

Runes and words: runology in a lexicographical context

Judith Jesch

The latest Samnordisk runtextdatabas records 6578 inscriptions: 270 in the older futhark, 3635 from the Viking Age, and 2673 labelled “medieval”. This is a substantial corpus of the Scandinavian languages through well over a millennium that is frequently ignored by dictionaries, which overwhelmingly draw their material from manuscript sources. For example, the “Einleitung” to the *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (first published 1957-60) begins by claiming that “Wir kennen die altwestnordische sprache ausschliesslich aus literarischen quellen” (de Vries 1977: vii). Going beyond just lexicographers and Old West Norse, historians can still claim that the medieval Scandinavian laws “are the oldest surviving texts in the vernacular in all Scandinavian countries” (Nedkvitne 2005: 290).

Some dictionaries do include runic evidence, though rarely thoroughly or systematically. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* focuses on “the words used in this old classical literature”, as one would expect from the title, but does list “Runic inscriptions” in the “Classification of works and authors cited in this dictionary” (Cleasby et al. 1957: xii). However, the number of examples actually cited is very small, even the entry on *rún* does not make use of any runic inscriptions. Other dictionaries of Old West Norse tend to exclude runic inscriptions. I have not found any runic material in Fritzner (1883-1972), while the *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* (ONP) explicitly restricts itself to “the vocabulary of the prose writings of Old Norse, as transmitted in Norwegian and Icelandic manuscripts” (1989: 15). Finnur Jónsson’s *Lexicon Poeticum* cites runic vocabulary from the Karlevi inscription because it is included in his edition of skaldic poetry, but not I think otherwise. On the East Norse side, Söderwall’s *Ordbok öfver svenska medeltids-språket* (1884-1918) and its *Supplement* (1953-73) both explicitly exclude runic inscriptions, while the ongoing *Gammeldansk Ordbog* does include runic inscriptions, but only later ones that are contemporary with its manuscript sources, i.e. from c. 1100.

Most dictionary-makers, whether dealing with living or dead languages, have an enormous body of material on which to base their definitions, and have to be selective. As these examples show, this selection is done according to a particular understanding of the source language, which can be defined both geographically and chronologically. Historical dictionaries can further restrict the material through the sources they use, thus Söderwall excludes the Swedish laws, while Fritzner and ONP do use the Norwegian and Icelandic ones.

There is no dictionary of all runic inscriptions as such. Apart from passing reference in some dictionaries, there are however a variety of lexical aids. Most of the volumes of the national corpus editions (DR, NiyR, SR) include glossaries, or word-lists, and there is Lena Peterson’s *Svenskt runordsregister* (1989 and subsequent editions) for the Viking Age inscriptions. While the “Ord- og navneforråd” of *Danmarks runeindskrifter* is ambitious, frequently providing notes on etymology, interpretation or cognates, these other lists mostly give only minimal grammatical information and simple, if any, definitions, in the modern national languages. Presumably there is no dictionary of runic inscriptions since, as we have seen, dictionaries tend to be based on a particular language, and there is no “runic” language as such. A “runic” dictionary would be one that selected its evidence based on the alphabet, rather than on the language, in which its source material was written. Although this would be a departure from usual lexicographical practice, there are several reasons why such a dictionary would make sense, not least because the runic material is largely ignored by other dictionaries and still needs fully to be recorded.

However, a dictionary based on the whole runic corpus is unlikely to be feasible. The runic corpus extends over quite a bit more than a millennium, and a wide geographical area covering (albeit unevenly) much of Europe. Even leaving aside those inscriptions in which runes are used to write a non-Germanic language, such as Latin, it is clear that the corpus is not all in one language and is therefore unlikely easily to be encompassed in one dictionary. It could be argued that it would be better to split the runic corpus into its constituent languages and incorporate the material into the respective dictionaries. The ongoing *Dictionary of Old English*, for instance, does include Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions in its source material. The majority of these inscriptions are earlier than the majority of Old English manuscripts, though

there is some overlap, providing a useful parallel to the Scandinavian situation, where there is a similarly uneven, but overlapping, chronological distribution of inscriptions and manuscripts. One could conclude that, since runic inscriptions are just another way of writing languages for which we have other sorts of evidence, it would be artificial to split them off on the basis of alphabet for the purposes of lexicography. Yet that is exactly what has on the whole been done for the Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian vernaculars.

A dictionary restricted to the Scandinavian corpus, as reflected in the contents of the Samnordisk runtextdatabas, would however have its own coherence, and would have several benefits. Since this corpus is relatively small, it would be possible to take all of it into account, in a way that is not possible with the manuscript material that forms the basis of other dictionaries of the early Scandinavian languages. Inscriptions in the runic corpus are relatively easily datable and, since few involve transmission by copying, they are less likely to be a linguistic palimpsest and more likely to be accurately representative of the language of their time and place. The runic corpus also covers those parts of the Scandinavian world where we have little or no evidence for manuscripts in the Scandinavian vernacular (e.g. Greenland, or Britain and Ireland). Over half of the Scandinavian runic corpus records the respective languages before they were written in manuscripts, and thereby provides evidence for the antecedent languages. Even those runic inscriptions that overlap chronologically and geographically with manuscript writing emanate from different socio-cultural circumstances and so give insights into different registers and usages. Thus, there are many good reasons to isolate the vocabulary of runic inscriptions from that recorded in the partially overlapping manuscript record, and a runic dictionary would have much to contribute to our understanding of both the diachronic and the diatopic development of the Scandinavian languages.

Because of the smallness of the corpus, and because of the materiality of the inscriptions, it would also be possible to make a runic dictionary in a distinctive way. Dictionary-makers distinguish between different kinds of definitions. Among others, synthetic (basically synonyms), analytical (essentially explanatory) and encyclopedic (reflecting real world knowledge) definitions can be ranked on an increasing scale of richness of information (Geeraerts 2003: 89-90). The runic corpus is particularly suitable for what I have in the past called “discursive” definitions, somewhere between the analytical and the encyclopedic. An example of such definitions from a rather different type of corpus are the entries in the ongoing *Vocabulary of English Place-Names* (Parsons et al. 1997-) which are, essentially, short word-studies. These can include discussions of etymology, attestations in other sources, linguistic development, semantic range, figurative or metaphorical usages, and relationships with other words in the same or similar semantic fields, as well as providing modern meaning equivalents. More detailed word-studies are, of course, a well-established field of research in Scandinavian philology, and have of course been applied to some runic vocabulary (the dreaded *þegn* and *drengr* spring to mind). But a dictionary containing such shorter word-studies would be singularly appropriate, I argue, to the skaldic corpus, and could be encompassed with a comprehensive account of all the vocabulary in runic inscriptions, not just the more exciting words.

A short lecture is not the place to take this more comprehensive view. My concern in the lecture at the conference will instead be to explore what it is that is so special about the runic corpus that it might justify this more expansive approach to dictionary-making, beyond the already-existing word-lists. In addition, I will focus on the processes by which we establish the meanings of words in Viking Age and medieval inscriptions in Scandinavian runes.

Many of these processes are traditional in historical philology, especially semantics. However, runic inscriptions present a different kind of textuality which requires more than purely linguistic methods to decode it. There has been some discussion about the nature of runology, whether it is purely a philological or linguistic discipline, or whether a study of the inscriptions also has to take account of physical and other contexts (e.g. Peterson 1995, Lerche Nielsen 1997). On the whole, opinions are not totally polarised but fit into a continuum, with different scholars emphasising different aspects. More recently, younger scholars in particular have been investigating the ways in which the whole runic object “means” (Stern 2009, Bianchi 2010), showing how the decoration, design and layout of rune stones in particular contribute to the “meaning” of the inscriptions, making them multi-modal objects. I myself have argued (Jesch 1998) that the “materiality” of rune stones is as much a part of their meaning as their textuality. And at a broader level, Terje Spurkland (2004: 342)

has proposed the term “runacy” in recognition of the fact that writing in runes differs from manuscript literacy both in its medium and its communicative contexts. The implication is that “runate” texts, differently written, also require different forms of reading.

Such discussions can seem to stretch the concept of “meaning” beyond that which seems appropriate in a lexicographical context, though even here there is a recognition that words cannot be understood without some reference to the world in which they are used. Christian Kay has shown (2000: 64-5) how lexicographers often operate in a pragmatic way which acknowledges this need for real-world reference, while semantic theorists, unencumbered by the practical necessity of providing definitions, more often ignore it, and she argued for the importance of what she called “interdisciplinary semantics”, a concept that is particularly useful for runic inscriptions. But even without getting too deeply into the ways in which the visual, material, pseudo-runic or non-runic aspects of runic inscriptions can “mean”, it is possible to see that these aspects help to understand what the runic texts say and, therefore, what the words in them mean. We do not easily have access to real-world knowledge from the time the inscriptions were made, but their material contexts do suggest one aspect of this real-world knowledge, or at least they present something that is real. Similarly, the linguistic and communication contexts of runic inscriptions are often rather particular, as many have shown (e.g. Spurkland 2005), and also need to be taken into account in the analysis.

This then is the starting-point: runology in a lexicographical context requires a reading of the runes in their own particular range of contexts. The list below is a provisional attempt to identify the contexts most relevant to an understanding of runic vocabulary, which I may have refined by the time of the conference. My paper at the conference will concentrate on presenting a detailed analysis of a selection of words and phrases to demonstrate how some of the features listed below can contribute to our understanding of this vocabulary, beyond any synthetic or analytical definitions that might be found in a dictionary, and to explore the features that would need to be taken into account in such expanded definitions.

- semantic contexts:
 - immediate (e.g. collocations)
 - structural (e.g. synonyms, antonyms)
 - onomastic (given names and nicknames)
- discourse contexts:
 - formulas
 - deixis
 - poetry
- physical contexts:
 - the object itself/materiality
 - decorative and structural elements
 - physical surroundings
- functional contexts:
 - communication
 - monumentality

The aim of the analysis will be to explore:

- the implications of considering vocabulary within the confines of the runic corpus, without ignoring the other evidence we might have for it from the manuscript tradition;
- the range of aspects of the inscription as both text and object that contribute to the meaning of individual words and phrases.

Bibliography

- Bianchi, Marco, 2010: *Runor som resurs*. Runrön 20. Uppsala.
- Cleasby, Richard, Gudbrand Vigfusson and Sir William A. Craigie, 1957: *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford.
- Dictionary of Old English*. Toronto 1986- .
- DR = *Danmarks Runeindskrifter*, by Lis Jacobsen and Erik Moltke. 3 vols. (*Text, Atlas, Registre*).

- København 1941-42.
- Finnur Jónsson, 1931. *Lexicon Poeticum*. 2nd ed. Copenhagen.
- Fritzner, Johan, 1883-96: *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog*. 3 vols. 2nd ed. Christiania.
- , 1972: *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog: Rettelser og tillegg*, by Finn Hødnebo. Oslo.
- Gammeldansk Ordbog*. = <http://dsl.dk/sprog/ordboger-og-sprogteknologi/gammeldansk-ordbog> [accessed 3 June 2010].
- Geraerts, Dirk, 2003: "Meaning and Definition." In *A Practical Guide to Lexicography*, ed. Piet van Sterkenburg, 83-93. Philadelphia.
- Jesch, Judith, 1998: "Still Standing in Ågersta: Textuality and Literacy in Late Viking-Age Rune Stone Inscriptions." In *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung*, ed. Klaus Düwel and Sean Nowak, 462-75 + Tafel 9. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 15. Berlin.
- Kay, Christian, 2000: "Historical Semantics and Historical Lexicography: will the twain ever meet?" In *Lexicology, Semantics and Lexicography: Selected Papers from the Fourth G. L. Brook Symposium, Manchester, August 1998*, ed. Julie Coleman, 53-68. Philadelphia.
- Lerche Nielsen, Michael, 1997: "Runologien mellem sprogvidenskaben og arkæologien – med et sideblik på de forskellige tolkninger af Glavendrupindskriften." In *Beretning fra sekstende tværfaglige vikingesymposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen and Hans Frede Nielsen, 37-51. Moesgård.
- Nedkvitne, Arved, 2005: "Administrative Literacy in Scandinavia 1000-1350." In *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann, 286-302. Viking Collection 16. Odense.
- NIyR = *Norges innskifter med de yngre runer*, by Magnus Olsen et al. 6 vols. to date. Oslo 1941- .
- ONP = *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog: Register*. Copenhagen 1989.
- Parsons, David, et al. 1997- : *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names*. 3 vols. to date. Nottingham.
- Peterson, Lena, 1989: *Svenskt runordsregister*. Uppsala [and subsequent editions].
- , 1995: "Runologi. Forsök till ett aktuellt signalement." *Saga och Sed* 1995, 39-54.
- Samnordisk runtextdatabas 2.5 = <http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>, 2008.
- Spurkland, Terje, 2004: "Literacy and 'Runacy' in Medieval Scandinavia." In *Scandinavia and Europe 800-1350: Contact, conflict, and coexistence*, ed. Jonathan Adams and Katherine Holman, 334-44. Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 4. Turnhout.
- , 2005: "Viking Age Literacy in Runes — a Contradiction in Terms?" In *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann, 136-50. Viking Collection 16. Odense.
- SR = *Sveriges runinskrifter*. Stockholm 1900- .
- Stern, Marjolein, 2009: "Sigurðr Fáfnisbani as commemorative motif." In *Á austrvega: Saga and East Scandinavia: Preprint Papers of the 14th International Saga Conference*, ed. Agneta Ney et al., 898-905. Papers from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences 14. Gävle.
- Söderwall, K. F., 1884-1918. *Ordbok öfver svenska medeltids-språket*. 3 vols. Lund.
- , 1953-73. *Ordbok öfver svenska medeltids-språket: Supplement*. 2 vols. Lund.
- Vries, Jan de, 1977: *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. 3rd ed. Leiden.