

# 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 interpunctuation. The number of signs is considered to be 52 by the most runologists; however, in the first publication Admoni and Silman 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)ufuaRipRialtualiRs(r)iis (underlining indicates uncertain reading), but did not interpret it. In the second part fr(s)anmanaf(r)s)atfibulsinibluka they read a spell written in a typical eddic metre *fornyrðislag* with alliteration **fr**an **manaf** (**fr**)at **fibul si nibluka** (ON *fránn mánaálf, fránt fífl, sé niflunga*) «Shining moon alf / shining monster / be of Niflungs (in the realm of Niflungs, 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 Silman 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 (*kefli*) 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):

?**ufir(u)ufuaRipRhat(L,m)ualt(i)Rrii(m)sfranmanakraṭfibulsinibluka =  
ufir uf uaRipR hati ualtR rims franmana kraṭ fibulsini bluka**

ON ? *yfir of variðr hati / valdr (h)ríms / fránmána grand / fimbulsinni 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 **ufuaRipR** as *of variðr*, **franmana** as *fránmána*, **kraṭ** as *grand* and **fibulsinibluka** 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*, *Haustlög*) are composed not in *fornyrðislag* but in the skaldic metre *dróttkvætt*. Høst considered the stick to be a runic stick (*rúnakefli*), 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**)**ufirufuaRipRhalialtRriiasfranmanakraṭfibulsinibluka =  
(t)u (u)fir uf uaRipR hali ualtR rias fran mana kraṭ fibul sin i bluka**

ON (*d*)ó *yfir of variðr halli valdr (h)ræs / fránn, manna grand, fimbul sinn i plóga.*

“Died high clad in the stone owner of the corpse (=warrior)<sup>1</sup>, 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 **t**. The further differences compared with the reading of Høst are runes 14-17 **hali** (*halli*, dat. sg. of *hallr* “stone”) and runes 23-26 **riias** (*hræs*, gen. sg. of *hræ* “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**)**ufi(u)ufuaRipRhalialialiRrimisfranmanakraṭfibulsinibluka =  
s ufi uf uaRipR hali ualiR rims fran manakraṭ fibulsini bluka**

ON (*e*)s *úfi of variðr hali / vélir rims frá(n) mannagrann 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 **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 **bluka** (ON *plóga* gen. pl. of *plógr* “plough”). Grønvik considers that the inscription represents a heroization of a chieftain of peasants, who is praising the fruitful earth:

(**t**)**ufirufuaRipRhalialialit,a)R(i)rii(m,f)sfranmanak(f)raṭfibulsinibluka =  
(hel)t ufir of uaRipR hali ualaR riifs fran mana kraṭ fibul sini bluka**

ON (*helt*) *yfir of vaRipR / halle vallaR rífs / fran manna grænd / fimbulsinni plóga.*

“(og) styrte – omgitt av hellet (bakkene) / ned mot den fruktbare vollen – / henover de tapre menns grend / et veldig følge av pløger.”

The most improbable in the reading of Grønvik is his treatment of the beginning of the inscription. He reads the first character as **t**, but considers this **t** to be the last rune in the verb *hélt* adding three new runes [**hel**] to the beginning of the inscription. This reconstructed (**hel**)**t** 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:

(?)**ufr uf uaR (r)ipR hami ualtrims franmana k na raṭ fibul si nibluka**

ON *úfr (or yfir) of varr riðr / hami vald(h)ríms / fránmána grand / fiðl sé niflunga.*

<sup>1</sup> Kenning *valdr hræs* “owner of corpses” would much better suit to a raven than to a warrior. The possibility of such an interpretation was pointed out by Høst in her letter to Krause (Krause 1960: 557 note 2).



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; **ǰ** – 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; **p** – 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 disappeared 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 Sparlösa-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 preceding 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** (*yfir* 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 **ufr** and treat it as *úfr*, which can mean “uneven surface, rough edge”. This meaning allows us to suggest that *úfr* 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. *kúfr*, 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 *vriða* “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. **buruti**, **buru** 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 *snælduhali* “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 *yfir of variðr hali veltr* means in this case “above dressed spindle is rotating”.

In the sequence nos. 21-24 **rīls 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)ríms* “Master of the hoarfrost”) but she takes into consideration the reading **l**, treating **rīls** 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 **rīls** is not worse than the other readings. The interpretation of **rīls** as *hræls* is plausible if we remember the function of the stick.

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

The rune 32 was 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 **kr̥at** has been also accepted by all interpreters, however the interpretations were different (see above). I propose a new interpretation of this word. It can be treated as a neutr. form of the adjectiv *grannr* “thin, slender”, which is preserved in Swedish dialect defining the words for thread and yarn (cf. *grannt tråd* “thin, fine thread”, *grannt garn* “thin, fine yarn” (Rietz 1962.: 209; Hellquist 1957: 296). The second possibility is to interpret **kr̥at** as a verbal noun *grennd/grannd* “finess, thinness”.

The adjective *grannt* can be related to the following word which has a clear reading **fibulsin** or, if **i** belongs to this word, **fibulsini**. **fibul** has already been treated as a prefix-like component *fimbul-* (H, Kr, Ki, G, Ku) which means a very high degree of a quality designated by the substantive (cf. *fimbulvetr* “the great and awful winter”, *fimbultýr* “the mighty god”, *fimbulkulur* “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 journey” (H), “enormous way” (Kr), “et veldig følge” (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 *fimbulsin*. 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 *heiti* 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 **rīlsfr̥anmaṅakr̥atfibulsin** (or **fibulsini**) as *hræls fr̥ánman á grannt fimbulsin* (or *fimbulsinni*) “the flashing maiden of the weaver’s rod has (or will have) a thin (and) very long thread (or succession)”.

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. **kiāfluk** (Gjaflaug) Ög 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** “Neflaug”), cf. personal names (or nicknames) **nifR** Öl 130, **nif** U476 *Nefr*, and compound names **nefkiR** U 950, **nefkair** 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 *Hnefi* (leader of Danes) in

Beowulf 1114 and in Finnsburg 2 as well as the OHG name *Hnabi*. To the same group belongs the name **hnabdaR** (or **hnabudar/hnabidar**) 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 *Hnefi* as a secondary formation to *Hniflungar* (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* (*heiti* of hawk), *ifjungr* (*heiti* of bear), *ifingr* (headscarf, hapax in SnE) and in the compound *ifröðull* (*heiti* 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 (Kiil 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:

**? ufr̥ uf uaRipR hali ualtR riḷs fraṅman a kraṭ fibulsin(i) (ni)bluk a**

*yfir of variðr hali veltr hræls fráṅman á grannt 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 alliteration the text can be formed so: *yfir of variðr / hali veltr / hræls fráṅman / á grannt fimbulsin(ni)*.

With the reading **ufr̥** (*úfr̥*), which can designate the head of the distaff, *of variðr* can be related to the first word (*úfr̥ 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 *seiðstafar*. 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.

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