A runic inscription on a distaff from the Viking Age: a new interpretation of the runic inscription on the stick from Staraya Ladoga

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The present paper deals with a runic inscription on a stick found in Staraya Ladoga in 1950 and published in 1957 by Admoni and Silman. The stick dates from the beginning of the ninth century (Korzuhina 1971: 122-131; Mel’nikova 2001: 203). Later two more objects with runic inscriptions were found in Staraya Ladoga (Kusmenko 1997; Mel’nikova 2001).

The stick has a form of a fork with four bright teeth on the one end (see fig. 1) and a flat cut on the other. It is 42 cm long and round in section (1.5-2.6 cm in diameter). The stick has been shaved off and the surface is formed by the narrow long facets. The runic inscription, which takes only 12 cm of the whole length of the stick, has been carved in the middle of the stick on its brightest facet. The runes are 0.8-1 cm high besides the first one, which is much shorter (0.4 cm) and evokes the most discussion. On the reverse side of the stick three signs in form of hooks are carved. The runes have the form of so called Rök-runes (short-twig-runes or Swedish-Norwegian runes). The runes are cut very clearly, the greatest problem consists in the interpretation of an unusual great number of vertical lines (i runes). It is usually considered that the upper part of some of these runes has been effaced and they could have lost their twigs. This assumption has led to different interpretation of some i-like characters (besides i, they have been interpreted as m, t, l; Marstrander 1965: 252). The inscription has no interpunction. The number of signs is considered to be 52 by the most runologists; however, in the first publication Admoni and Sil’man suggested that the stem of the rune r can be formed by the stem of the preceding rune, in this case the number of runes can be 48, which is a magic number: 24 (the number of runes in the elder futhark) × 2; 16 (the number of runes in the younger futhark) × 3, or 8 (the number of runes in a group in the elder futhark) × 6. The magic number 48 was used in the inscriptions on the amulets from Lindholm and from Staraya Ladoga (Kuzmenko 1997); the number of the runes of each side of two amulets from Novgorod is 12 (Mel’nikova 2001).

After the publication the inscription was the subject of an animated discussion connected with the role of the Scandinavians in the building of the Russian state. The runologists, however, could not come to a common accepted interpretation. The suggested interpretations have confirmed the apprehension of A. Liestøl that the number of possible interpretation of this inscription will be equal with the number of interpreters (Liestøl 1959: 134).

Former interpretations

Admoni and Silman in the first publication of the inscription have proposed the reading of the whole inscription and the interpretation of its second part: they read the first part of the inscription as u(k)ufis(r)ufuaRîpRialtuaiRs(r)îs (underlining indicates uncertain reading), but did not interpret it. In the second part fris(ännafr(s)åt)fibulsinibluka they read a spell written in a typical eddic mètre fornyrðislag with alliteration frän manafr( fr)aît fibul si nibluka (ON fránn mándalfr, fránt fjll. sé niflunga) «Shining moon alf / shining monster / be of Niflings (in the realm of Niflings, under the earth)». They proposed that the magic character of the inscription was confirmed by the magic number of runes (48). Following the preliminary definition of the archaeologists Admoni and Sil’man considered the stick to be a fragment of a bow treating the inscription on the bow as a spell against the evil. However, the further investigations have shown that the stick has been made of a twig of a fir, the sort of wood, which does not suit well as a material for a bow. After a careful examination Ravdonikas and Lauškin have determined the stick not as a fragment, but as an independent object, which could be a runic stick (keflí) or a fetish (Ravdonikas and Lauškin 1959: 25).

The first interpretation of the whole inscription was proposed by G. Høst at first in a short article in Aftenposten (13.12.1957) and then in the article in Norsk tidsskrift for sprogvidenskap (NTS) in 1960. In NTS Høst treats the inscription as a fragment of an Old Swedish shield-poem describing three figures of the Scandinavian mythology pictured on a
shield: the master of the hoar-frost (the giant Thiazi), the damage of the shining moon (the giant Skati) and the goddess Gefjon, who turned her sons into oxen and ploughed Seeland from Sweden.

The reading and interpretation of Høst (1960):

\[ \text{ufir uf uafirR hati ualtR rims fr凝聚ana kræt fibulsi bluka} = \text{ufir uf uafirR hati ualtR rims fr凝聚ana kræt fibulsi bluka} \]

ON ? yfir of variðr hati / valdr (h)rams / fr凝聚ana grand / fibulsi inn plóga.

“Above, clad in his cowl the Master of the Hoar-frost, the Damage of the shining moon, the mighty journey of the plough-oxen.”

Though Marstrander (1965) has approved the interpretation of Høst, pointing out especially the interpretation of \text{ufuaRipR} as of variðr, fr凝聚ana as fr凝聚ana, kræt as grand and fibulsi bluka as fimbulsinni plóga (Marstrander 1965: 252), some readings (see below) and the whole interpretation seem problematic. Linguistically unusual is the lack of a predicate, what has been pointed out by Kiil (1964). Besides we do not know any shield-poems in runes, and the rare shield poems of skalds (Ragnarsdrápa, Haustlöng) are composed not in forn-yrðislag but in the skaldic metre dróttkvætt. Høst considered the stick to be a runic stick (rűnakefli), its function being to be carved with runes.

In the same volume of NTS the interpretation of the inscription on the Staraya Ladoga stick by the renowned German runologist Wolfgang Krause was published. He has changed the readings of some runes and the word division proposed by Høst and assumed that the inscription is a praise song in honour of a dead warrior:

\[(t)ufirufuaRipRhaluualtrRriasfr凝聚anafronkrætfibulsi bluka = \]

\[(i)u (u)fir uf uafirR halli ualtR rias fr凝聚ana mana kræt fibul si bluka \]

ON (d)ú (y)fir of variðr hallr valdr (h)raes / fr凝聚力ma grand, fimbul sinn i plóga.

“Died high clad in the stone owner of the corpse (=warrior),1 shining, ruiner of men (warrior), in the enormous way of the plough (the earth).”

Unlike Høst who did not interpret the first character, Krause has read it as \text{t}. The further differences compared with the reading of Høst are runes 14-17 \text{hal}i (hallr, dat. sg. of hallr “stone”) and runes 23-26 \text{rias} (hraes, gen. sg. of hrae “corps”).

Kiil (1964) proposed a partly new reading and a totally new interpretation of the inscription, proposing it to be a spell on a staff of an arrow:

\[(s)ufiufuafirRhalualtrKrimsfr凝聚anafronkrætfibulsi bluka = \]

\[s ufi uf uafirR halli ualtR rias fr凝聚ana mana kræt fibul si bluka \]

ON (e)s úfi of variðr halli / véltir rims frón(n) mannagrant fimbulsinni plóga.

“The tail is dressed in plumage, the sharp tip (or the serpent of the wooden stick) is attracting booty in a great number for all.”

His reading of the first character as \text{s} is most problematic.

During the following 40 years there were no new interpretations of the inscription, but 2004 Grønvik proposed a new one. The key word in his interpretation is \text{bluka} (ON plógr “plough”). Grønvik considers that the inscription represents a heroization of a chieftain of peasants, who is praising the fruitful earth:

\[(t)ufirufuafirRhalualtr(l)aR(t)r(e)m(s)fr凝聚anafronkrætfronfibulsi bluka = \]

\[(hel)t ufir uf uafirR halli ualtR rifs fr凝聚ana kræt fibul si bluka \]

ON (helt) yfir of vaRipR / hallr valaR rifs / fr凝聚ana grand / fimbulsinni plóga.

“The (og) styrte — omgitt av hellet (bakkene) / ned mot den fruktbare vollen — / henover de tapre menns gred / et veldig følge av ploger.”

The most improbable in the reading of Grønvik is his treatment of the beginning of the inscription. He reads the first character as \text{t}, but considers this \text{t} to be the last rune in the verb \text{helt} adding three new runes [hel] to the beginning of the inscription. This reconstructed [hel] turns to be the only predicate in the inscription.

Recently in 2009 at the conference in memory of Admoni I proposed a partly new interpretation:

\[(?)ufir uf aR (r)jipR hamu ualtrims fr凝聚ana k na ra⁴ fibul si nibluka \]

ON úfr (or ýfr) of varr riðr / hamu val(h)rams / fr凝聚ana grand / fi þ sé nifunga.

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1 Kennig valdr hraes “owner of corpses” would much better suit to a raven than to a warrier. The possibility of such an interpretation was pointed out by Høst in her letter to Krause (Krause 1960: 557 note 2).
“Perfidious (or above), very careful will ride in the shape of a strong hoarfrost, the ruiner of the shining moon, monster be of Hniflungs (in the realm of Hniflungs, under the earth).”

Unlike Høst I have limited the number of the personages named in the inscription to one (the wolf who will swallow the moon in Ragnarök) treating the inscription as a spell against evil in the shape of the wolf.

Function of the stick

The most interpreters have not paid much attention to the function of the stick considering it to be only a material for writing (rúnakefli; Høst 1960 = H, Krause 1960 = Kr, Grønvik 2004 = G, Kusmenko 2009 = Ku). Admoni and Silman (1957 = A/S), following the preliminary determination by the archaeologists, treated the stick as a fragment of an bow; Kiil (1964 = Ki) considered it to be a fragment of an arrow. The stick however can not be a fragment of a bow or of an arrow because of the sort of the wood (fir) which it has been made of. But it does not look as a rúnakefli either. It is long and round and the runic inscription does not cover the whole surface of the stick, which is typical of a rúnakefli: the inscription is only 12 cm long (the length of the stick is 42 cm). Moreover the stick has a peculiar form, it is cleft into four parts on the upper end and has a flat cut on the other end.

The form of the Ladoga stick is very similar to the form of a distaff, which was widely used in Europe in the Viking Age and in the Middle Ages. It is a short distaff which was either hold in the left hand or under the left arm or stuck in the belt, which made it possible for a woman to spin thread while doing other things. The short distaff could also be stuck in the hole in a horizontal board on which the spinner could sit while spinning. The upper end of the distaff (head of the distaff) where the fibre was bound could have various forms. It can be pointed, cleft, formed as a blade or as a comb. Our distaff has a cleft upper end which was typical both of the distaффs in Scandinavia (Hald 1950: 134, 135 fig. 123) and in Balticum and Russia. Finding of the objects connected with spinning in Staraya Ladoga is not rare. Here two other distaффs, some spindles and more than 400 spindle-loads (Davidan 1981, Riabinin 1985) have been excavated.

The form and the size of the Ladoga do not leave any doubt about its function. It is a distaff.

New interpretation

We can try to find out if the inscription is connected with the function of the stick. My reading is based on my own examination of the stick in november 2009, on the photos of Korotkevich, Steblin-Kamenskaja, Marstrander, Ravdonikas and Lauškin.

ukst0 0 su i mt ai s mtia

?uf(i)rufuaRipRålIuualtRrls

frånmanakrätfibulsinibluka

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The underlined letters indicates uncertain reading, the small letters above represent the proposed alternative reading.

Forty characters have been read alike by all interpreters (u – nos. 2, 5, 7, 17, 38, 46; a – 8, 14, 18, 31, 48; i – 4, 10, 23, 36, 41, 43; f – 3, 6, 25, 35; a – 26, 29, 33; n – 27, 30, 42; l – 19, 39, 45; R – 9, 19, 21; r – 21a, 25a, 32a; s – 24, 40; b – 37, 44; m – 28; t – 34; b – 11; k – 47).

The other characters need a special treatment.

No. 1 is the most problematic character. It has been read as u, k (A/S), s (Ki), t (Kr, G) but it could indicate every rune with twigs in the upper or middle part of the stem which could be wiped off. If we suggest that the upper part of the stem with twigs has dissapeared we can add l, m, f, h and i to the above mentioned readings. A/S proposed that the first character was not a rune, and so did H and I followed them in my first interpretation. However only when reading this character as a rune we can obtain the number 48, which is hardly a coincidence.

Nos. 4 and 4a: The character no. 4 has been read as i by all interpreters. The following character is one of the most unclear. According to the size and the position of this character it can be read as s, but the form is similar to the part of the rune u (see the interpretation of Ki). H has interpreted this character as a staveless r, which occurs in some runic inscriptions from the Viking Age (e.g. on Sparlös-stone). She supposed that all r-runes in the inscription are staveless (4a, 21a, 25a, 32a). A/S mentioned the possibility of interpretation of stems of preceeding runes as stems of r, thus suggesting combined runes ir 4-4a, Rr 21-21a, fr 25-25a, kr 32-32a.

The beginning of the inscription remains unclear. If we do not read the first character and treat the characters nos. 4 and 4a as separate runes ir like Høst, we can read the first word as ufir (yftr adv.) “above”. If no. 4 represents a stem of r and nos. 4 and 4a form one rune, we can read runes 3, 4, 4a as ur and treat it as šfr, which can mean “uneven surface, rough edge”. This meaning allows us to suggest that šfr can also designate a cleft stick and a cleft end of a distaff as well.

The treatment of the first character as a rune makes the number of possible interpretations of the first word almost countless (the possible reading of the first character being u k t l m f h i). It is clear that in this case we can find a word that more or less could suit our interpretation (e.g. kūfr, which in Orkney means “a small piece of wood with incisions”, de Vries 1962: 333). But these interpretations can hardly be considered as plausible. However, though we can not interpret the first character it is not impossible, that the first word could designate either the head of the distaff or the fibre.

The runes ufuaRipR have been interpreted by H as the past participle of the verb verja “to clothe, to wrap, to inclose” – variðr “dressed, clad” preceded by the perfective particle of. This interpretation suits very well a distaff or a spindle. However, we can propose another interpretation which can also be suitable for an inscription on a distaff. The runes ufuaRipR can be treated as presens of the verb vríða “swing, sway, reel” (the last meaning is especially important for us) with the same perfective particle of and a svarabhakti a. The svarabhakti vowel was possible not only in the latest inscription in the elder futhark (cf. Istaby warAit instead of wrAit), but also in the inscriptions in the younger futhark (cf. burúti, burú in Jacobsen and Moltke 1942: 1003-1004). In this case of v(a)riðr can mean “is reeling or is swinging”.

The next word is a noun to which the above mentioned forms can be attested. The reading hali which has been proposed by Kr, Ki, G and which is rather clear due to the point in the middle of the stem in no. 13 and the right twig in the upper end of no. 15. This reading has been interpreted by Ki as hali “tail of an arrow” – for other interpretations see above. However, it could mean a tail of a spindle, cf. ON snoelduhal “tail of a spindle”. According to Feilberg hale can mean “spindle” in Danish dialects (Feilberg 1894, 1914). Thus the sequence ufuaRipRhali can be interpreted either as of variðr hali “the spindle is dressed” or of v(a)riðr hali “the spindle is reeling”. The most problematic character in the sequence ualtR (nos. 17-19) is no. 20. A/S read it as t, H following this reading sees a “weak trace” of a left twig characteristic of t, which I could not find. But in so far that the preceding character is l it is possible that the rune 20 can be read as a t or i (the reading of Ki), proposing that the upper part of the rune could be effaced. Kr followed H in reading t, G proposed reading a, which is less probable. H and Kr suggested the interpretation of ualtR as valdr “owner” but several other possibilities of interpretation remain. A possible interpretation is the treatment of ualtR as presens of the verb velta “to
roll", the sentence *yfri of variðr hali veltr* means in this case "above dressed spindle is rotating".

In the sequence nos. 21-24 *rilso no.* 20 represents the most unclear character, which was interpreted as *i* (A/S), *a* (Kr), *m* (H, Ki, Ku) and *f* (G). H in her final interpretation prefers the reading *t* (valdr (*h*)rims “Master of the hoarfrost”) but she takes into consideration the reading *l*, treating *rilso* as gen. sg. of (*h*)ræll “the weaver’s rod or sley”. She, however, rejected her own proposal because it did not suit to her interpretation of the inscription as a shield-poem (Høst 1960: 429). I think that the reading *rilso* is not worse than the other readings. The interpretation of *rilso* as *hreils* is plausible if we remember the function of the stick.

The genitive *hreils* can be attributed to the next word which has been read as *fráman* by all interpreters. However their interpretations of this sequence differ very strongly from each other (see above). I interpret *fráman* as *fráman* a compound noun nom. sg. “flashing maiden”. The adjective *fránn* “gleaming, flashing” was used in poetry concerning appearance (cf. *fráneygr* “with flashing eyes”, *fráneir* “flashing looking”). Thus the sequence *rilsfraðman* can be treated as *hreils fráman* “the flashing maiden of the weaver’s rod”, what can be a kenning of a weaver. The following rune *a* can be treated as *d* presens of the verb *eiga*. The following segment represents an extended object to this predicate.

The rune 32 war read by A/S as *f*, but H has shown convincingly that much better reading is *k*. The other interpreters followed her reading, and so do I. The reading of H of the characters 32-34 as *krat* has been also accepted by all interpreters, however the interpretation were different (see above). I propose a new interpretation of this word. It can be treated as a neutr. form of the adjectiv *grannt* “thin, slender”, which is preserved in Swedish dialect defining the words for thread and yarn (cf. *grannt tråd* “thin, fine thread”, *grannt garr* “thin, fine yarn” (Rietz 1962: 209; Hellquist 1957: 296). The second possibility is to interpret *krat* as a verbal noun *grennd*/*grannd* “finness, thinness”.

The adjective *grannt* can be related to the following word which has a clear reading *fibulsini* or, if *l* belongs to this word, *fibulsini*. *Fibulsini* has already been treated as a prefix-like component *fimbuls*-(H, Kr, Ki, G, Ku) which means a very high degree of a quality designated by the substantive (cf. *fimbulsini* “the great and awful winter”, *fimbultýr* “the mighty god”, *fimbulþur* “the great wise man”). The second part of this compound represents *sini* or *sin*. The interpretation of *sini* as *sinni* “fellowship” has been proposed by most interpreters (cf. translations of *fimbulsinni* as “mighty jorney” (H), “enormous way” (Kr), “et veldig folge” (G)). This interpretation does not contradict the function of the stick as a distaff and could mean the fine, long succession (of thread). But it is not impossible that the noun defined of *grannt* is not *fimbulsinni* but *fibulsini*. The word *sin* (acc. sg. neutr. ) can correspond to ON *sin* neutr., “carex vesicaria”, a plant that was used in many cultures (e.g. by the Saami) for spinning ropes. We can assume that this word could be used as a *heit* for thread. Etymologically *sin* “carex vesicaria” can be connected with the word *sin* f. “sinew” that served as material for the first threads. By production of a thread from a sinew it must be separated into thinner fibres, which then were spun to a thread (cf. the production of thread from sinew by the Saami - Keyland 1920). It is possible that the gender of the word for thread produced from a sinew (*sin n.* ) could differ from the gender of the word for sinew (*sin f.*).

If we take into consideration all written above we can interpret the sequence *rilsfraðmanakraðfibulsini* (or *fibulsini*) as *hreils fráman á grannt *fibulsini* (or *fimbulsinni*) “the flashing maiden of the weaver’s rod has (or will have) a thin (and) very long thread (or succesion)”.

The next runes do not belong to the wish (or spell) expressed in the first part of the inscription but represent the name of the owner of the distaff. The sequence *(n)ibluka* can be interpreted as a female name ended in *luk* (-laug), a very popular second part of female names + *á* presens of the verb *eiga*. The monophthongization of *au* in -laug occurs in many runic inscription, cf. *kiafluk* (Gjaflaug) Óg 228; *kiluk* (Gillaug) U 255; *kinluk* (Ginnlaug) U 619; *ikiluk* (Ingjilaug) U 117, U 505) etc. The first part of this name is more problematic. If *n* belongs to the name the runes *nib* can be interpreted as *nef n.* “nose, edge” (cf. *nibluk* “Neflauq”), cf. personal names (or nicknames) *nifR* Ól 130, *nif* U476 Nefr, and compound names *nefkiR* U 950, *nefkar* U 1110, U 1083 Nefgeirr, cf. ON personal name Nefsteinn. But among the names with *nef-* we do not find any female names. Possible is the first part *hnefi* „fist, king (main figure) in the board-game hnefatafl” ) *nibluk* (Hneflaug). This root we can find in the name of the sea king *Hnefi* in ON and in the name *Hnæfi* (leader of Danes) in
Beowulf 1114 and in Finnsburg 2 as well as the OHG name Hnabi. To the same group belongs the name *hnaðdaR* (or *hnaðbar/hnaðdir*) in the runic inscription on the stone from Bø. But the compound names with this root are not known. The third possibility is the interpretation of Hnafi as a secondary formation to Hniflangar (cf. similar formations Gjúki < Gjúkungar, Buðli < Buðlungar, Skelfir < Skilfingar; Wessén 1927a: 27).

If n does not belong to the name of the owner, we can assume the compound name *ibluk* (Iflaug) with the first component *if-* occurring in the words like *ifill* (heitr of hawk), *ifingr* (heitr of bear), *ifingr* (headscarf, hapax in SnE) and in the compound *ifrōðull* (heitr of the sun). The etymology of this *if* is uncertain. It seems that the root *if* in *ifingr* (headscarf) has the best chance to be the first component of a female name, but we do not know personal names with it. However, though both *(H)neflaug* and *Iflaug* do not have any sure correspondences among the known Old Scandinavian names, both structure and semantics of these hypothetical names are quite plausible.

The interpretation of the sequence *(n)ibluka* as a combination of personal name *(H)neflaug* or *Iflaug* with presens of the verb eiga (*á*) helps us to understand the function of three hooks placed on the other side of the stick. These V-like hooks have been treated either as a picture of three arrow points (Kii̦l 1964) or as the runic formula *alu* (Engovatov 1963) or as three magic runes *u* (Mel’nikova 2001). However no one of these interpretations is convincing. Much more probable seems the treatment of these hooks as owner’s brand (Sw. *bomärke*). Both Old Scandinavian and Old Russian tradition have a rich system of these signs, which can have different forms triangles, incisions, hooks, circles etc. in various combinations. Three hooks on our distaff have the same function as the inscription “Hneflaug possesses (this distaff)”.

**Conclusion**

If the first character does not belong to the text we can propose the following interpretation of the inscription:

`? ufr uf uARipR halj ualtR riš fránman a křat fibulsin(i) (n)ibluk a yfr of variðr halı velr hræls fránman á grannit fimbulsin(ni) / (N)eflaug (or Iflaug) á “The above dressed spindle is rotating. The flashing girl of the “reel” will have a fine long thread. Neflaug (or Iflaug) possesses (this distaff)”`. If we regard the allitiration the text can be formed so: *yfr of variðr / halı velr / hræls fránman / á grannit fimbulsin(ni)*.

With the reading *ufr* (*áfr*), which can designate the head of the distaff, *of variðr* can be related to the first word (*áfr of variðr “the head of the distaff is dressed ...”*). If the first character is a rune of *variðr* can also be related to the first word of the inscription.

In the inscription we see a wish or a spell for a spinner to spin so that the weaver can get a fine long thread (the spinner and the weaver being the same person). This spell could have a stronger effect when carved in runes. The spinning in the Scandinavian tradition was the most ritual occupation. The distaff possessed magical powers (the norns twinned thread of fate) and could serve as *gandpinnar* or *seíðstafar*. In female graves proposed to be the graves of völvas 40 wands have been excavated which look very similar to distaffs used spinning linnen (Harrison and Svensson 2007: 19-23). The runic inscription on a distaff seems to be on its right place.

I am by no means inclined to think that my interpretation has solved all problems of the inscription on the Ladoga stick once and for all. However, I hope that the treatment of the stick as a distaff opens a new way in its interpretation.

**Bibliography**


Harrison and Svensson 2007: