

Portals to the Past:

Distribution Patterns in Stave Church Inscriptions

Annette Jones

The stave church inscriptions are unique in Europe, allowing us to hear the voices of a large and otherwise voiceless sector of society: rural people. We have many rune-sticks from Bergen and other towns, but far more people lived in rural areas than urban ones. Not all of the inscriptions in stave churches were made by people who lived there: some were by outsiders, such as Sigurðr Jarlssonr declaring on Vinje stave church portal N170 that he would not reconcile with King Sverrir during the civil war; others were made by priests and builders, who may or may not have been locals. But a closer examination of the texts and their location within the churches may shed some light on who wrote them, and thus perhaps on the lives of this silent majority.

Surprisingly, the stave church texts have not yet been studied as an individual corpus. Although an argument can be made for studying all church inscriptions as a corpus, the stave churches differ sufficiently from the stone churches not just in their material, but in their geographical distribution, that they may be studied together apart from other churches. There was a tendency to replace wooden churches with stone ones when this could be afforded, which caused a relation of stone churches to the urban milieu and regions with a strong royal or archiepiscopal influence.

Table 1. Geographical distribution of church inscriptions.

County	Total no. of church texts	Stave church texts	No. of inscribed stave churches	Stone church texts	No. of inscribed stone churches
Østfold	7			7	3
Akershus & Oslo	1			1	1
Oppland	55	47	8	8	2
Buskerud	36	36	5		
Telemark	23	21	6	2	1
Rogaland	8			4	2
Hordaland	9			6	1
Sogn og Fjordane	117	107	7	10	2
Møre og Romsdal	9	8	1	1	1
Sør-Trøndelag	42	1	1	40	1
Nord-Trøndelag	15			15	2
Total	325	220	28	97	18

As table 1 shows, only six counties have inscribed stave churches. This includes data from lost churches, but uninscribed churches have not been listed. If the forty texts from Nidaros cathedral are excluded, the stone churches only provide 57 texts; a quarter the number from stave churches. This may be because wood was a more attractive surface to write runes on, or simply because the stone walls were re-plastered, covering old graffiti. The stone churches provide a further five texts on wood, but this material may be from defunct stave churches. Sogn og Fjordane is a region particularly rich in church graffiti; four of its stave churches are among the most inscribed; the other three in this table are remnants of lost churches.

The distribution of stave church runes is highly uneven, but not random. It was not just medieval stone replacements which threatened stave church survival, but the Reformation tendency to enlarge or replace them by log-built structures. Renovation could be almost as devastating as destruction for survival of graffiti, as the Protestants were not troubled by the Catholic notion that it was sacrilege to destroy parts of a consecrated building. Thus some churches, usually the most altered, have no inscriptions and others very few. It is no coincidence that Borgund, the least altered, also has the most texts and is thus the only church which might provide anything like a complete picture, although it may not be typical. The distribution of texts within the church is certainly not random, as I shall demonstrate.

The Locational Approach

Stave churches vary somewhat in plan. All have a nave with supporting pillars, the staves: some as rows of free standing pillars; some as a single central pillar; others incorporated into the walls. There is usually a chancel to the east, containing the altar; this was the most holy space, entered only by the priest or his assistants. These chancels often had an apse to the east. There were usually portals to the west and south of the nave, sometimes just one, often both; sometimes also in the south of the chancel and occasionally to the north of the nave. Many stave churches had a pentice, or covered walkway, round the outside to protect the walls from the weather and provide some structural support. Other rune-bearing spaces in the church included the rafters, where builders could paint, and under the floors, where amulets or rune-sticks could be pushed.

The most common alterations done to stave churches were: removal of the pentice; widening of the chancel and removal of its apse; and adding wings to make the nave cruciform. As these surfaces are heavily inscribed in undamaged churches, it is fair to surmise that many inscriptions have been lost by such alterations (see table 2). Portals tend to be preserved, although may be moved within the church, or even to a local farm, so there are relatively more portal inscriptions from less-inscribed and lost churches than from the most inscribed ones. When wings are added, the location of any side portals is lost, so it cannot be determined which pillars related to them, as at Lom.

Table 2. Survival of church parts and texts on them.

Church	Total texts	Chancel	Chancel texts	Pentice	Exterior texts	Nave	Nave texts
Borgund	38	√	6	√	23	√	4
Lom	26	#	4	X		#	21
Urnes	22	#	2	#	5	√	15
Hopperstad	21	#	11	X		√	9
Kaupanger	16	#	5	X	2	√	9
Gol	13	#	8	X		#	3
Torpo	10	x		X		√	5
Rødven	8	#		X	2	#	?
Uvdal	7	#	2	X		#	2
Hedal	7	x		#	7	#	
Eidsborg	6	x		#	5	#	1
Høre	5	x		X		#	2
Nore	2	#		X		#	2
Ringebu	2	x		X		#	2
Røldal	2	#	2	?		#	
Hegge	1	#		X		#	1
Heddal	1	#		X	1	#	
Reinli	1	√		√		√	1
Total	188		40		45		77

Survival of a part is shown by a tick; its destruction by a x. Alterations, however severe, are represented by #.

The uninscribed churches have generally been very altered. Reinli is an anomaly as it seems to retain many medieval features, yet has only one text. It is somewhat late, dating from the 1320s (Anker 2005: 246). The other three churches from this date or later have no runes, nor do the parts of other churches from 1300 or later. This may be due to the Black Death, which hit rural Norway extremely hard, halving its population; as it is so hard to date runic inscriptions, this hypothesis remains to be verified. Blindheim (1985: 12) noted a corresponding paucity of pictorial graffiti from these late churches, but he surmised it related to the lack of elaborately carved portals and thus no skilled artisan to doodle them.

Heddal may have kept its chancel, but the pillars have been removed and no texts remain inside it. The vast majority of the nave texts are on pillars rather than walls. Walls tend to survive, but may have been planed or painted over; are there many inscriptions hidden beneath the paint, waiting to be discovered, or was there something about the pillars which made people more inclined to write on them? Both internal surfaces may have been damaged by lye washing (Blindheim 1985: 12). Outside, there appears to have been a preference for writing

on the pentice rather than the walls of the church; this plus weathering means that most external texts have been lost with pentice removal.

Locational analysis considers both the material context, the position of the text within the stave church, and the textual context, its relationship to other inscriptions. When considering the locational distribution of texts throughout the church, the legibility or comprehensibility of a text can be considered less relevant than its presence. Of the 220 stave church texts, 27 cannot be reliably located to an area of the church. Although some of those have had their location recorded I need to clarify the reliability of this data so I have excluded it from discussions here. 60 of the texts have an uncertain meaning and thus cannot be categorised. In order to analyse the location of different types of inscription, only enough of the text to be confident of its categorisation needs to be clear. It is only when a text is sufficiently problematic for this to be uncertain that textual issues become a concern at this level of analysis. Thus 140 texts can be analysed in this locational manner. The categories discussed in this paper are names, prayers and holy references, including God, the Virgin Mary and other saints. Other interpretable texts include futharks, comments, cryptography, Latin etc.

It was Blindheim's theory that the graffiti must have been made by builders prior to consecration. He had several reasons for this: some of the graffiti is high up the walls; it would be disrespectful to mark a consecrated church so they must have been made before this occurred; the building team would include an artistic carver to make the portals. I have to take some of his points and agree that some of the graffiti was clearly made by builders. But his claims give a false impression of the location of most graffiti. In fact, apart from the tar paintings in the rafters of some churches, there are only ten bits of graffiti high up, and the only high incised runes seem to be the result of reusing old planks. The vast majority of the incised graffiti are within human reach from the ground, either standing or kneeling prayerfully. Apart from a few well-executed artistic motifs most of this graffiti could have been made by anyone and gives more the impression of gradual accumulation. Blindheim has to admit that some of the graffiti was not made by builders, such as the ships of late medieval design. As for the contention that graffiti would be inappropriate after consecration, it has to be noted how restrained both the runic and pictorial graffiti is in comparison to that from secular sites. Blindheim himself noted 'it is a little surprising that there is no trace of anything verging on the obscene' (1985: 60) and none of the runic texts are remotely scurrilous.

Some texts were unequivocally made by builders, and this group of writers can rarely be excluded from the group of possible authors when considering any given text, as they had total access to all parts of the building before any bits became less accessible either physically or socially. However, some texts have content unlikely to have originated from this group, such as N150 from Atrå **aslagr pr(e)str reit runar þessar**, *Áslakr prestur reit rúnar þessar* (underlining signifies bindrunes). Áslakr the priest was unequivocally not a builder! Also the first half of Borgund N351: **þórir ræist runar þissar þan olaus messoæpþan (e)rhan for herum**, *Þórir reist rúnar þessar þann Ólausmessaptan, er han fór hér um*. Olaf's mass eve, when Þórir travelled past, was in summer, but N368 on the same church was made in winter: the first half says **klemetr ræistru(n)arþesarsunutahþanernestræpt(e)riol** *Klemetr ræist rúnar þessar sunnudag þann, er næstr er eptir jól*. It seems unlikely that the building work would have taken this long, or have taken place on a Sunday, or in the depths of winter, or during Christmas celebrations. Nor does it seem likely that builders would have had the ecclesiastical education to write N406 in Hopperstad, a long Latin text showing signs of manuscript literacy.

So who made most of the runic graffiti if not builders? Priests are a likely candidate as they were educated and literate and knew runes, as Áslakr has told us in N150 above. Most of the texts claiming authorship do not claim priesthood however, so they were presumably by laymen. Travellers are another possibility, as in N351 above. These non-locals have to be considered, but just because there are some texts which clearly implicate them does not mean that most texts could not have been made by parishioners. Comparisons can also usefully be drawn not just between priestly and lay writers, but potentially between men and women as they stood on opposite sides of the church during mass. Before or after services was a likely time for people to have written runes. There is a bishop's letter (Spurkland 2005: 157-8) which tells people not to be unruly at such times, but to circulate in an orderly manner among the graves, praying for souls. Some of the runic texts clearly fit such a context.

An overwhelming majority of the texts on nave pillars are on the western half of the pillar.

This is the surface most accessible to and legible by the congregation as they stood facing the chancel. It seems unlikely that the reason for this can be found in the concealment of an illicit writing activity from the sight of the priest during mass; not only do the texts not show signs of illicit content, but it would seem likely that such activity would be legislated against if it were a problem, for which I have not encountered any evidence. What it does support is the theory that texts were produced during use of the church rather than construction, as the latter would be unlikely to reveal a preference for which side of the pillar was written on.

If this method of text production is accepted, then an examination of the texts in light of their location and relationship to the structure and to each other can shed light on both their authors and on the usage of the church. Some patterns are revealed by simply examining all the church plans with the texts plotted onto them; others show up best if all the texts of a certain type are plotted onto a generalised plan. Of course, care has to be taken when using this approach, as there are considerable differences in plan, which often vary according to region. Nonetheless, it is a useful tool when used with suitable caution.

Patterns

Especially for those churches which have just a few texts, patterns can most clearly be revealed by plotting texts of each category from all churches onto the generalised plan. For example, there are 59 texts containing personal names; 47 of which are securely located. This shows that personal names are a popular thing to write, occurring in just over a third of interpretable texts.

Table 3. Known locations of texts with personal names. 'Nave' excludes texts near portals; each quarter of the nave is further analysed.

	Rafters	Chancel	Exterior	Portals	Nave	NE	NW	SW	SE
Total	4	8	10	12	13	2	2	2	7
Male	3	7	9	9	11		2	2	7
Female	1	1	2	3	2	2			

An examination of the genders of the people named is revealing, bearing in mind that women stood to the north and men to the south of the nave. These texts contain 87 names, only 9 of which are female. The only female name incised in a chancel is on the north side, possibly in reach of the nave, Gol N568; as is the only female name painted in the rafters, Lom N52, above the chancel. The two male names at the back of the women's side not near portals are both from Lom; N42 is a prayer for a man; N44 is the same name as one visible in the rafters, maybe a copy. 18 texts record male authorship; none says a woman wrote it.

The pillars closest to west portals are the site of some transgression of this north-south divide: the south one at Kaupanger has N389 Petronilla; the north one has N326 Beini at Urnes; N113 Ásgrímr at Torpo; and possibly N305 Ásgautr at Fantoft/Fortun, uncertain due to Fantoft's reconstruction. This feature could be due to the nature of portal inscriptions, although the names may not be autographs; a person might write the name of someone of the opposite sex for a variety of reasons! It is also possible that male names at the back of the female side may represent travellers, most of whom would presumably be men, who had to stand on the 'wrong' side if there was no room on the south; Beini is an Icelandic name, not a local one. The highest status people in the congregation would have probably stood at the front, closest to the altar and first to partake of the host. After the reformation, when pews were put in, the richer the farm sponsoring their pew, the closer it was to the front, seen for example in Flesberg. So strangers, unless they could claim particularly high status, were likely to be relegated to the rear.

Although names are possibly the most common text to be found as graffiti anywhere, runic or otherwise, there may be different reasons for their being written on a church than elsewhere. To proclaim 'I wrote here' in a church is a religious statement; to suggest a link between writer and object, with connotations of belonging, either ownership or territory, is to suggest membership of the congregation, being part of the religion, included in the group and its belief system, to declare allegiance. Perhaps such a statement is most appropriately made by a male head of household.

Or to draw readers' attention to the person named, whether the author or someone they care for, might serve as both a prayer request to the human audience and even a prayer in itself with an audience of God and his saints. But if the sole names are prayers, we are left with the disturbing gender bias. In the explicit vernacular prayers, there is an even divide between those for the author and those for someone else; named recipients include five men and two women. But why would women be so under-represented if sole names are prayers? Their lives were every bit as hard and dangerous as men's, with high rates of death in childbed. So maybe the function is more likely to be the implicit declaration of inclusion and participation in the Christian endeavour reflected by such texts as N388 at Kaupanger **ektruiaġuþ**, *Ek trúi á Guð*.

The distribution of all nave texts reflects that of names: the NE being the least inscribed quarter, followed by the NW, although if portal texts are disregarded the NW has as few as the NE; both front and back of the south sides are heavily inscribed by comparison. This seems to suggest that men are responsible for most, if not all, of the stave church graffiti. Why this might be is a challenging question. There are enough examples of female runic literacy in the wider corpus for me to be unwilling to suppose this is an uneven spread of literacy, although that has to remain one possibility. Another suggestion is that women did not carry knives to church so it was lack of writing equipment, not knowledge (Else Mundal, personal comment 2009). If writing on the church was a form of public declaration it would be more appropriately done by heads of households, usually male. It is disappointing to find women's voices so under-represented, but it does seem clear that the men are writing primarily on their own side, so where texts do occur on the north side, especially at the front, we may well be looking at female literacy.

Prayers are another category with interesting distribution patterns. These can be divided into two types: vernacular prayers, which are not formulaic; and Latin formulaic prayers, the *Pater noster* and *Ave Maria*. There are fourteen examples of vernacular prayers from eleven churches. The ten texts which can be certainly located are found in the parts of the church accessible to the congregation, five outside on pectices or walls and five within the nave. The four uncertain ones also appear to follow this pattern. The lack of any prayers of this type within chancels suggests that their function was not to get the prayer as close to the holiest space as possible, but to serve as a reminder or a request, implying their intended audience is human rather than solely divine. That they are all unique utterances shows higher levels of literacy than rote reproduction of formulae.

The Latin formulae would have been known by everyone and as such could have had a variety of uses, from writing practice, through individual prayer, to protective formula. Orthographic differences would be expected between Latinate writers, such as priests, and lay people unfamiliar with usual praxis in this language; this will help me investigate authorship of such texts. Most of these Latin prayers occur in chancels, despite their universal nature. Others are found near portals, along with other holy references and may be used as protective formulae, which will be addressed in the next section. Three exterior texts which might be the beginning of *Pater noster* have been excluded as being uncertain.

Portals

The portals of a church are an important area, providing an interface between sacred and secular space; everyone must pass through one to enter and leave. They also admit daylight to an otherwise dark interior, which illumination may create a more attractive writing surface. So what type of inscriptions do we find in these liminal regions? I have already mentioned the Vinje text, which appears to be a legal declaration relating to sanctuary, claimed in order for the two sides in dispute to attempt reconciliation, evidently a failure in this case. There are other official announcements, such as which saint the church is dedicated to, who built the church etc., which seems totally appropriate to us, as our churches also tend to put their official notices in entrances. We also find personal names, references to God and various saints and miscellaneous other texts.

Where a text occurs in a nave, but near a portal, which of those locations was the primary reason for the choice of site? Analysis of the proportion of types of texts in various locations shows that the portals differ markedly from the rest of the nave, having a very high concentration of holy references. It seems likely that the single vernacular prayer near a portal

relates more to the nave. Names are ubiquitous to all areas, so it is unclear whether they are all drawn to portals; they are not repelled by them. The two pillars nearest the portal are regarded as being in portal proximity, as the statistics reveal them to be so.

Table 4. Proportions of categories in locations.

	Chancel	Exterior	Nave	Portal
Name	8	7	11	12
Holy reference	1	3	3	13
Latin prayer	5		2	3
Vernacular prayer		5	4	1
Misc	30	32	28	12

Eight of the holy references by portals invoke the Virgin Mary, seven are just her name, often including or entirely consisting of bindrunes in a monogram. N396 at Hopperstad includes her with God: **kupminokhiælakmaria**, *Guð minn ok hin helga María*. She is invoked on seven churches, including twice at Øye where locations are unreliable as this church has been remade from parts found below the floor of its replacement. Of these, Heddal was dedicated to Mary, as was Lom, alongside John the Baptist and St. Olaf; Hopperstad had a side altar probably dedicated to her; Urnes had a statue of her; but a letter from 1668 says Borgund was dedicated to St. Andrew and Torpo may have been dedicated to St. Margaret (Dietrichson 1892: 266, 276-84). Thus these Mary references are not simply dedication records; although they may serve a dual function.

Kaupanger A85-7 are three occurrences of various forms of *Guð gæti* explicitly invoking the protection of God. Just as castles needed strong barbicans, so churches needed to concentrate their spiritual defences by the doors. We often see grotesques carved around doorways in European churches, indeed many stave churches have marvellously carved portals with monstrous beasts, probably designed to ward off evil. The portal does not even appear to need to be functional to require such protection. N327 at Urnes names Maria on the pillar nearest the false portal created by the wonderful and famous carved panel. Despite being on the women's side of the church, this is unlikely to be a personal name as it was only used by royalty. A tankard base from Bryggen, N626, has the name Maria inside it. This is also a context associated with protective formulae, so it seems likely that the primary reason these holy references occur near portals is to invoke their powerful protection (Seim 1988: 40-42).

Other saints may also be called upon. At Vågå portal, N54 is a prayer to several saints: **betrus ... + markus ouk ... [#] (h)ialp(i)meral(e)rþeir + aubunreistmik**, *Petrus ... Markus ok ... [#] hjalpi mér allir þeir. Auðun reist mik*. Auðun is calling on Saint Peter, whom the church is dedicated to, and Saint Mark, as well as the seven sleepers, not all of whose names are legible, denoted by [#]. Portals can also carry the formal record of dedication of the church, as at the lost Nesland church N172 **þæsse kirka ær uigd sa(k)t(s) (o)l(a)u(e) ko(n)og(e)**, *Þessi kirkja er vígð Sanctus Ólafí konungi*. This church is dedicated to Saint Ólafr the King. Of course portals are the funnel through which everyone entering the church must pass and texts in this location get maximum exposure, but such a text may also implicitly invoke that saint's protection of his church.

Does any mention of a saint, especially near a portal, indicate a dedication? N323 on a pillar by the west portal at Urnes says **maghinhilg Magnús hinn helgi**. Saint Magnús was very popular in Scandinavia and this text is neatly made, having the unusual horizontal orientation sometimes used for more official runic texts; as does N327 mentioned above naming Saint Mary. It has not yet been possible to discover from other sources some of the dedicatory saints of the churches in question, which should shed light on this question. As N54 Vågå shows, both the dedicatory saint and other saints could be called upon.

As we have seen, saints are not always given a title. Some saints' names were also popular personal names, like Klementr or Jón. Is it possible to be sure whether a single name refers to a saint or a person? Jón appears four times in stave churches: twice alone; once in Borgund A307 as **ion:ihu** where the second word may be an unfinished reference to the name of his farm, or a second name such as Ígull; the last being at Kaupanger N387 which refers to John's mass day. In this last example the saint is unequivocally meant; in Borgund the rest of the text makes this more likely to be a person. So what of the other two? One is on a door from the

lost church of Ålen and is a bindrune **ion** assumed to be the name Jón, the base has a serif; the other is from Urnes N341 from the pillar to the south at the west portal and also binds the **o** and **n** but with a separate *i*-rune. The latter could be regarded as a pair to the Saint Magnús text. As it is impossible to say whether these are personal or saintly names, I have treated them as personal in the statistical analysis, but this serves to illustrate some of the complications in allocating categories to which I shall need to give much attention in my wider research.

There are two other texts near portals which could possibly have a dedicatory function. Ringebu N56 : **føyrialæs**, *fyrir alla sálar/sál* may mean ‘for all souls’ or ‘bring the fortunate’. If it is the former, this may be a dedication to All Saints. The other one is Gol N565 ***ri(s)taaamik** possibly meaning *Krist(r) á mik* Christ owns me. If the ‘me’ in question is the church speaking, this could be a Christchurch. The first rune looks like **n** but is considered in NIyR as an unfinished star rune, here acting like Greek *chi*. The second rune appears a clear **r** in the photograph in NIyR, but in fact has a **k** branch as well; either could be a scratch. The **s** and **t** are both problematic. Alone and especially located somewhat near to the door, being the second pillar from the west on the north side, the interpretation may still be plausible. But this pillar is also near N566 which begins **kysamik** and could thus have inspired a degraded copy.

It is the holy references which set portals apart from other locations within the church. The reason for this must have been to protect the vulnerable ingress from spiritual attack, by parallel with carvings both in Norway and in the rest of Europe, as well as by the phrasing of some of the texts, such as those at Kaupanger. This official spiritual function suggests that priests may be the most likely authors of such texts. There appear to be fewer other categories of texts in such a location, with the exception of names, which seem to occur just as frequently in portals as they do everywhere else. These other texts may have been written by anyone, from fleeing princes to ordinary parishioners.

Conclusions

The patterns primarily reveal gradual accretion over time during usage as a church rather than one-off deposition by builders on construction. The height of texts from the floor are demonstrably within reach of a standing or kneeling man, while the clustering towards the western side of pillars suggests an authorship and intended audience of people facing the chancel. I have to conclude that it seems likely that a wide range of people wrote on stave churches; not just builders and priests, but ordinary agrarian workers as well as occasional travellers. They wrote prayers, some of which show anxiety for safe travel, some for others, some for themselves. They wrote codes and word play, showing they had time and curiosity for such things. And they wrote their names; the urge to do so has not depleted down the centuries, even if the reasoning may have differed if names had a parallel function in this ecclesiastical context.

One needs to consider the reasons people wrote on the church in the first place, whether some of these might be more masculine, such as showing off writing ability. Several of these texts on the male side are proclaiming male authorship, even if it is linked to a request for prayer. It is impossible to recover how public an act writing on the church might have been, whether it was seen as a declaration of some kind, or whether it was a private act of devotion or supplication. One thing is clear: unlike modern graffiti the runic texts in stave churches were not illicit. Not only did priests write on their own church, but the nature of the texts we find shows that their content was entirely suitable to their context.

Bibliography

- Runic texts and numerical data compiled from NIyR, *Nytt om runer*, the Runic Archives in Oslo, and Samnordisk runtextdatabas = <http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>.
 Anker, Leif, 2005: *Kirker i Norge*, vol. 4: *Middelalder i tre: stavkirker*. Oslo.
 Blindheim, Martin, 1985: *Graffiti in Norwegian Stave Churches c.1150-c.1350*. Oslo.
 Dietrichson, L. 1892: *De norske Stavkirker*. Christiania.
 NIyR = *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer*, by Magnus Olsen et al. 6 vols. to date. 1941- .
 Seim, Karin Fjellhammer, 1988: ‘Runic Inscriptions in Latin: A Summary of Aslak Liestøl’s Fascicle (Vol. VI, 1) of NIyR.’ In *The Bryggen Papers: Supplementary series no. 2*, 24-65. Bergen.

Jones

Spurkland, Terje, 2005: *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, trans. Betsy van der Hoek. Woodbridge.