related to other lexical items in the lexicon (Lipka 1990: 4) which means that words are linked to other words on the basis of their meaning. A lexical item is a variation of a lexeme, which can roughly be defined as an ‘abstract linguistic unit’ that represents the kernel of a certain concept (Lipka 1990: 58). These lexical items can be studied from a language immanent approach on the one hand and a referential or denotational approach on the other (Lipka 1990: 47-48). A language immanent approach aims to uncover the distinctive lexical features of a word by (a) looking at how the word is related to other words in the lexicons (for example, synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms etc.) and (b) looking at those words with which it forms a syntagma, a combination of lexical items that follow or precede each other, for example a sentence. These are called paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations (Lipka 1990: 12). Analysing the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations of lexical items can reveal certain distinctive lexical features of words. The referential or denotational approach studies the lexical item and its relation to the extra-linguistic object it refers to, i.e. the real-life concept that the word refers to (Lyons 1995: 58).

The senses of *kona* in a runic context

There are approximately seventy-four Scandinavian runic inscriptions that contain the word *kona*.² Of the seventy-four inscriptions, eight are from the British Isles, ten are from Norway and six are from Denmark. There is one attestation of the word in an inscription from Iceland. Given the relatively large number of Viking Age runic inscriptions in Sweden, it is not surprising that the bulk of the attestations of *kona* are from there. Its spread is representative of the dissemination of runic inscriptions throughout Scandinavian and the Viking diaspora. In approximately forty-seven (about 2/3) of these inscriptions *kona* forms part of the common formula used in runic memorials, ‘X raised this Y in memory of Z’. In forty-five of these memorial inscriptions, *kona* is in a some form of possessive relationship with a male subject in the syntagma. Often, this male subject is the commissioner of the inscription who commemorates his wife: in these cases the lexical item *kona* is always in a direct syntagmatic relation with the possessive pronoun *sín*. For example, in an inscription from Forkarby, Uppland (U 1079) the male subject *Fasti* had the stone raised in memory of *konu sina* ‘his wife’:

² All signatures, numbers, examples and translations of the runic inscriptions are from the *Sammordisk Runtex-databas*, <http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>, (version: 2008).

[fas](t)i * lit * h(r)[ita * stan eftiR *] (f)astuiu * kun[u si]nh

Fasti let retta stein æftiR Fastviu, kunu sina

Similarly, in an inscription from Andreas, Isle of Man (BR;Olsen 183), Sandolf the Black raised the cross in memory Arinbjorg, *konu sina* ‘his wife’.

**sont:ulf : hin : suarti : raisti : krus : þona : aftir : arin:biaurk * kuinu : sina (u) [*] k : au [*]:
(o)ks/(b)ks**

Sandulfr hinn Svarti reisti kross þenna eptir Arinbjörgu, konu sína.

Alternatively, it was also possible for a woman to commission the inscription and announce herself as X’s *kona*. An example is an inscription from Jelling, Denmark (DR 55) where ‘Tófa, Mistivir’s daughter, wife of Harald the good, Gormr’s son, had the monument made in memory of her mother’:

**tufa ' IRt ' kaurua ' kubl mistiuis ' tutiR ' uft ' muþur sina ' kuna harats ' hins ' kuþa ' kurms
sunaR**

Tófa lét gera kuml, Mistivís dóttir, ept móður sína, kona Haralds hins Góða, Gorms sonar

In this example, Tófa connects herself to her husband by stating she is *kona Haralds*.

This memorial formula, limited to an epigraphical context, is an important type of syntagma: the syntagmatic relations between the lexical items are decisive not only for the choice of words, but also their interpretation. *Kona*’s use in the context of a formulaic runic inscription and its subsequent connection to the possessive pronoun or genitive narrows the sense of the word to ‘wife’. This is further supported by an inscription from Kirk Michael, Isle of Man (BR Olsen 215):

**mal:lymkun : raisti : krus : þena : efter : mal:mury : fustra : si(n)e : tot(o)r : tufkals : kona :
is : aþisl : ati + ...etra : es : laifa : fustra : kuþan : þan : son : ilan +**

*<mallymkun> reisti kross þenna eptir <malmury> fóstura sín, dóttir Dufgals, kona er Aðísl átti.
Beta er leifa fóstura góðan en son illan*

The inscription is carved in very irregular Old Norse, but most scholars agree on the translation ‘Mallymkun raised this cross in memory of his foster-mother Malmury, Dubgaill’s daughter, the wife whom Aðísl married. It is better to leave a good foster-son than a bad son’, thus accepting a few discrepancies in the grammar (Page 1983: 234-36). The inscription follows the standard formulaic memorial pattern, but uses a different construction to point out that Mallymkun is married to Aðísl. However, the sense ‘wife’, implying marital relations, is not given by a possessive but by the verb *eiga*, ‘to be married to’. On the basis of this construction we can carefully deduce that the lexical item *kona* does not have to imply marital relations by itself. At least in an epigraphical context, if *kona* is not modified by any other lexical item that implies marriage, *kona* only has the primary sense ‘wife’ when it is grammatically connected to a masculine possessive pronoun or genitive form referring to a male subject.

The sense ‘wife’ fits the main purpose of these inscriptions. One of the functions of formulaic runic memorials is to serve as public documents, for example to make legitimate claims to an inheritance (Jesch 1991: 48-9). Consequently, it is the woman’s role within the family unit, in this case ‘wife’, that is most important to emphasise when commissioning these memorials. This would certainly explain the impersonal style of the formulaic inscriptions and why in some examples the name of the woman who is to be remembered is not mentioned. Such is the case in an inscription Smedby, Sweden (U 210) where ‘Vebiorn had the stone cut in memory of Gunni’s daughter, his wife’ and an inscription from Maughold, Isle of Man (BR Page 1998; 21) where ‘Cuan, son of <mailb...ak> made the tombstone(?) in memory of his wife’.

The question then rises how we should interpret the other 27 inscriptions where *kona* is neither used in a formulaic structure nor syntagmatically related to a male subject. In these contexts, the word can have a wider sense than ‘wife’ alone. In an inscription from Tillitse, Denmark (DR 212), the lexical item *kona* refers to Þóra as the stepmother of Tóki, but *kona* itself is not lexically linked to a masculine possessive or genitival form. (this time, it is an alternative role within the family unit, that of stepmother, that is connected to *sín*). Instead, *kona* is in a direct syntagmatic relationship with the adjective *góð*, ‘good’.

toki * risti * runaR * e(f)(t)(i)(R) (*) -(o)ru * stiubmoþur * sina * kunu * koþa
Tóki risti rúnar eptir [Þ]óru, stjúp móður sína, konu góða

We find a similar construction in an inscription from Korpbron, Sweden (Sö 139):

stain : lit x raisa stain x þ... ... x esipi x frinkunu x sina x kristr : liti : anta + ...(a)R : kunuR
kopraR k[iulr] * auk : fiþr * piR * ristu ru
Steinn lét reisa stein þ[enna at](?) Ásheiði, frændkonu sína. Kristr létti anda [henn]ar(?), konu góðrar. <kiulr> ok Finnur þeir ristu rúnar.

In this particular example, the word *kona* is also used in a compound, *frændkona*, thus narrowing its sense to ‘female relative’ and excluding possibility of the sense ‘wife’. As in the inscription from Tillitse, *kona* is modified by the adjective *góð*. How, then, should we interpret *kona góð*? In both inscriptions, the lexical context does not provide positive evidence that these women were, in fact, married: There is no reference to their husbands, *kona* is not lexically linked to a masculine possessive pronoun or genitive and we do not have any extra-linguistic evidence. It is therefore more appropriate to interpret *kona* as ‘woman’. However, this would be oversimplifying the matter. We can deduce from the adjective *góð* that the society which produced and read this inscription upheld certain standards and expectations when it comes to being a *kona*. The women commemorated in the examples from Tillitse and Korpbron seemed to have lived up to these expectations. However, as an inscription from Saleby, Sweden (Vg 67) shows, this need not always be the case:

+ fraustin + karþi + kubl * þausi + aftiR + þuru + kunu + sino + su(s) + tutiR bast +
mip + altum + uarþi at + rata + au=k + at arkRi + kunu + saR + ias haukui + krus + -... + uf
+ briuti
Freysteinn gerði kuml þessi eptir Þóru, konu sína. Sú [va]r ... dóttir, bezt með ǫldum. Verði at <rata> ok at argri konu sá er hǫggvi [i] krus, ... of brjóti

It should be noted that *kona* is first used in the common memorial formula together with the possessive pronoun *sín* and undoubtedly means ‘wife’. The formula is followed by a charm where the lexical item *kona* is used again but this time modified by *argr*, an abusive term. The example illustrates that the same lexical item *kona* can have senses other than ‘wife’ in one inscription. Thus, rune-cavers and their audience must have had a notion of the different senses of *kona* and interpreted the word in its context. But what did the rune-carvers and their audience regard to be ‘good women’?

On the basis of archaeological and textual evidence from the Viking Age, women were primarily praised for their role in managing the household and other ‘femine qualities that are so important in farming communities’ (Roesdahl 1998: 59). In my view, this is how we should interpret the phrase *kona góð* in the inscriptions from Tillitse and Korpbron. Rather than being a ‘good woman’, *kona* here denotes the woman’s achievements in managing the household. The other words with which *kona* is in a paradigmatic relationship support this argument. There are various other contemporary words that can refer to women and could thus substitute *kona* where appropriate. Most of these words, however, narrow the sense of ‘woman’ to, for example, their place within the family by using words for ‘mother’, ‘sister’ and ‘daughter’, a specific relation, such as *drottning* to denote one’s ‘lady’, or to emphasise other distinctive features such as *mær*, ‘maiden’, which is often used in late runic inscriptions to denote the Holy Virgin. The sense of *kona* as ‘manager of the household’, however,

embodied by the word *húsfreyja*. The compound *húsfreyja* consists of *hús*, meaning ‘house’ or ‘farmstead’, and a very important place for many people during the Viking Age, and *freyja*, an older form of *frú*, also meaning ‘woman’ or ‘goddess’ and not coincidentally the name the most feminine goddess in the Nordic pantheon. The word *húsfreyja* can therefore literally be interpreted as ‘goddess of the household’. Although it is more than likely that these women were married, *húsfreyja* places more emphasis on the woman’s role of managing the farm and the household. The different roles of women as ‘wife’ on the one hand and ‘manager of the household’ on the other, is particularly well reflected in an inscription from Hassmyra, Sweden (Vs 24):

**buonti x kuþr x hulmkoetr x lit x resa x ufteR x oþintisu x kunu x seno x kumbr x hifrya x
til x hasuimura x iki betr x þon x byi raþr ropbalir x risti x runi x þisa x sikmuntar x uaR
... sestR x kuþ**

Bóndi góðr Holmgautr lét reisa eptir Óðindísu, konu sína. Kemr hýfreyja til Hqsumýra eigi betri, en býi ráðr. Rauð-Ballir risti rúnar þessar. Sigmundar var [Óðindísa] systir góð.

The inscription consists of two parts. First, there is the standard formulaic memorial, ‘X raised this Y in memory of Z’. In this construction, Óðindisa is referred to as *konu sína* establishing her as the wife of Holmgautr. The second part is a form of verse in which Óðindisa is referred to as *húsfreyja*. As can be expected, in the memorial formula she is first and foremost remembered for her role as wife. In the verse part she is praised for her other role in society: the manager of the house or farmstead. In order to distinguish the different roles, the commissioner of the stone selected different words. To strengthen the importance of the household, Holmgautr himself emphasises his role in the household and his relation to Óðindisa by stating he is a *bóndi góðr*. The word *bóndi*, is defined by the *English Dictionary of Runic Inscriptions in the Younger Futhark* as ‘householder, legal head of a household; farmer, man of fixed abode who lives by agriculture, peasant, landowner; husband’. Similar to *húsfreyja*, emphasis is first drawn to their connection to the farmstead. Their role as spouse is of secondary importance.

Another word that is closely linked to *kona* and *húsfreyja* is the lexical item *ráðkona*. *Ráðkona* is attested in a runic context only in an inscription from Uppsala, Sweden (U 923):

**ikifast[r * lit * rita * sten ef]ti[R * s]ys[t]ur * netilkiarþi * uk * totur sena * k[asu * uk * fasluh
* rapku... ...]**

Ingifastr lét rétta stein eptir systur ...gerði ok dóttur sína <kasu> ok Fastlaug ráðko[nu](?) ...

Unlike *húsfreyja*, this is a compound where *kona* is modified by *ráð*, which is related to the verb *ráða*, ‘to advise, to lead, to decide’. *Ráðkona* can thus be interpreted as ‘woman who leads, decides’. It can be noted that the verb *ráða* is also mentioned in the Hassmyra inscription to emphasise Óðindisa’s skills as a *húsfreyja*. The *Samnordisk Database of Runic Inscriptions* provides the translation ‘housekeeper’ for *ráðkona*, but this might have to be revised. The sense ‘housekeeper’ has the connotation ‘servant’, whereas the unique and distinct use of *ráða* together with its semantic relation to *húsfreyja* implies a certain authority over the household. Especially if one takes into consideration that Ingifastr decided to place her name on a memorial together with his sister and her daughter, the ‘sense’ housekeeper does not do her role enough credit. It is unclear what her relation to Ingifastr is, as the inscription is not complete and thus we do not know whether a possessive pronoun was to follow. This is strengthened by the absence of an alternative: the daughter, sister and *ráðkona* are mentioned, but the absence of a wife is noticeable. It is possible that Fastlaug was the head of the household in the absence of a wife. Perhaps the *húsfreyja* had passed away, in which case another woman, unrelated to Ingifastr could have taken over the responsibilities of the household. Because Ingifastr and Fastlaug were not married, the word *húsfreyja* would not have been appropriate, and the substitute *ráðkona* was used to denote a more functional role within the household.

It is likely, however, that the sense of *húsfreyja* merged with sense of ‘wife’ for *kona*. There are approximately twenty-one runic inscriptions where the woman is referred to as *húsfreyja*. With the exception of the Hassmyra stone, all attestations are from the high

medieval period. Moreover, all of the attestations of *húsfreyja* are from Sweden, mostly from Gotland. In contrast, there are only fourteen inscriptions from the medieval period that contain *kona*. Only a few of these are in a formulaic context, yet the medieval inscriptions that contain *húsfreyja* are based on formulaic constructions similar to the inscriptions from the Viking Age that contain *kona*: *húsfreyja* thus occurs in formulaic structures where it is in relation to a possessive pronoun or genitival form. For example, the post-Viking Age inscription from Eksta, Sweden (G 71) notes that:

[botuarþr i snoþu han lit giara þina stæin yfir sina husfroiu butaiþu til aista]

Botviðr(?) i Snoðu/Snoder hann let gæra þenna stæin yfir sina husfrøiu Bothæiðu til Æiksta/Eksta

This is similar to earlier examples of the phrase *X's kona*. Similar to Viking Age *kona*, women also referred to themselves as *húsfreyja*, for example in this inscription from Grötlingbo, Sweden (G 35):

*** katrin : ioans : husfyr : I sundru : han : lit : giara : þina : stæin : yfir : moþur sina :**

botiaupu : iak[o]bs : kunu : sihlaihs:arf(a) : bipin : f(i)l(i) (h)enar : sial : bater : noster :x

Katrin, Iohans husfrøya i Sundru/Sundre, hon let gæra þenna stæin yfir moður sina Botþiuðu, Iakobs konu Siglæiksarfa/Sigsarve. Biðin fyriR hænnar sial pater noster

Thus, we see a shift in the use of *kona* and its synonyms in runic contexts. Perhaps due to the impact of Christianity and the subsequent upcoming manuscript and literary tradition, the purpose of runic inscriptions and the way in which they presented texts, changed. From the 12th century onwards, runic texts seem to function less as public documents and more as literary outlets. This more ‘poetic’ context changes the interpretation of *kona* also. For example, two distinctive roles of women in society as ‘wife’ and ‘manager of the household’ is playfully used in a 13th century inscription from Tønsberg, Norway (N A39):

§A æilifr * uiri* uæhr * a mek * mit : stæin:grimr : ha=fum : mælt : ma=rt : o=kka=r imilli : firir : þa so=k : at ek : uil : nema : a=f þi : runa=r :

§B eaa=uo : knor : ek : spu:r þek : uilt * tu * gifta * mer * æina*þa * en * þa=r er : <þisar> mrthk iiiii sssss ttttt lllll *

§C æ t þ f f s s a n t æ t þ f f s s a n t

§D : þa=u : ero : bæþe : i buþ : saman : kla=uua:kare : o=k : ko=na : uilia=lms : hæil=lþu : hæil=l * sæl * þu * þa

§A Eilífr Virðivægr á mik. Vit Steingrímur höfum mælt mart okkar ímilli fyrir þá sök at ek vil nema af því rúnar.

§B ek spyr þik: vilt þú gipta mér einþá er þar er, þessar, <mistil, ristil, tistil, histil, kistil>

§C e[inn], t[veir], þ[rír], f[jórir], f[imm], s[ex], s[jau], á[tta], n[íu], t[íu], e[llifu], t[olf], þ[rettán], f[ljörtán], f[ímtán], s[extán], s[jautján], á[ttján], n[íttján], t[uttugu]

§D Þau eru bæði í búð saman Klaufa-Kári ok kona Viljalms ... Heit sæl/sæll þú þá’.

It is the D inscription that is particularly interesting in this discussion. A man called *Klaufa-Kári*, ‘Clumsy Kári’ and a woman presented as *Viljalms kona*, ‘Viljam’s wife’ are ‘lying together’. Emphasis is drawn to the role of the woman as ‘wife’ by using the genitival structure *Viljalms kona* instead of her name. The man with whom the woman is ‘lying’ is not referred to as a *bóndi góðr*, but as *Klaufa-Kári*. Instead of being in charge of the *hús*, the man and woman are lying in a *búð*, which can be roughly interpreted as ‘temporary dwelling’ and often refers to a space outside or away from the main house (Jesch: pers.comm.). The careful use of words and the mixed connotations are certainly adding to the effect of the innuendo and the naughtiness of the activity.

The Tønsberg inscription reflects the change in runic activity, as mentioned previously. It illustrates that rune-carvers were likely to be aware of the possibility of manipulating contemporary epigraphical traditions in order to create a literary effect. For this reason,

Tønsberg could be regarded as poetry. This change in runic tradition, perhaps as a result from the influence of manuscript culture, is also reflected in the group of twelve inscriptions from Maeshowe, Orkney. The few direct references to women in Maeshowe are neither part of a formulaic pattern, nor is the lexical item denoting a woman semantically connected to a male subject. The lexical context indicates that the sense ‘manager of the household’ is not fitting. The inscription Maeshowe 9 illustrates this point:

§A *ingibiorh * hin fahra * æhkia*
 §B *mqrhk * kona * hæfer * faret * lu(t) in her mihgil oflate*
 §C *ærlikr*
 §A *Ingibjörg, hin fagra ekkja.*
 §B *Mörg kona hefir farit lút inn hér. Mikill ofláti.*
 §C *Erlingr.*

The lexical item *ekcja* from the §A inscription is usually translated as ‘widow’. However, in poetic contexts, which I believe Maeshowe to be, *ekcja* can also be used to denote a woman in general (Jesch 1991: 159). Moreover, *ekcja* is modified by *fagr*, ‘beautiful’, thus emphasising the woman’s apparent good looks rather than her status as ‘widow’. The reference to *kona* in the B inscription seems to refer to a group of women, or perhaps more accurately, a type of woman. Barnes has suggested that the sentence, *Mörg kona hefir farit lút inn hér*, ‘many a woman has gone stooping in here’, could be interpreted as a reference to sexual activity. Barnes points out that the verb *lútr* is used in *Bjarnar Saga Hítðelakappa* ‘to suggest the pose of both the ‘active’ and ‘passive’ partner in a homosexual act [...] and it is by no means impossible that the image of a woman in a submissive sexual role was part of what the author of no. 9 wished to convey’ (Barnes 1994: 102). The sexual interpretation is in line with other inscriptions from Maeshowe, in particular 10, where the act of fornication is explicitly mentioned. Although the texts from Maeshowe are by definition runic inscriptions, the interpretation of their vocabulary is not bound by pre-existing runic traditions, unlike the earlier examples discussed above. In this poetic context, the interpretation of *kona* as ‘wife’ or ‘manager of the household’ is not appropriate. Rather, the syntagmas in which *kona* and *ekcja* occur denote the woman’s femininity and sexuality.

The inscriptions in Maeshowe convey the rune-carver’s awareness of Maeshowe as a distinct and confined space that allows for activities which are perhaps taboo outside of this space. In particular, I am referring to sexual activities. In this respect, Maeshowe is similar to the *búð* we came across in the Tønsberg inscription which also symbolised a place where different, i.e. sexual, roles for the man and woman are prevalent. Considering Maeshowe in a poetic context might also shed light on the many references to treasure: could the references to ‘treasure’ actually be referring to women and their sexuality? During the Viking Age, women were associated with gold, silver and jewellery which reflected the status of a woman in society (Roesdahl 1998: 39). Freyja, most feminine of goddesses, cries golden tears. If so, given the poetic and sexual context of the inscriptions from Maeshowe and the possible influence of manuscript traditions, we might need to reconsider our traditional understanding of the inscription Maeshowe 27, *Sæll er sá, er finna má þann auð hinn mikla*: ‘happy is he who can find these riches’.

Conclusion

On the basis of this discussion, we can construct the following lexical units of *kona* in a runic context:

kona as ‘wife’
kona as ‘manager of the household’
kona as ‘sexual partner, lover’

Which sense is most appropriate is decided by its paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, as well as the purpose and function of the runic inscription. The first sense, ‘wife’ can only be positively identified in a formulaic structure in which *kona* is linked to a male subject by the

possessive pronoun *sín* or a genitive. In addition, the sense is purely functional, which fits the purpose of the inscriptions as public documents. After the Viking Age, perhaps as a result of Christianity and competition of the subsequent manuscript tradition, the lexical item *kona* with the sense ‘wife’ seems to be replaced by its synonym, *húsfreyja*. During the Viking Age, the two senses are still separate, with *húsfreyja* having the primary sense of ‘manager of the household’. The close paradigmatic relation between *kona* and *húsfreyja* suggest that where the context indicates the achievements of a woman, *kona* is likely to have the sense ‘manager of the household’. The third sense, ‘sexual partner, lover’ should only be interpreted in poetic contexts that are in contrast with the woman’s public roles as manager of the household or wife. As such, the interpretation of the concept behind the word *kona* is highly dependent on its social, linguistic and textual context and appears to have undergone semantic shifts due to developments in the runic traditions.

To come back to the question with which this paper started: what is a *kona*? Do the above senses point out what a Viking Age woman really is? The answer has to be no. Although I might have come a bit closer to the ‘degree of sophistication’ with which to understand the concept behind the word *kona*, I have found that *kona* in a runic context is first and foremost an idea, or perhaps more accurate, an ideal. Rather than reflecting the daily life of Viking Age women, the cultural and textual context of the runic inscriptions emphasises the woman’s function as wife, the expectation to be a goddess of the household and her appearance in sexual fantasies.

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