

# Unraveling the jumble: Runic plates and the transformation of magical traditions

*Fanny Agåker*

The enigmatic runic plates from Scandinavian Viking Age and Middle Ages have inspired many runological interpretations over the last century. Still, archaeologists and historians have more often than not been strangely unaware of their existence, and few have attempted to examine runic plates as a part of the larger archeological and cultural context.

This article is based on the conclusions made in my master's thesis (Agåker 2010), in which I have investigated the Scandinavian runic plates in a macro perspective, taking into account the runological content, the archaeological context, the geographical spread as well as comparative material (archaeological and historical) from the rest of Europe. The study has shown runic plates to be not simply one category of objects but several, ultimately products of the fusion of magical and religious customs that occurred as the people of Scandinavia interacted with the outside world. As such, the different types of runic plates should not be considered different stages of development of the same type of object. Instead they must be viewed as parts of a whole, mirroring the occurrences of the time from whence they came.

## The typology

The typology presented in fig. 1 is based on the physical appearance of the runic plates, and is fundamental to this study. The types A, B and C are also divided into sub-categories: A1 and A2; B1, B2 and B3; C1 and C2. The more detailed division into sub-categories of type B especially will not be discussed much in this article, but may be of value in future investigations and is therefore included.

[Fig. 1. Typology of runic plates]

The types are generally easily distinguished from each other. Type A contains some form of hole or loop for suspension, and are often trapezoid in shape. Type B are all plates which do not have such suspension features, and are neither rolled nor folded nor are in the shape of a cross. Folded or rolled up plates belong in type C, while type D only physically differs from type B in that it contains only cross-shaped runic plates.

The obvious difficulty in the practical application of this typology, which deserves to be mentioned, is the ever present problem of preservation. If an object is only partially preserved it might of course prove hard or even impossible to distinguish between types A, B and D. However problematic this is it is unavoidable in any typology based on physical features, as there will always be less-than-complete archaeological preservation. Still, in dubious cases the runic content, the context and dating of the plate may hint at which type it is.

## Origins of type A: rune pendants

The earliest runic plates are almost without exception of type A1. Most likely the origin of the type lies in a fusion of traditions which occurred as Scandinavian Vikings travelled eastwards, across the Baltic Sea and into the river systems.

Trapezoid pendants of copper and bronze, without any type of textual inscriptions, date back all the way to the early Iron Age in certain parts of the Baltic states and Russia, and were still in use throughout the Viking Age and Middle Ages. They are common in Latvia, around St Petersburg and Gdov, and further to the east around rivers Oka and Kama, yet are absent in Finland and very rare in Estonia (Serning 1956: 62).

As the East Scandinavian traders, who travelled on the waterways into Russia, came in direct contact with the local population, the Vikings were faced with cultic and religious expressions of a type not existing in Scandinavia. At that time, the runic knowledge carried by the travelling Scandinavians seems to have fused with local tradition along the trading routes, and the result was the creation of trapezoid pendants in copper and bronze with runic inscriptions: type A1. In accordance to that theory, the earliest finds of type A are generally

trapezoid in shape and found in or close by trading sites around the Baltic Sea; such as in Birka, Köpingsvik, Staraja Ladoga and Gorodische. Those which are geographically or temporally further away from the area of origin are less consistent with the original trapezoid shape. From the 11th century and onwards type A2 appears, clearly differing from the earlier shape. There are also a few whose material deviate from the norm, such as the silver rune pendant from Østermarie, Denmark (Steenholt Olesen 2007: 87 ff.), and the lead rune pendant from Holm St Benet, Norfolk, England (Hines 2006: 14). The latter also differs from the usual in that it, despite being of type A1, also has been folded. Since the folding prohibits it from actually being hung by the suspension hole, the folding is most likely secondary.

This fusion or transfer of ideas also affected the Saami population of Northern Scandinavia, and trapezoid pendants became common in Saami sacrificial sites, mainly from the 11th-14th centuries AD. There are also a few found in Saami graves in Vivallen, Härjedalen, and in one grave in Inderøy, Nord-Trøndelag. The Saami counterparts are mostly unadorned; though some are decorated with for example criss cross patterns or dots. Even after the Middle Ages the trapezoid pendants remained a part of Saami customs, and are often found hung on shaman drums. Interestingly the trapezoid pendants are often older than the drum from which it hangs. It is also the older type of drum which they are most frequently found on, another indication of the pendants' ancient origin (Zachrisson 1997: 207).

The inscriptions on the runic pendants, especially regarding type A1, are often difficult or impossible to interpret, due to frequent use of pseudo-runes and sequences of runes which in all likelihood are non-linguistic. Those that are interpretable show a probable function as a protective amulet, worn preventatively, or as a magical cure for an already existing condition. One example is an 11th century copper pendant from Sigtuna (MacLeod and Mees 2006: 118):

*Þurs sarriðu, þursa drottin! Fliu þu nu! Fundinn es(tu). Haf þær þriaR þraR, ulfR! Haf þær niu nauðiR, ulfR! Iii isiR þis isiR auki (e)s uniR, ulfR. Niut lyfia!*

Ogre of wound-fever, lord of the ogres! Flee now! (You) are found. Have for yourself three pangs, wolf! Have for yourself nine needs, wolf! *iii* ice (runes). These ice (runes) may grant that you be satisfied (?), wolf. Make good use of the healing-charms!

The purpose of the amulet is to magically expel the *þurs sarriðu*, most likely the being thought to cause disease, more specifically “wound-fever”. This particular rune pendant is thus more likely to have functioned as a cure for an existing medical condition, rather than as an amulet worn for protection. An example of the contrary was found in Södra Kvinneby, Öland. It is an 11th century type A2 pendant whose inscription reads:

*Hær risti ek þær berg, Bofi. Mær fullty! Ihuð (?) es þær viss. En bra haldi illu fram Bofa. Þorr gæti hans með þem hamri sem uR hafí kam. Fly fran illvett! Fær ekki af Bofa. Guð eRu undiR hanum auk yfiR hanum.*

Here I carved for you (runes of help), Bofi. Help me! Knowledge (?) is certain for you. And may the lightning hold all evil away from Bofi. May Þórr protect him with that hammer which came from out of the sea. Flee from evil! It (?) gets nothing from Bofi. The gods are under him and over him. (MacLeod and Mees 2006: 28)

It is also inscribed with a few pseudo-runes and the outline of a fish, the latter perhaps indicating that the amulet was designed for Þórr's protection during fishing expeditions.

## Origins of type C: folded or rolled runic plates

As Scandinavia was introduced and converted to Christianity, the unofficial beliefs and practices of continental Europe also found their way into the north, whether brought home by the Scandinavians who were educated abroad, or by the foreign monks and clergymen who

settled in Scandinavia. The folded or rolled runic plates were generally made of lead, are most often found near medieval monasteries, churches or places of importance to the ruling elite, and carry inscriptions which connect strongly to mainly western European but also Byzantine medieval magic. This magic, which was originally based on beliefs from a multitude of cultures, flourished in the learned and religious centers of continental Europe and was often practiced by monks and members of the clergy.

The magical tradition in the rest of Europe during the Middle Ages includes the use of powerful words such as the acronym *agla*, referring to the Hebrew expression *attah gibbor le'olam adonai* ('Thou art strong to eternity, Lord'), the Greek *agios*, meaning 'sacred', and *tetragrammaton* which refers to the Hebrew word for God. Also common are quotes from prayers, certain expressions (for example *alpha et omega* and the *sator-arepo* formula), and sacred names of angels and the apostles. Along with more or less accurate quotes from Latin prayers, this is exactly what is found on folded or rolled runic plates, firmly placing the inscriptions of type C in the realm of European rather than Scandinavian magic

The act of folding or rolling was often an integral part of the ritual. As the 14th century writer John Arderne advised with regards to textual parchment amulets: "Let it be closed afterwards in the manner of a letter so that it cannot be opened easily" (Skemer 2006: 145). By folding or rolling the parchment the magician sealed and protected the magical spell, thus preventing it from losing its potency. Most likely the same sentiment lies behind the folding of type C runic plates.

A great example of a type C amulet which shows the importance of the text and the folding alike was found in Lille Myregård, Denmark. It is unusual in that actually consists of two plates, not one, both inscribed. The first, which contains both a complete *Ave Maria* and a sequence based on the athanasian creed, reads:

+ *Ave sanctissima Maria, gratia plena. Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus et benedictus fructus ventris tui. + Increatus Pater + Immensus Pater + Aeternus Pater.*

The second lead strip is folded around the first, and contains the sequence *Gala agla agla laga. Gala agla agla laga* (Stoklund, Imer and Steenholt Olesen 2006: 6).

This arrangement, though unusual, is consistent with the tradition in which it was created. The outer lead strip serves as an extra precaution, enveloping the inner plate within the protective *agla* formula. As a comparison, consider the folded lead plate from Västannor, Sweden (Gustavson and Snædal Brink 1980: 230). It was wrapped around what is believed to be bone (unfortunately disintegrated into a powder at the time of excavation), most often interpreted as a religious relic, enclosed within the protective power of the inscription:

*Ave Mari[a], gratia pl[e]na, Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus et benedictus fructus ventris tui. Amen. Alfa et o[m]mega]. Agla. Deus adiuva. Jesus Christus Dominus noster.*

The idea of physically enclosing something inside a written spell can also be found in the use of textual parchment amulets, which were sometimes wrapped around the body of the ailing person. The power of the words and symbols lay not only in their linguistic meaning, but also in their physical existence. The same idea is expressed in those examples where written magical words or symbols were physically consumed, by eating for example a piece of cheese or an apple inscribed with a magic formula (Skemer 2006: 127 ff.).

There are also some exact equivalents to type C runic plates which are inscribed with Latin letters rather than runes. For example, the folded lead plate from Schleswig, with an inscription containing both the *sator-arepo* formula and a Latin amuletic text aimed at protecting against "demons, elves, and all the infections of all illnesses, and all obstructions" (*coniuro vos demones sive albes ac omnes pestes omnium infirmitatum ac omnes interiectiones*; McKinnel et al. 2004: 153 f.). This example is striking evidence that the type C runic plates are in fact a runic variation of a type of objects also existing outside of Scandinavia.

## Origins of type B: runic plate

The reader may question why type B is not discussed between A and C, as would seem proper. But in fact, type B is best described and understood with A and C already discussed. The geographical spread, choice of material as well as runological content, all point to a split personality. Some type B plates carry inscriptions of the same kind as type C, originating in the magical tradition brought north as Scandinavia turned to Christianity. However, there are also type B plates with inscriptions in Old Norse, with little or no trace of foreign influence.

For an example of type B consistent with the Scandinavian tradition, consider the 11th century copper plate from a grave in Väddesta, Uppland, which reads *Illfuss. Uni/Unni biðr va!* (“Malicious one, Uni/Unni conjures you destruction!”; Gustavson 1969: 211). As a contrast, the lead plate from Kävlinge, Bohuslän, which on one side has the carved image of *Majestas Domini* and on the other side carries a long inscription entirely in Latin referring only to Christian lore, is entirely consistent with the European practices.

Then, of course, there are the examples which exist somewhere on the scale between the traditional Scandinavian and the newly arrived European practice. For example, the plate from Boge, Gotland, has the following Latin inscription (Gustavson 1995: 135).

*In nomine Domini nostri Jesu Chr[i]sti, Guðlaug, Domini patris et filii, Guðlaug, [s]piritus sancti, Guðlaug, Amen. Crux [Chris]ti pater, crux [Chris]ti filius, crux [Chris]ti spiritus sancti, Guðlaug, amen. Christus regnat, Christus, Guðlaug, vincit, Christus imperat. Amen.*

Yet, it is not made out of lead, which would be typically European, but of copper. Though being available to the Scandinavians before the Middle Ages, lead was for some reason not chosen for the making of Viking Age runic plates; the Vikings chose only to use copper and bronze. The rest of Europe, however, had for centuries thought of lead as especially appropriate for magical purposes.

The geographical spread of type B in Sweden connects to the same types of monastic and ecclesiastic sites which type C are found by. However; they are also found in the same areas in which type A are frequent. When it comes to material there are some which are made in lead, according to the European tradition which type C belongs to. Others are made out of copper or bronze, the preferred materials of type A.

Certain medieval manuscripts from Western Europe tell of a magical object called a *lamina*, a thin square piece of metal, wood or leather, which was inscribed with magical characters, words or symbols. The *lamina* was imbued with the power of orthodox Christian prayers and symbols as well as non-Christian ritual actions, and were usually made for medical purposes (Page 2004: 29 ff.). One example of such a *lamina* is found in a small codex known as Sloane MS 475 (British Library, London), which was written in late 11th or early 12th century. For helping a woman conceive, the writer recommended using inscribed tin sheets, referred to as *lamellae stanni* (Skemer 2006: 81). Another example from a medieval manuscript (MS 15236, British Library, London) tells of a fertility amulet in the form of a 2×2,2 cm lead *lamina* inscribed with a series of indecipherable letters and magical symbols, ending with the word *amen*. A woman was to wear it around her neck until she managed to conceive (Skemer 2006: 128).

The metal *laminae* or *lamellae* described in the medieval manuscripts are most likely close relatives of type B runic plates, especially those whose inscriptions are in Latin and connect to the European magical tradition. The description of *lamellae* as being square plates of metal but also of other, more perishable materials, also suggests a strong possibility of such counterparts in the Scandinavian material.

The overall picture of type B is that it exists on a sliding scale from the traditional Scandinavian magic to the foreign magical tradition brought north in the transition to Christianity and the increasing exchange of knowledge between Scandinavia and Western Europe. It also has to be remembered that the tradition brought from the south not only includes Latin and typically Christian material, but also such “magical characters” as were said to at times be inscribed on the magical *lamellae*. Therefore, inscriptions which contain pseudo-runes or uninterpretable sequences of runes may in fact also connect to the European tradition. Simply put, the inscriptions on type B has its origins in a multitude of traditions, as the knowledge from Western Europe in itself contained elements stemming from several

different cultures. There is no conclusive evidence of where the physical shape and appearance of the type originated; it is however likely to have entered Scandinavia in conjuncture with the introduction of churches and monasteries, as that is when they begin to appear in the archaeological material.

## Origins of type D: cross-shaped runic plates

Type D, cross-shaped runic plates which are all made of lead, show a distinct geographical spread indicating a western origin. In Sweden there are only precious few examples, while there are several in Denmark, and most are found in Norway. Though the texts are inscribed in runes (except for a few cases with the Latin alphabet), there is nothing to indicate a Scandinavian origin, as the content of the texts are fully consistent with the Western European magical and religious tradition, similar to what is found in type C runic plates and many of the type B plates.

One of the few examples from Sweden is a small cross shaped lead plate from Lödöse, found by the outer wall of a medieval smithy. The inscription, which refers to the story of how God saved three young men from a burning furnace, reads:

*Domine Jesu [Christe, l]ibera de ignib[us sicut] liberasti t[r]es [peuros] de camino ignis ...*

The text is also almost word for word quoted from one of twelve prayers from *Commendatio animæ*, performed in direct connection to the death of a person. This textual connection, together with the fact that the cross was found approximately 20 meters from the church cemetery of S:t Olov, this specific cross is thought to originally have been placed in a grave (Svärdström 1971: 255 ff.).

It has been suggested that the cross-shaped runic plates are the result of English cultural influence, and I concur. In Anglo-Norman areas during the 11th-13th centuries inscribed lead crosses are known to have been placed on bodies about to be buried, on the chest (Svärdström 1971: 261). There is also close equivalent is described in an English medieval manuscript from the late 12th century, Hunter MS 100. One of the cures for fever which the writer recommends consists of a formula being inscribed onto a lead cross, which then was to be suspended around the neck of the patient (Skemer 2006: 80).

Interestingly, the cross-shaped runic plates are somewhat later than the Anglo-Norman tradition, suggesting that the idea was picked up rather late and carried on in Scandinavia even after the tradition more or less ceased to exist in England. Surprisingly the Norwegian lead crosses are known to have been placed in graves substantially older than the Middle Ages. The two type D crosses from Bru, for example, were placed in Bronze Age burial cairns, which is generally interpreted as a protective measure against the dead (MacLeod and Mees 2006: 190). However, one should not forget the possibility that the ancient burial cairns could have been seen as places of power. As such, the location may have been especially suitable for magical rituals, and the deposition of an inscribed lead cross in that manner might have been a way to strengthen its effect.

## The issue of practical utilization: pendant, pouch or ritual deposition?

Apart from constituting a great example of a non runic version of type B, the description of how to carry the fertility amulet previously described (MS 15236, British Library, London) gives another valuable insight. Since the lead plate was not described as being pierced for suspension, one has to presume that the lead plate was to be carried inside a small pouch or some equivalent. There are many examples of such enclosures described in the textual sources, though not many have been archaeologically preserved. And the enclosures are not limited to the *laminae*; folded or rolled textual parchment amulets are also often described as being kept in an enclosure of some sort and worn on the body, either suspended around the neck or placed elsewhere. A good example, though a bit late in regards to this study, comes from 16th century Germany, where a priest used a folded parchment amulet, placed inside a leather pouch, to treat a demon-possessed girl. Another example was described by the

Augustine chronicler Johann Busch, who mentions a woman around 1450 wearing a folded amulet inside a lead suspension capsule (Skemer 2006: 156 f.).

The European counterparts make it highly likely that the same is true for many of the runic counterparts. Type B and C both may thus have been worn inside enclosures of some sort, most likely of perishable material. And in fact, one such leather enclosure has been preserved, in the case of the 11th century type B plate from Väddesta, Uppland, which was found inside a leather pouch which fit snugly around the plate (Gustavson 1969: 211). Type A, having direct means of suspension, is thus not the only runic plates meant to be worn around the neck. The difference is that type A pendants, being suspended directly from holes or loops, were not tucked away, hidden or protected by an enclosure, suggesting a slight difference in the underlying idea.

Similarly to certain *laminae* described in the medieval manuscripts, some type B runic plates may have been used to cure wounds by direct physical contact. An example from MS 15236 describes how to place a lead *lamina* inscribed with five crosses (one in each corner and one in the center) directly on top of a fistula or wound while reciting an Anglo-Norman French prayer. Another example is found in a late English medieval manuscript in Stockholm, which recommends placing a lead plate inscribed with five crosses directly on a wound, whilst reciting a series of incantations (Skemer 2006:128).

In contrast to the runic plates which served as magical cures, or were worn on the body as protective amulets, the archaeological contexts surrounding some runic plates tell a different story. The four type C folded runic plates from Saxholmen, Värmland, are interesting examples, as are the two runic plates found in Västannor, Dalarna. At both of these sites the runic plates have been ritually deposited, in Saxholmen placed under the floor and in Västannor deposited in a lake together with a multitude of other objects (Röjder and Schedin 2004: 64, Ersgård 2002: 289) It is of course unknown whether or not the depositions were secondary, thus the runic plates may very well have been in use prior to it. However; the idea of ritually depositing such items is recurring if one considers related objects such as the Saami trapezoid pendants, which have been found in great numbers in sacrificial sites (Zachrisson 1997: 207), and folded or rolled curse tablets (*defixiones*) which were usually deposited in sanctuaries, tombs or in bodies of water such as springs or wells (Adams 2006: 1).

## Conclusion

To understand the runic plates, whichever type, one must consider the process in which they were created. They were products of the fusion of ideas as the Scandinavians interacted with the outside world, and as such cannot be viewed from a Scandinavian perspective only, nor should they be viewed only from a runological standpoint. The term “runic plate” in itself is inadequate, when the different types in reality may have more in common with non-runic versions than with each other.

One can draw multiple conclusions from this study. The probable origin of type A shows a new side to the already known eastern contact, indicating a concrete integration of magical or cultic thoughts and ideas. It also sheds light on the Saami trapezoid pendants, which probably came into existence by that very contact between the East Scandinavians and the people on the other side of the Baltic Sea. The fact that type A was originally based on pendants without any inscriptions or linguistic meaning, makes more sense of the many uninterpretable rune pendants, with pseudo-runes or non-linguistic sequences of runes. This because the power of the rune pendants, especially the early ones, did not necessarily depend on a linguistic meaning of the inscriptions.

Type C, D and at times type B tell a different story from the usual description of the Christianization process. The official beliefs and rituals of Christianity were not the only to be brought north. The unofficial beliefs, which were highly questionable in the eyes of the authorities, also followed as a separate string of knowledge, brought along by certain individuals within the Church. And importantly, the runic plates of type C, D and some of type B, were not created when the Scandinavian’s met the official Christian community, but in the meeting with the unofficial side of European beliefs. The unofficial side of medieval European beliefs however is probably more true to the reality of how people lived, thought and acted, and therefore it needs to be embraced by the modern interpreter of the past.

The implications of this is that when for example a new type C runic plate is found to be

inscribed with Latin quotes and sacred names, it is not sufficient to claim its Christian origin. The truth behind the object and the inscription is a magical tradition which, despite containing Christian lore, often was forbidden by the Church and contained strains from a multitude of cultures and religions. And yet, those who kept the knowledge and created these magical objects were themselves a part of the core of the Christian organization: the monks, nuns and priests.

## Bibliography

- Adams, Geoff W., 2006: "The Social and Cultural Implications of Curse Tablets [*defixiones*] in Britain and on the Continent." *Studia Humaniora Tartuensia* 7, A.5, 1-15.
- Agåker, Fanny, 2010: "Runic Plates: Products of Cultural Fusion in Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavia." Unpublished MA thesis, Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University.
- Ersgård, Lars, 2002: "Västannortjärn: En rituell plats från högmedeltid." In *Plats och praxis: Studier av nordisk förkristen ritual*, eds. Kristina Jennbert, Anders Andréén, and Catharina Raudvere, 287-293. Vägar till Midgård. Lund.
- Gustavson, Helmer, 1969: "Ett runbleck från Järfälla." *Fornvännen* 64, 209-212.
- , 1995: "Runorna och det latinska språket." In *Runmärkt: Från brev till klotter: Runorna under medeltiden*, eds. S. Benneth, J. Ferenius, H. Gustavson, and M. Åhlén, 127-141. Stockholm.
- , and Thnorgunn Snædal Brink, 1980: "Runfynd 1979." *Fornvännen* 75, 229-239.
- Hines, John, 2006: "An Inscribed Lead Plaque from Holm St Benets, Norfolk." *Nytt om runer* 19 (2004), 14-15.
- MacLeod, Mindy, and Bernard Mees, 2006: *Runic Amulets and Magic Objects*. Woodbridge.
- McKinnel, John, Rudolf Simek, and Klaus Düwel, 2004: *Runes, Magic and Religion: A Sourcebook*. *Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia* 10. Vienna.
- Page, Sophie, 2004: *Magic in Medieval Manuscripts*. London.
- Röjder, Helena, and Pernilla Schedin, eds., 2004: *Saxholmen: Värmländsk arkeologi 2004*. Värmlands museum skriftserie 29. Karlstad.
- Serning, Inga, 1956: *Lapska offerplatsfynd från järnålder och medeltid i de svenska lappmarkerna*. Stockholm.
- Skemer, Don C., 2006: *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia.
- Steenholt Olesen, Rikke, 2007: *Fra biarghrúnar til Ave sanctissima Maria: Studier i danske runeindskrifter fra middelalderen*. Ph.D. dissertation, Det Humanistiske Fakultet, Københavns Universitet.
- Stoklund, Marie, Lisbeth Imer, and Rikke Steenholt Olesen, 2006: "Arbejdet ved Runologisk Laboratorium, Nyfund fra Danmark 2003." *Nytt om runer* 19 (2004), 4-10.
- Svärdström, Elisabeth, 1971: "Tre föremål från Lödöse med runinskrifter på latin." *Fornvännen* 66, 255-269.
- Zachrisson, Inger, 1997: "Varför samiskt?" In *Möten i gränsland. Samer och germaner i Mellanskandinavien*, ed. Inger Zachrisson, 189-220. Statens historiska museum, Monographs 4. Stockholm.