

The sakum formula of the Rök inscription: variants and distribution

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The last two decades are marked by increasing interest in the Rök stone memorial as a cultural and literary monument unparalleled in early medieval Germanic world. New approaches to the analysis of the Rök inscription have been pioneered by Lars Lönnroth who elaborated and modified the ‘repertoire’ theory of Elias Wessén (Wessén 1958). He initiated a structural study of the inscription which led to a new interpretation of the text (Lönnroth 1977). The subsequent studies of Gun Widmark and Joseph Harris resulted in the appreciation of the Rök-stone inscription as a tripartite riddle-answer (Lönnroth 1977) or question/hint-answer (Harris 2006; Harris 2009) text based on oral narrative tradition current in Östergötland in the beginning of the ninth century (Widmark 1992).

The phrase **sakumukmini** immediately following the dedication, opening the narrative part of the inscription, and repeated several times throughout the text, was recognized as a formula long ago (Bugge 1910: 119). There exist a more or less general consensus on the division of the sequence **sakumukmini** into words **sakum [m]uk mini**, on the meaning of **sakum** as *sagum*, 1st person sg. or pl. pres. of *segja* ‘I (we) say, I (we) tell’ (with alternatives: imperative ‘Let me (us) say’ or ‘I (we) say for (to) ...’: Lönnroth 1977: 22–23; Marez 1997: 552–553; Harris 2006: 48) and – to a lesser degree – **mini** as *minni* ‘memory, remembrance; legend, tale’ or *mænni* ‘men’ (Friesen 1920; Höffler 1952).

Most controversial remains the word **[m]uk** which together with **mini** allows a variety of readings of practically equal possibility from the paleographic point of view. It can be interpreted as **muk** if rune **m** is regarded as both the final and the initial letter at the junction of words *sagum* and *mogminni* or as **uk** if rune **m** is thought to represent only the final letter of *sagum*. Wessén summarized four main interpretations of the sequence **[m]uk mini** existing at his time:

1. *ung-minni*
2. *ung-mænni*
3. *mōg-minni*
4. *mōg-mænni*

He found the alternative *múg-minni* ‘folk-memory’, ‘legend’ (*múgr* ‘people, crowd, mob’) the most convincing (Wessén 1958: 34–36). His opinion (with a possible variant ‘We tell (let us tell) a memory to (the) people’; Lönnroth 1977: 22–23) is widely accepted (Jansson 1987: 32–34; Reichert 1998: 79–81, et al.). Two more interpretations of **[m]uk mini** were suggested since Wessén’s study: **uk** as conjunction *ok*: *sagum ok minni þat* ‘We say (Let us tell) also this memory (legend)’ (Nielsen 1969) and **muk** as *mogr* ‘son, boy’ (Widmark 1992: 30–31; Marez 1997: 550–551; Harris 2006: 48) to the effect ‘I pronounce this hint for the lad’ (Harris 2006: 95). With paleographic equivalence of the variants and linguistic plausibility of most of them, the choice of the reading of **[m]uk** is tightly connected with meta-linguistic considerations, first and foremost with the interpretation of the content and message of the whole inscription.

Variants of the sakum formula

It was noted long ago that the formula exists in several modifications (Wessén 1958: 32 et al.). Harris named ‘three variants (omitting the damaged 20): (1) in ll. 23 and 26 **sakumukmini**; (2) in ll. 3 and 21 **sakumukminiþat**; and (3) in 5–6, 12 and 14 **þatsakum** [+ ordinal number]’ (Harris 2009: 39). These variants include two to four words in different combinations (I accept the reading *sagum mogminni* ‘I (we) say (tell) folk-memory (ancient tale)’ for the reasons given below as well as the sequence and numbering of lines by Wessén 1958: 24–27):

1. *sagum mogminni þat* (ll. 3 and 21),
2. *sagum mogminni* (ll. 23 and 26),

3. *þat sagum* (ll. 5, 12, 14).

The first, extended, variant consists of all elements of the formula: verb + object with an attribute (both nouns) + demonstrative pronoun. The second and the third variants use the object represented by either a noun + attribute group (*mog-minni*) or a pronoun. The variation of the object groups suggests their interchangeability depending on context or their relative position in the text. At the same time the variability of object groups correlates much better with the interpretation of **mukmini** as *múg-minni* ‘folk-memory’, ‘legend’ than a prepositional phrase *um mögminni* ‘(tout) autour du monument commémoratif du fils’ (Marez 1997: 550–552) because the verb *sagum* retains *-um* in the third variant of the formula.

The only one word present in all variants of the formula is **sakum** and it makes the verb the kernel of the formula. The object (**muk**)**mini** explaining what is going to be said or to whom the following is going to be said is used four times and always follows the verb. The word (**muk**)**mini** thus appears to be a second in importance key word.

The position of pronoun **þat** is unstable: it can conclude the formula (two times) as well as open it (three times). In two cases **þat** is absent altogether.

The combination of the same two key words, **sakum** and **mini**, occurs once more in a badly damaged l. 20. The line begins with a sequence of runes which Sophus Bugge restored as **nuk [m[inni] miR a]lu [sa]k[i] ainhuARR – þ – iftir fra ...** ‘Nun [sage ich] vollständig [alte Erinerungen ...] jeder einzelner – – habe nachgefragt’. He compared enclitic *núk = nú ek* with *Vafþrúðnismál* 55: *Nú ek við Óðin deildak [mína] orðspeki* (Bugge 1910: 119–120, 149–151; Brate 1910: 273–274). This reading became widespread: *Nu’k minni meðr allu sagi. AinhvaRR ...* ‘Now I tell the memories completely. Somebody ...’ (Wessén 1958: 26, 50–51); ‘Now I tell the tales in full. Someone ...’ (Jansson 1987: 34). The inclusion of both key words, *segja* and *minni*, in the phrase is an important indication that **nukm[ini] ... [sa]ki** is one more variant of the **sakum** formula though it differs from others in several ways (cf. Lönnroth 1977: 23, 50, 57; Grønvik 1988: 130; Grønvik 2003: 4–49).

Thus, the **sakum** formula has four modifications as far as its wording and syntactical pattern is concerned.

1. *sagum mögminni þat* (ll. 3 and 21),
2. *sagum mögminni* (ll. 23 and 26),
3. *þat sagum* (ll. 5, 12, 14).
4. *nu’k minni meðr allu sagi* (l. 20)

Distribution of the **sakum** formula

It is a common opinion that the **sakum** formula opens new narrative units but the implications of the usage of the formula in different variants as well as its role as a structural token have attracted little attention. It was only Lönnroth who suggested a certain system in its distribution in the text. He pointed out that the formula introduces three ‘morphological units of each set’, consisting of two riddles and an answer (Lönnroth 1977: 8). The **sakum** formula thus signalizes the beginning of a new riddle which allowed Lönnroth to designate it as an ‘incipit-formula’. Lönnroth regarded *sagum mögminni þat* and *þat sagum* as one and the same formula and did not allude, however, to other alternatives. He thus saw no possible structural significance in the usage of different variants.

A closer look at the distribution of the variants of the **sakum** formula in the text suggests that the choice of this or that variant is not accidental but it is tightly connected with the overall structure of the inscription. The location of the variants seems to be subjected to or coordinated with (1) the content of the following unit and (2) to its graphics.

The correlation between the content of the inscription and the script has been established long ago and the change of script was one of the main arguments in favour of the division of the inscription in two main sections – (I) ‘narrative’ written in younger runes and (II) ‘mythical’ or ‘sacral’ (this conventional designation is dubious; an alternative interpretation of this section see in Harris 2006) ciphered with several types of cryptic runes including older futhark. The usage of different graphic systems in one and the same inscription is exceptionally rare and the transition from one script to another is an eloquent indication that the

author of the inscription ascribed different significance to each of the sections and meant to make this difference obvious.

A more detailed division of the text can be based on separation of minimal content units. Some of them have been isolated already at the dawn of the study of the inscription (like the strophe on Theodoric), others are still objects of discussion (especially lines 23–28). A systematic separation of minimal content units was suggested by Widmark (1992: 25–26), who isolated ten of them. The peculiarities of the distribution of the **sakum** formula are most evident if the bipartite and content-unit divisions of the inscription are combined.

The first unit contains the dedication and is structured in accordance with the memorial formula thus being a separate section of the text which did not need a **sakum** formula.

The main part of the inscription is structured as follows:

Table 1. Distribution of the **sakum** formula.

Younger runes section			
I.2	<i>sagum mogminni þat</i>	topic: transmission of <i>valraubar</i>	
3	<i>þat sagum</i> + ordinal	topic: death of Theodoric (?)	
4		topic: the statue of Theodoric	
5	<i>þat sagum</i> + ordinal	topic: twenty slain kings	
6	<i>þat sagum</i> + ordinal	topic: twenty king at Siolund	
7	<i>nu'k minni meðr allu sagi</i>	topic: (concluding phrase?)	
Cipher runes section			
II.8	<i>sagum mogminni þat</i>	topic: Ingvaldings	older runes
9	<i>sagum mogminni</i>	topic: Vilin	younger and shift runes
10	<i>sagum mogminni</i>	topic: Sibbe of Vi	two types of twig runes and coordi- nate runes

The distribution of the **sakum** formula variants follows a distinct pattern. The extended formula *sagum mogminni þat* occurs two times and opens the two major sections of the text, ‘narrative’ and ‘sacral’, inscribed in younger futhark (l. 3) and in cipher runes (l. 21) respectively. It marks the beginnings of sections most probably consolidated by their content or the theme common to all units within a section. The usage of one and the same variant of the incipit-formula that does not occur elsewhere in the text stresses the structural equivalence of both sections.

The reduced formulae *þat sagum* and *sagum mogminni* are used to mark the opening of a new unit within the major sections. These formulae are strictly tied to the sections. The form *þat sagum* is met only in the first section whereas *sagum mogminni* belongs to the second section.

In all cases *þat sagum* is followed by an ordinal and then by a question or an objective clause introduced by an interrogative/relative pronoun in the same way as the extended variant. The enumeration of units in the first section strongly supports its ‘catalogue’ interpretation as the content of the units introduced by the same variant of the formula might be presumed to be thematically comparable. The closest parallel from *Vafþrúðnismál* was cited already by Erik Brate and Elias Wessén (Brate 1910: 296; Wessén 1958: 33–34) “*Segðu þat it einn ..., Segðu þat annat ..., Segðu þat it þriðja ...*”. In the *Eddic* poem the formula introduces questions but the same device could have been used in cases of ‘threading’ any similar textual units including retellings of, or allusions to epic stories.

The distribution of the *þat sagum* formula seems to indicate also that units 3 and 4 usually regarded to represent separate legends (or riddles/hints) belong to a single thematic block. Unit 3 alludes to a man who ‘died with the Reidgoths ... because of his offences’ (Jansson 1987: 32) or ‘lost his life among the Hreið-Goths and still (yet) is ready for battle’ (Lönnroth 1977: 26). The subject of unit 4 is a description of the equestrian statue of Theodoric brought by Charles the Great from Ravenna to Aachen in 801. The mention of the Hreið-Goths tightly connected with Theodoric epic together with the dedication of the next unit directly to him

makes the identification of the man who ‘lost his life’ with Theodoric plausible. Though unit 4 is a strophe in *fornyrðislag* while unit 3 is a prosaic text and though different legends are alluded to, the commonality of the hero might allow us to perceive both units as one whole devoted to the ‘Theodoric theme’. In this case the formula *þat sagum* had to be used only once before the beginning of the allusion to the death of Theodoric.

The formula *þat sagum* thus seems to introduce new narrative topics: the tradition about Theodoric the Great, the tale about twenty kings slain in a battle, and the tale about twenty kings ‘sitting on Zealand’.

The *sagum mogminni* formula allows variations in its continuation: in l. 23 it opens a question/objective clause like the extended formula and *þat sagum*. In l. 26 it is followed by the name *Þórr* (whatever the sequence of ll. 27 and 28 might be) spelled with a specific kind of cipher runes used only to incise this single word.

The fourth variant of the **sakum** formula, *Nu 'k minni meðr allu sagi*, occurs only once and its position at the end of the ‘narrative’, younger-runic section makes its interpretation as a ‘post-script formula’ (Lönnroth 1977: 23) highly probable. The specific role of this variant different from the function of other variants of the formula might explain its peculiarities.

The **sakum** formula thus seems to structure the text and the distribution of its variants shows a sophisticated narrative strategy of the author of the inscription. Together with the change of the script, the variants of the **sakum** formula mark the division of the text into two-level units. The extended variant signalizes alterations of major themes and indicates the beginnings of the two main sections. The reduced variants introduce individual subject-plots and each reduced formula belongs to one and only one section. The formula variants thus form a two-level hierarchy that reflects the structure of the text and, most probably, the hierarchy of themes and topics.

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