

Runes in context: Rune stones and roads

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the relationship between rune stones and contemporaneous roads in Sweden. Without doubt a rune stone had to be reached with the help of a road or at least a minor path so that it could be recognised and read by the people. A monument forgotten somewhere in the forest would not be suitable for remembrance, while remembrance seems to be the foremost reason to raise a rune stone. Furthermore, some inscriptions mention the building of a road and even more mention a bridge, which necessarily belongs to and extends a road. Therefore it is often argued that rune stones were most frequently raised in connection to roads. A closer look at several stones showed that other monuments, e.g. traces of settlement or graves, were found nearby, and I would like to ask whether the road or another construction was the reason for placing the stone at this particular place. Was the rune stone erected close to a road to be a road monument, or was the rune stone erected at places which also had to be reached by a road?

After a short survey over the state of research and the detection of roads, several inscriptions naming road and bridge building will be discussed and the placement of the stones in question will be analysed in detail. Not only the inscription but also archaeological surveys will be discussed. At the end of the paper it will be considered, whether inscription and archaeological data correspond with each other or not.

The material

A scientific treatment of rune stones started already in the 16th century. Great value was added to the find history of the stone and its location in the landscape. Several of the earliest drawings of rune stones do not only depict the stone, but even other monuments in its surrounding. This important additional information dates to times before great changes in agriculture, e.g. the invention of deep ploughing in the 19th century and the increasing demand for cropland and, partly as a consequence of this, even before great changes in the landscape took place, the dehydration of several bogs and a drawdown of the water table. When the compilations of the runic material in Sweden were written down (*Sveriges runinskrifter* I–XV, Stockholm 1900–1981, cited as SRI), the authors compiled all these older sources carefully. Some observations had to be revised later after detailed investigations, e.g. in Värmland: After an excavation of the supposed burial mound near the Järsberg stone (Vr1) in the year 1975 it became clear that the mound has to be treated as a cenotaph (Jansson 1978: 36). Several of the earliest written records for the stone from Söderby krog in Södermanland (Sö 306) state that it is standing “widh stor wägen” (Brate and Wessén 1924–1936: 282). Even today the stone is located between the country road and the highway E4/E20, but until recent excavations it was unknown, that the road crossed a Viking Age grave field (Salem 1:1), which is located 28m west of the rune stone and has now been excavated partly. If one takes only the data from SRI, the stone might be expected standing along the road. After the excavation it became obvious that the road had to be younger, because it destroyed several Viking Age graves when it was built. As a probable grave mound turns out to be a natural hill (Vr1), a probable meadow turns out to be a grave field. Therefore it is always important to proof and extend the given information from SRI with the help of recent archaeological data.

State of research

After a long period of romanticizing the past, when the rune stone was naturally placed on the *ättehög*, the forefathers’ grave mound, some scholars started to doubt this picture. Instead they reclassified the rune stones in the tradition of Roman stones, which were standing along avenues (Steenstrup 1927: 66). As a main argument stanza 72 from *Hávamál* was frequently quoted: *Sialdan bautarsteinar | standa brauto nær | nema reisi niðr at nið* (“Memory stones

seldom stand by the road, if it is not raised by a relative for one of his kin”). Most scholars take this stanza literally, in spite of the fact that *bautarsteinar* alliterates with *brauto* and that this required alliteration may mean that *brauto* was chosen for metrical reasons. But even in taking it literally, it is only stated that the stone should be standing close to the road, yet not necessarily alone. It is self-evident that a rune stone had to be located by a road, because otherwise nobody would be able to read the inscription. To my mind the aspect of raising the rune stone to honour a relative is the main message of this stanza. A honourable position might be close to the road, but probably even on a special spot, e.g. a hill or together with other remarkable monuments. The stanza is therefore no distinct proof for the theory that a road is the most suitable place for a rune stone, but only a reminder for the people to honour their relatives by raising a rune stone at a prominent spot.

As an addition to stanza 72 of *Hávamál*, Cnattingius argues with the help of an inscription, which, according to his theory, describes the rune stone itself as a *brautar-kuml* (1929: 128). Probably he is talking about the rune stone from Sälna in Uppland (U 323), but the interpretation of the inscription is not without controversy. Beck noted that *brautar-kuml* does not refer to the rune stone, but to the bridge (1978: 559). On the basis of this inscription and stanza 72 of *Hávamál*, Cnattingius developed a general rule for the location of the rune stones when he writes in a later essay: “Som allmän regel om runstenarna här liksom i andra trakter gäller, att de rests vid eller i närheten av bebyggelse och oftast vid en väg” (1930: 117).

A still frequently quoted Swedish paper on the relationship between rune stones and roads was written by Gunnar Ekholm in 1950. According to Ekholm, monuments were in general arranged along roads, but the reason to set up a rune stone at a particular spot could never be other monuments, but only the road. He argued with the help of chronology, stating that for example the cemetery of Lunda in Uppland (Lunda 91:1 / SHM 23794) derived “från en helt annan och äldre tid än runstenen”, probably U 356 (1950: 138). About 250 graves were registered there and six random examinations by Ekholm in 1947 could show that the grave field was used in the Roman Iron Age and onwards. Since only six out of probable 250 graves were excavated, no definite time span can be stated for the use of the grave field. The shape of the graves (19 mounds, approximately 172 rounded stone settings, 5 square-cut stone settings, 9 rectangular stone settings, 1 triangular stone setting and 43 raised stones) makes it strongly reasonable that the grave field was used during the whole Iron Age. Ekholms conclusion that the grave field is “nära ett årtusende äldre än runstenen” (1950: 138) is based on six out of 250 graves and is therefore highly uncertain. Besides this, parts of the road, which, according to Ekholm was of the same age as the stone, were even dated around the birth of Christ and thus coincide with the burials (Larsen 1949-1951: 129). Since both parts of the cemetery as well as parts of the road were dated around the birth of Christ, this cannot be taken as a criteria for the erection of the rune stone at the road. It is uncertain whether road or cemetery was crucial for the erection of the rune stone, because even cemeteries had to be reached via roads, and roads connect the monuments with each other. No road means no audience and thus no use for a monument. A sharp distinction between road and cemetery should not be made, but instead it is conceivable that the combination of road and cemetery represented a very suitable location for a rune stone.

Helmer Gustavson followed Ekholm stating that rune stones could be used as the main source for the reconstruction of Viking Age roads (1991: 58). According to Gustavson eight rune stones were raised along the *Erikskata* in Hagunda Härad. It is stated in medieval sources that the Swedish kings had to ride the *Erikskata* to be honoured by their people. The exact course is only partly reconstructed, often with the help of rune stones. Very often this leads to a circular argument: one states on the one hand that rune stones were raised along the *Erikskata* and on the other that the *Erikskata* can be reconstructed with the help of rune stones (see also Brink 2000: 52; Petersson 1982: 17; Lagerkvist 1982: 5ff). The crucial point is that all mentioned scholars have considered only single stones or stones from one area, mostly without a detailed archaeological investigation of that particular area. As a proof for roads, rune stones were cited, and as a proof for the location of rune stones, the roads were referred to. Therefore a detailed investigation of older roads and rune stones has to be made on the basis of the recent state of archaeological research and not limited to stones that mention bridge or road building in their inscription.

Reconstructing roads (without the help of rune stones)

King Qnundr is presented by Snorri Sturluson in the *Ynglinga saga* 37 as building roads through the rough terrain of *Tíundaland*. His nickname *Braut-* (*Braut-Qnundr* = Road-Qnundr) acts as a proof for this. Already in medieval times the construction of roads and bridges was important, and the king himself took care of roads and earned honour by so doing. But not only kings were mentioned as builders, even Kol, bishop in Östergötland, became famous and long remembered by building the Kolsbro in the 12th century, which kept his name alive until the 18th century (Brink 2000: 30).

Throughout time roads have been built for entirely different reasons: Different leaders needed good communication roads for military action, the traders to transport their goods, and the church to expand its mission in the remote and hardly accessible areas of the country. In addition to such economic considerations, the erectors of rune stones gathered future fame and honour when their service to the community was carved in stone and made visible in the form of a solid path or bridge. And this memory was certainly the reason that the construction of roads together with the name of the donator was noted in the inscriptions or annals. It seems likely that the great demand for posthumous fame and honour was one reason why the road network in the North was as advanced as in the Mediterranean area (Szabó 1996: 38). Building roads is therefore of high social value, but how can we identify those old roads and bridges today?

Today older roads are often reconstructed with the help of maps from the 18th and 19th century (Brink 2000: 58). This might only partly be suitable, because in the time of Industrialization entirely new roads were needed, since winding paths were no longer suitable for new vehicles and their higher speed. The reconstruction of roads from the medieval period on the basis of older maps appears further to be insufficient, because it is unlikely that in the 11th and 12th century as many roads were needed as in the 18th or 19 century. The population density was much lower and large parts of the country were completely uninhabited. Most loads were transported on the waterways, which were the main routes for large and heavy loads (Westerdahl 2002: 43). It was not without reason, that the most important markets, for example Distingsmarknad in Uppsala or Samtinget in Strängnäs took place in the winter, so that the goods could be transported over the frozen rivers. A projection backwards from modern to prehistoric routes is therefore highly questionable.

But without taking these maps into consideration a reconstruction of roads is very difficult. Simple roads can be detected only by the traces of cart tracks or footprints (Carlie 1999: 40), which are only found in undisturbed areas. The simplest way of road building consisted of twigs, branches and logs that were placed transversely to the travel direction. This was a common practice for crossing wetlands and flood plains. Even wheel-marks can be seen on the planks. More expensive, and more solid, were the plank roadways. The first evidence of stone roads derives from the Pre-Roman Iron Age (Schou Jørgensen 1988: 101).

Dendrochronological dating is rarely used on roads, and if used, it is no strict dating for the whole course, because they were usually used for several centuries and continuously new branches and gravel were added. Therefore such a dating can only provide a date of use, which is neither the date of its establishment nor the most recent evidence of its use. It might be stated that the road is “av ålderdomlig typ och konstruktion” (Blomqvist 2004: 18), but in most cases an exact dating is not possible.

Bridges are comparable to roads, and in several cases no distinct separation can be made, because wooden constructions over wetland areas can be treated as both: bridge and road. Bridges in our modern sense, spanning from one side of the river to the other, are seldom to be found in Viking Age Scandinavia. Only one example is known at present: Sigrid's bridge in Södermanland. The original meaning of the word bridge is “beam” (Ebenbauer 1978: 555) and it was not more than this in the beginning: A way of crossing a terrain without solid surface (possibly temporary). The wooden bridge itself is rarely found, only the bridge pillars can be detected on both sides of the crossed section. Because of the reason that these were often reused for younger bridges on the same spot they are very hard to detect and date.

Rune stones and roads: The archaeological evidence

An archaeological investigation of rune stones and roads has to deal with at least two greater

difficulties: “Is the rune stone in question still at its original position?” and “Is the road contemporaneous to the stone?” The first question can be solved with an in depth study of the find context, earliest sources and the find history of the stone, including the oldest depictions. For most of the stones this study is quite easy to undertake, because almost everything is collected in the Swedish main work on runes: *Sveriges runinskrifter*.

The oldest written sources on rune stones and their distribution date to the 17th century, a time when the agricultural use of the land was still undertaken with rather simple machines. Considering the size and weight of an average rune stone, one can easily imagine how difficult it was for a farmer to move this stone. It is therefore assumed that at least the bigger stones were not moved, and if they were, it might be only some metres. Only with the invention of dynamite in Sweden in 1867 was it possible to split large stones, which sometimes were seen as a hinder for agriculture. In determining the original location of a rune stone it is therefore important that the earliest sources about find circumstances and locality date before the 18th century. The placement referred to must be reconstructed using modern maps and must coincide with the current location of the rune stone. At the time of discovery the rune stone must not be fragmented (sole exceptions are smaller fragments due to weather effects). By using this criteria, and supplementing with several carvings into bedrock, all in all 730 of 2654 Swedish rune stones can be used in this investigation, because their original location can be reconstructed. 1231 rune stones were used as building material, while for 693 stones the exact location cannot be determined by employing the stated criteri.

Table 1. Rune stones and their original location.

	Total	% (100% = 2654)
Used as building material	1231	46%
Location uncertain	693	26%
Original location & bedrock inscription	730	28%

The exact dating of the road is, as stated above, more difficult – not to say: Impossible. Therefore, all prehistoric and sunken roads which were registered at the Swedish National Board of Antiquities had to be taken into consideration. The investigation (for details see Klos 2009) examined all registered roads within three different ranges (a radius of 25, 100 and 500 m) around every single of the named 730 rune stones. The result was that only 5% of all Swedish rune stones are directly (0-25 m) located besides a road. Expanding the radius to 100 m increases the percentage of stones located beside a prehistoric road to 10%, and an extension to 500 m gives 19%.

Even if we take into consideration that early modern roads reconstructed with the help of older maps and mile- or boundary stones could represent older roads, the number in the shortest radius does not increase remarkable. It increases from 5 to 8% (prehistoric and reconstructed roads together). In a 100 m radius it increases to 15% and 500 m to 26%.

Table 2. Rune stones and roads.

	0-25 m	%	0-100 m	%	0-500 m	%
Prehistoric road	35	5	72	10	135	19
Reconstructed road/early modern	21	3	39	5	146	20
Total	56	8	111	15	192	26

The archaeological data contradicts the common opinion of the rune stone as a road monument. A possible explanation might be that we are often inclined to project modern roads directly into the past. Within a radius of 500 m almost everywhere in southern and central Sweden a road is to be found. In some cases it may well happen that modern roads and older ways overlap. Thus it is never possible to transfer the Swedish infrastructure as a whole from the 21st century back into the rune stone present. Modern roads cannot be used as an evidence for rune stones to be erected along roads. Such an argument can only be considered on the basis of archaeological excavated roads, possibly supported by early modern roads. Only 8% of all the Swedish rune stones are to be found directly at those. But rune stones are of course more than a stone and the archaeological environment. We may therefore not forget to take a

look at the inscription – something most scholars might do firstly when they discuss the rune stones.

The Inscriptions

Two runic inscriptions mention the building of a road directly besides the rune stone. The inscription Sö 34 states: **styrlaugR * auk * hulmbR * staina * raistu * at * bryþr * sina * brau(t)u * nesta ...** (“Styrlaugr and Holmr raised the stones next to the path in memory of their brothers”), similar U 838: [...] **hir maa , stanta , stain , ner , brautu [...]** (“Here will the stone stand near the road”). *Braut* is named in dative singular and the adverbs *hér* acc. *nær* state clearly that there is a spatial link between stone and road. Not as distinct is the inscription U 323:

× **iystin** × **auk** × **iuruntr** × **auk** × **biurn** × **þiR** [× **byryþr** × **risþu**] ... **...stin** × **trums** × **f[apur]**
 × **sin** × **kuþ** × **ihlbi** × **ons** × **ont** × **auk** × **selu** + **fur+kifi** × **onum** × **sakaR** × **auk** × **sutiR** × **hi**
 × **mun** × **ligia** × **meþ** + **altr** + **lifiR** × **bru** × **hrþ**×**slagin** × **briþ** × **e[ft** × **k]uþ--** **suenar** **k[arþu**
 ×] **at** × **sin** × **fapur** × **mo** × **igi** × **brutaR**×**kuml** × **betra** × **uerþa** +.

“Eysteinn/Jósteinn and Jorundr and Björn, these brothers raised ... -steinn Clumsy(?) their father. May God help his spirit and soul, forgive him (his) guilt and sins. Ever will (it) lie, while mankind lives on, the firm-founded bridge, broad in memory of the good (one). The lads made in memory of their father. No path side-monument will be better.”

The noun *braut* is used in genitive singular and belongs together to the word *kumbl*, a ‘road-*kumbl*’. The common translation assumes that “road-*kumbl*” refers to the rune stone (e.g. SRI or Rundata), but to my mind this translation is not as certain as it sounds. The inscription indicates that three brothers raised this rune stone to honour their father. In addition, they also built a bridge. Not until the last sentence is the *brutaR-kuml* mentioned. Bearing in mind that the sentence before was about a solid bridge, it might be possible that rather this bridge is the “road-*kumbl*” (Beck 1978: 559), as a bridge crossing water is always the continuation of a road. The rune stone itself is not called *brutaR-kuml* and has therefore no direct connection to a road. In how far road, bridge and rune stone are connected to each other and whether they may constitute a general monument is not specified by the inscription.

It is a similar case with four inscriptions that name the building of a road without indicating the spatial relation to the rune stone. Sö 311, Sö 312, U 101 and U 149 tell us only that a road was made, *braut ryðja*. The accusative singular *braut* stands together with the verb *ryðja* ‘to clear’. While the inscription Sö 311 contains only the information that Holmfastr cleared a path, Sö 312 extends this information by the fact that not only a path was cleared, but also a bridge made (*brú gera*). Jarlabanki follows the same principle indicating on U 149 that he had cleared a road, which is expanded on U 101 by the information that he and his brother Hemingr also built bridges (*brú gera*). None of the four stones states, however, that there has to be a spatial connection between the named roads, bridges and rune stones.

Four of the listed stones are still standing on their original location. In the case of the two Uppland stones U 101 and U 323, no traces of older roads are found. Without archaeological evidence, but according to the local tradition, Sö 311 and Sö 312 are placed along Gamla Turingevägen, an older road directly in front of the bedrock with the inscriptions. The age of that road is of course not known.

A short look may also be drawn to the noun *brú* f. ‘bridge’, which is found in 129 inscriptions from Sweden. In 37 inscriptions we have a combination of the noun *brú* together with the demonstrative pronoun *sjá* (for the list, see Klos 2009: 156 n. 59), e.g. Ög 162: + **hakun** + **karþi** + **bru** + **þasi** + **ian** + **su skal** + **haita** + **kunas** + **bru** (“Hákon made this bridge and it will be called Gunnarr’s bridge”). The demonstrative pronoun makes it very likely that the bridge was visible to the reader of the inscription. Another linguistic proof for a spatial connection of stone and bridge are several adverbs, e.g. the adverb *hér* in the inscription from G 203 together with the preposition *fyrir*: ...**hier** : **mun** : **stanta stain** : **a[t]** : **merki bietr** a : **bierki in bro furiR** ... (“Here may the stone stand as a landmark, clearly on the hill, and the

bridge before it”). The phrase *hér mun standa steinn* is frequently used on rune stones and states, that the stone was raised exactly here, in this case brightly on a hill.

A spatial relation between stone and bridge can also be assumed in the case of U 316, the inscription is: **þorþr a bro** (“Þórðr owns the bridge”). In comparison to the other rather stereotypical inscriptions with a memorial formula, this inscription most likely clarifies the acquired property of a bridge. Probably the rune stone was erected together with another stone (e.g. U 314), which had a memorial formula. Unfortunately this stone was used as building material for a manor and the question of a pair monument has to remain unsolved.

All remaining 90 inscriptions (for the list, see Klos 2009: 158 n. 66) do not state explicitly that there was a spatial connection between stone and bridge. It is possible that rune stone and bridge were not raised on the same spot; an example consists of the well known Jarlabanki stones: While it is stated on U 101 that he made bridges (*auk broaR kiara*) it is stated on U 261 that he built a bridge close to the rune stone (*auk bru þisa karþi*). Therefore it might be possible that the naming of the bridge building activities on U 101 refers to physical bridges at other spots, which are named in other inscriptions (e.g. U 261). In any case, it is possible that bridges were built somewhere and that this act was mentioned on a rune stone that was placed at another location.

The original location is known for 57 stones with a bridge inscription. 17 of the named bridges were found by the archaeologists, while in 29 cases a bridge is very likely because of a nearby river. In 11 cases there was neither a bridge nor a river found nearby the rune stone. Here we have to assume that the mentioned bridge building refers to another spot, maybe even with another rune stone. In sum, 80% of the mentioned bridges were definitely built in the vicinity of the stones.

Summary

In this paper I have discussed the relation between rune stones and roads. It is often stated that rune stones were most frequently erected along roads, but the archaeological account in Sweden shows, that only 8% of all rune stones for which an original location could be reconstructed have close connection to prehistoric and early modern roads. A probable explanation for the frequently stated connection between rune stones and roads might be several inscriptions stating that the erector of the stone also built a road or a bridge (as an extension of a road). Looking at those stones, inscription and archaeological data match with each other in 80% (bridges), respectively 50% (roads).

Conclusion

The strength of the relation between rune stones and roads differs according to the point of view or profession of the researcher. While a strictly archaeological point of view would imply negation of a relationship, a survey of inscriptions strongly indicates the opposite. The discrepancy might be due to chronology, but this idea has to be rejected, because the number of rune stones along roads does not increase or decrease remarkably during different periods (Klos 2009: 140).

Another probable explanation would be that rune stones were not usually located close to main roads but along minor paths, which were used by the locals on their way from farm to farm or farm to grave field. A major archaeological investigation (Klos 2009) has shown that most of the rune stones were erected close to graves (more than 80%). However, some erectors chose alternative sites for their stones, namely the context of some structures, such as bridges, fords or roads, possibly erected or donated by them. Even close to farms or on farmland boundaries rune stones were erected in single cases, perhaps because of hereditary rights. A different location than the usual might be stated in the otherwise formulaic and rather short inscription, which may be an explanation why inscription and archaeological data match in most cases, while most rune stones do not name other structures and were raised in connection to graves. A special place made a special inscription necessary; otherwise the formula served the purpose of the erectors.

What could be shown in the investigation is that stone and location are closely linked to each other and should be interpreted as a unit. Comparable to ornamentation, inscription, height and colour, the surrounding area was part of the runic monument and was surely

chosen with great care. It is the context, which transformation a single object into a monument, gives point to its word and adds weight to it.

It is not wrong to state that some stones were chosen to be raised along a road and this was not made without reason. The reason for this might have been the spread of information or the wish to remember the named persons not only by words but deeds, e.g. the building of a road. But it is wrong to state that the road was the most frequently chosen place for a rune stone, and that rune stones have to be interpreted as road monuments. Furthermore, it is not an easy task to take some rune stones to reconstruct an older road. For a reconstruction of older roads, other monuments or an in-depth study of the landscape have to be used.

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