What does 'context' mean in runology – and how are we to use 'context' when interpreting runic inscriptions? Some points for a methodological discussion

Jan Ragnar Hagland

Introduction

The main theme of the Seventh International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions being "Runes in Context", it might be appropriate to take one more look at the very notion of context and the methodological importance of context(s) for the interpretation of runic inscriptions in general.

What does 'context' mean in runology, we may well ask for a start. When it comes to the interpretation of each individual runic inscription, be it found in isolation or together with other inscriptions, there are, at any rate, immediate contexts to take into consideration as well as more general or far-reaching ones that will sometimes remain hidden to us. These are, of course, trivial facts, even if they need, as it seems, to be stated explicitly now and again. In so doing, let us try for a moment to sort out what immediate and other contexts are needed in order to make sense or meaning, not just linguistic meaning, of a runic inscription. As we can all see, this is not very easily done and can probably not be formulated once and for all in unequivocal methodological terms. Nonetheless the present contribution has as its aim to sort out some points for a methodological discussion.

Immediate context: the object

First of all, then: What do I mean by 'the immediate context' of a given runic inscription? How can it be established by valid scholarly arguments and where do contexts at various levels belong in the process of unveiling a meaning or possibly even the meaning of an inscription? There are, of course, a variety of answers to questions such as these, all depending on factors like find circumstances, the age of the inscription and more. To a degree this all relates to what e.g. Kurt Braunmüller at the 1995 runic symposium in Göttingen perceived of as one of several "Methodische Probleme in der Runologie." When it comes to the notion of context in the sense that interests us here, he states, without elaborating on it, that "es geht schlicht darum, ob man sich primär auf die Deutung der vorgefundenen Inschriftenteile einläßt oder ob man voreingenommen zu wissen glaubt, in welchen Kontext diese Inschrift einzupassen sei" (Braunmüller 1998: 5). Interestingly enough even when approaching methodological problems concerning runology, as Braunmüller does, the concept of 'context' seems to be taken for granted.

To keep the following discussion within reasonable limits, I shall confine the present contribution to taking up a few examples from the Scandinavian High Middle Ages, that is to say to a period of runic writing that contextually in the widest sense of the notion belonged in a digraphic society. I will invite symposium participants to fill in with further examples when discussing the points presented below.

Even if many will consider the the points below self-evident and something that goes without saying, I think it is pertinent, nonetheless, to spell them out when discussing methodological issues. I shall use some fairly trivial cases in order to try and make a few points of more general application.

It has frequently been claimed that runology primarily is a linguistic discipline of research. There is, of course, no doubt that the unveiling of a linguistic sense of an inscription should be seen as a primary task in the process of interpretation. The establishing of meaning in a wider sense, however, depends on contexts at different levels and may indeed be an inter-disciplinary undertaking, in which archaeology, history, and other fields of research should be considered equal partners. There are, then, contexts to be taken into consideration at different levels in the process of interpreting runic inscriptions – which is, as I see it, also much in line with contemporary textual theory in general. The latter point, however, does not need to be expanded on for the present purpose. The various contexts for runic interpretation should, as I

see it, be defined specifically and assigned defined or even ordered places in the process of interpretation, as we shall see later on. I shall suggest, tentatively, specific terms for the various contexts relevant to runological interpretation, starting with what has already been termed 'the immediate context'.

The immediate context shared by all inscriptions is, as I see it, constituted by the object on which they are carved. For the interpreter that implies in most cases to establish, if possible, its function. Taking the relatively extensive corpus of tags of ownership unearthed in Bergen and Trondheim as my first example, the wooden sticks carrying the inscriptions should, then, constitute a first level in what may be called or perceived of as a contextual hierarchy: What are they and what was their function? The linguistic content of these inscriptions in most cases tells us about ownership of some sort, such as ᚠᚢᚿᚼᚱᛅ = **gunara** = *Gunnarr á* = "Gunnarr owns" (N702, Bergen) or ᛅᚱᚿᛁᛅ = **arnia** = *Árni á* = "Arni owns" (N782, Trondheim) etc. Simple sentences such as these are, as is well known, often expanded with a grammatical object, such as ᛁᚢᚿ� : ᛅᛘᛁᚴ = **simun : amik** = *Símun á mik* = "Simon owns me" (N732, Bergen) or ᚢᚱᛘᚱᛅᛆᛋᛁᚴ = **urmrasek** = *Ormr á sekk* = "Ormr owns the sack" (N796, Trondheim) and so on. These short messages, as is also well known, are conveyed on sticks varying in shape, but almost invariably made so as to make it possible to tie them onto other objects by way of a lace or a cord of some sort. Similar sticks, then, carrying only a personal name, or even initials, can in consequence by contextual analogy quite safely be identified as marks of ownership. Such identification may be taken to represent a contextually based interpretation of function which may consequently represent a first step in an analysis of meaning in a wider sense than the mere denotation of a personal name or a simple sentence. The linguistic and runological form of an inscription may as such be considered integral part of the first level in the contextual hierarchy: There are sometimes in the inscriptions themselves linguistic or runological features that point to other geographical areas of origin than the location on which the inscribed objects were discovered. In the corpus of ownership or 'name tags' from Bergen and Trondheim there are such features to take into consideration when establishing an immediate context for some inscriptions. Thus the N670 from Bryggen in Bergen, ᛒᚮᛏᛚᛅᛁᚠᚱᛅ = **botlaifra** = *Bótleifr á* = "Botleifr owns", displays apparent Gotlandic features, wheras N791 from Trondheim, ᚼᚱᛁᚠᛚᛅ ᛅ = **hrifla a** = *Hrifla á* = "Hrifla owns", points to Icelandic (for details cf. Liestøl 1970 and Hagland 1988: 148).

Immediate context: the environment

The next step, let us call it step two, in establishing an immediate contextual hierarchy would, in the case that interests us here, obviously be to turn to archaeology in order to find as much as possible of relevant information about the environment in which the objects were excavated. This kind of information may, of course, vary even when a fairly uniform group of inscriptions such as the tags of ownership is concerned. In most cases it is possible to date the actual archaeological layers in some way or other. We need not go into details about this here. Suffice it now, as an example, just to point to the detailed account by Christophersen et al. (1988: 38–61 and 162–203) for the Trondheim material. For the runologist it is, in any case, necessary always to bear in mind the methodological point that archaeologists make: The dating of the immediate context at this level is not synonymous with the dating of each individual object contained in that context. Yet more often than not we see that runologists take the archaeological dating of the layer in which an inscribed object is found to be *the* dating of it.

Even so, dating the immediate context is important in order to establish the kind of contextual hierarchy suggested above. Using the Trondheim material once again as an example we can see a possibility, in some cases, for establishing a context that may also reveal aspects beyond the temporal dimension. In a contextual analysis of the totality of finds made on the municipal library cite in Trondheim Christophersen and Nordeide (1994) did single out the twenty-three rune-inscribed tags of ownership unearthed in Trondheim as a group. With two exceptions only, these finds belonged in contexts that were fairly concentrated both temporally and spatially. They were unearthed in two archaeologically defined phases or layers that have been dated to the periods c. 1175–1225 and c. 1225–1275 respectively. Spatially they all belonged in a restricted area to the west of a medieval street that was excavated in this particular part of the medieval port. The 1175–1225 layer in this area was, in

addition to the ownership tags, characterized by finds relating to habitation, different crafts, and to a certain degree, trade.[1] The 1225–1275 layer was, in addition to the marks, dominated by finds that could be connected to trade and a variety of crafts, the totality of which has been taken to indicate that the buildings in the area were rented out.[2] This is, then, the immediate archaeological context in which the inscriptions that interests us here belong – the second step in the hierarchy mentioned above. It provides us with information that must be taken into consideration in the process of interpretation, even if it is not available for the entire material when for instance the ownership tags are concerned. As runologists we are in cases such as this entirely dependant on knowledge provided by the archaeologists, and co-operation as close as possible between runologist(s) and archaeologist(s) is, of course, advisable.

Implied context: interpretation of facts

If that is what can be established of knowledge taken from domains other than the linguistic reading itself when approaching the inscriptions in order to find their meaning, it should be made explicitly clear to what degree these facts can be established on scientific grounds. When used in analysis the facts need to be stated explicitly in order to make the ensuing interpretation transparent and contradictable. What may come beyond this point in the analysis, will be inference or interpretation of the facts and should be treated accordingly in scholarly discussions about runic inscriptions such as the ones taken as examples here. It is important, then, to separate contextual facts from any interpretation of these facts, also archaeological interpretation. The arguments may easily become circular if e.g. synoptical or summarizing presentations of immediate contexts are used in the unveiling of meaning as we have termed it here, of a runic inscription. An illustrative example of this kind of filtered datum may be found in Christophersen and Nordeide's (1994: 248) summing up of the contextual aspects of the runic inscriptions discovered on the site of the municipal library in Trondheim. Taking as a point of departure an interpretation by Hagland (1986: 16–31) in which the ownership tags are taken to be parts of overseas trade (from Iceland and Greenland), the authors present in their summary only objects that support that particular interpretation. In fact, the only object mentioned is a bone of walrus carved into the shape of a neat little walrus. This is taken to evidence import from Greenland, which, of course may well be so – I am at any rate not the one to contest this particular interpretation. But methodologically it should be easy to see that taking this kind of synoptical presentation to represent the state of affairs as such when the immediate context of the tags is concerned, would be to bite oneself in the tail, as it were.

As is the case with the corpus of ownership tags a wider context than what is here called 'immediate' may deepen and clarify the meaning of the inscriptions. Arguments from other disciplines of research, history in particular, should of course be used to establish a historical context as accurately as possible. As we have just seen, the immediate archaeological context of the tags of ownership excavated in Trondheim relates, to a certain extent, to trade in some sense or other. If we, then, try to see these tags as part of something which had to do with trade, it may be possible to establish a wider valid context for the use of these inscribed objects, a context that related to trade or to the exchange of goods in a port like Niðaróss. Provided this kind of context can be supported by way of evidence from independent historical sources, such as laws, saga narratives etc., we may be able to establish something which might be termed an implied context. That is to say a context established indirectly by way of

---

[1] "Feltene FE, FF og FGV markerer seg med svært mange funn, og det gjelder boligfunn så vel som andre aktiviteter. Det må ha vært drevet tilnærmet profesjonelt, i betydningen fulltidsbeskjeftigelse, med flere aktiviteter her: På FGV har det vært skomakeri, kammakeri og smie. Her har de også handlet. På FF har det vært kammakeri og handelsvirksomhet, og likeså på FE. Det er også påfallende at alle merkelappene kommer fra disse tre feltene. FK ser ut til å ha et lignende mønster, men har materiale i mindre omfang, og mangler merkelapper." (Nordeide 1989: 88)

[2] "Merkelappene har en svært konsentrert spredning: de konsentrer seg på FA, forutenom 2 på FF og én på hhv. FL og FE. Handelsfunnene er særlig konsentrert til FA. Dette kan tyde på at av FA–FU–FW (som i hovedsak utgjør eiendommen 2B+3 …) er FA foretrukket til handel, mens produksjonen i større grad er holdt på andre deler av eiendommen. Ettersom det også på disse feltene er svært variert aktivitet (lærhåndverk, beinhåndverk, tekstilhåndverk, steinsmed, handel og fiske), kan det sammen med merkelappene fra importert handelsvare tyde på at også dette området nå er beregnet på utleie." (Nordeide 1989: 100)

interpretation of relevant sources. It should explicitly be presented as such, i.e. the facts from which the implied context are deduced must be accounted for accurately. Transparency is again a prerequisite as in all scholarly reasoning and needs not be elaborated on here in further detail. What is here termed the implied context should in consequence of its definition be ordered at a level lower than the immediate context in a contextual hierarchy to be used in runological interpretation – and a step three in the process of unveiling the meaning of an inscription.

Imagined context

We all know how tempting it can be to conjure up or create possible or feasible immediate contexts in support of a certain interpretation. The ensuing risks of circularity of argumentation need no further elaboration here. This kind of temptation may, of course, be experienced as particularly urgent when objects found in isolation with no known immediate context are concerned. Two inscriptions from medieval Trondheim, N833 and N849, may serve to illustrate slightly different aspects of contextual obscurity that may easily trigger creative suggestions of feasible immediate contexts. The former, N833, is carved on the two sides of a flat, now broken, piece of wood, sized 68×23×2 mm. On one side (side a) is carved: ᛒᛅᚱᛏᚾᛏᚱᛁᚦᛁᚼ[---, **spyrastriþih**[---, *spyr Ástriði h*[---, "ask Astrid, s(he)/i(f) [---". On the reverse side (side b): ??? ᛁᚾᛁ[---, **??? ast**[---, *??? Ást/ást*[---. The latter, N849, is carved on a wooden stick, 110×7×9 mm, sharpened in one of its ends: ᛁᚠᚼᛏᛁᚱ, **agætir**, *ágætir,* "excellent", i. e., masc. plur. nominative of the adjective *ágætr*.

The function of the objects on which the inscriptions are carved seems unclear in both cases. The N833 is carved on a small piece of wood, having no apparent function beyond that of carrying the inscription, a so-called *rúnakefli* it seems, now broken and its text preserved only in part. We shall, in consequence, have to move to what we have already termed step two in order to establish some sort of immediate context for this inscription: The object was excavated in archaeological layers that have been dated to the period c. 1175–c. 1275, an area with very mixed activity, including that of serving as living quarters, according to the field reports (cf. Nordeide 1989: 88f, 100). This does not give us very much in terms of a context to help interpretation beyond the interrupted linguistic sense on the two inscribed sides. Linguistically a possible continuation of side a could be **h**(**on**) … or **h**(**várt**) …, the latter introducing an interrogative subordinate clause, the former introducing a new sentence. In order to make any meaning of the fragmented inscription, we need, as we can all see, to have a context that exceeds the temporal clue that archaeology can provide. Such a context is not available to the present-day runologist, and any attempt at finding one belongs in the sphere of fiction or guesswork and should be explicitly presented as such when or if the interpreter feels tempted to follow that path. The temptation to make up feasible imagined contexts in cases such as this may, no doubt, sometimes feel almost irresistible to the runologist striving to find a meaning in what was once carved. We should always bear in mind, however, that imagined or constructed contexts may easily acquire the status of what has above been termed implied context. An incomplete text as tantalizing as the present one, of course, represents a challenge to temperateness in constructing possible or imaginable contexts. A good story does not change easily, and once established it easily sticks to the inscription and may be difficult to get rid of in the literature about it, as amply evidenced e.g. by Magnus Olsen's imaginative construction of a context for the inscription N492 in Nidaros Cathedral. The inscription consists of a series of syllables with the same consonant followed by varying vowels: ᚱᛁᚱᚢᚱᛁᚱᛁᚱᛁᚱᛅᚱᚯᚱᛦ, **reruririrerærøry**. The function of these repetitions has been discussed over the years, a definite conclusion of which, however, seems to remain rather open. Sophus Bugge suggested in the late 19th century that it should be taken to be some sort of spelling exercise. This was rejected by Ingvald Undset and later by Magnus Olsen (Undset 1888: 14, NIyR V: 55f.) but in recent years the idea that it should most probably be seen as some sort of runic syllabary has re-occurred (cf. Seim 1998: 508–511). Magnus Olsen argues that the inscription should, without much doubt, be considered part of the medieval hexacorde, the second tune of which was *ut re* etc.: "We may perhaps imagine that the inscription was in fact carved by a stone cutter who took pleasure in singing while carrying out his work. A particular tune may have struck the singer's mind, according to which tune he may have

adjusted the sequence of the eight vowels, each having its inherent normal pitch."[3] In subsequent literature it has indeed proved difficult to overlook such a marvellously constructed implied context!

The function of the object on which N849 is carved, is equally obscure. As the wooden stick is sharpened in one of its ends, it seems to have served a practical purpose of some sort, a purpose that cannot now be identified with any degree of certainty. It belongs in an archaeological layer that can be dated to the period c. 1225–c. 1275 from an area dominated by handicraft, according to the field reports, craft related to textile, bone and leather in particular (Nordeide 1989: 92). That is what information we have as far as the immediate context of the inscription is concerned. Judging by the linguistic content of the inscription, an implied context relating it to some sort of handicraft seems feasible, but is difficult to establish with any degree of certainty, as long as the exact function of the object remains unknown. What exactly it was that deserved to be valued as 'excellent' will in consequence be hidden to us. But we can all see a range of possible implied contexts that would create unambiguous meanings to this one word inscription. Again, that would belong in the sphere of fiction and should be left at that in runological interpretation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, the concept of 'context' needs, it seems, to be more specifically defined than has usually been the case in runological interpretation. It should, as the present contributor sees it, be stated explicitly what kind of 'context' we have in mind when using this particular notion in our work. That is not necessarily to say that strict schematic rules for interpretative procedure are what we should be looking for. Even so, a consensus about what different levels of 'context' we need would probably be a step in the right direction. An awareness of 'context' as a multi-levelled notion when used in the process of runological interpretation would probably help to make interpretations of inscriptions less impressionistic than what we have sometimes seen in scholarly work on runology over the years. Would perhaps a guide to runological analysis be something to wish for, we may perhaps ask. My answer to that would simply be to quote Henrik Ibsen – "I preferably ask, answering is not so much my task" (Ibsen 2009: 601: "jeg spørger kun; mit kald er ej at svare").

Bibliography

Braunmüller, Kurt, 1998: "Methodische Probleme in der Runologie – einige Überlegungen aus linguistischer Sicht." In *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung*, ed. Klaus Düwel, 3–23. Berlin/New York.

B + number = Runic inscription from Bryggen in Bergen (registration number in the Runic Archives, Oslo).

Christophersen, Axel, and Sæbjørg W. Nordeide, 1994: *Kaupangen ved Nidelva*. Riksantikvarens skrifter 7. Trondheim.

Christophersen, A, E. Jondell, O. Marstein, S.W. Nordeide and I. Reed, 1988: *Utgraving, kronologi og bebyggelsesutvikling*. Fortiden i Trondheim bygrunn: Folkebibliotekstomten, Meddelelser 13. Trondheim.

Hagland, Jan Ragnar, 1986: *Runefunna. Ei kjelde til handelshistoria*. Fortiden i Trondheim bygrunn: Folkebibliotekstomten, Meddelelser 8. Trondheim. 2nd ed. 1990.

——,1988: "Runematerialet frå gravingane i Trondheim og Bergen som kjelder til islandshandelen i mellomalderen." *Historisk tidsskrift* 67, 145–156.

Ibsen, Henrik, 2009: *Henrik Ibsens Skrifter*, vol. 11. Oslo.

Liestøl, Aslak, 1970: "Botlaifr." *Gotländsk arkiv* 42, 73–76.

N + number = Inscription published in *Niyr*.

Niyr = *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer*, vols. I–VI. Oslo 1941–1990. [=N1–N773.] [N774–N894 on internet: http://www..hf.ntnu.no/nor/Publikk/RUNER/runer-N774-N894.htm.]

---

[3] "Vi tør kanskje forestille oss at innskriften er ristet av en stenhugger som har hatt glede av å synge under arbeidets gang. En bestemt melodi kan ha foresvevet sangeren, og efter den kan han ha avpasset rekkefølgen av de 8 vokaler alt efter som deres iboende n o r m a l e tonehøide tilsa." (NIyR V: 55f.)

Nordeide, Sæbjørg W. 1989: *"...De beste Bønder i Kiøbstæden...": En funksjons- og aktivitetsanalyse basert på gjenstandsmaterialet.* Riksantikvarens skrifter 20. Trondheim.

Seim, Karin Fjellhammer, 1998: "Runes and Latin Script: Runic Syllables." In *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung*, ed. Klaus Düwel, 508–511. Berlin/New York.

Undset, Ingvald, 1888: *Indskrifter fra middelalderen i Throndhjems domkirke*. Christiania.