

Images of weapons on runestones

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Images of weapons on runestones, especially those that are depicted as attributes of human figures, are the subject of this paper. They are examined in relation to the size of the monuments and their inscriptions, as well as in light of their material counterparts in burial customs. axa

Burials and runestones

Much of the argument in this paper is based on the notion that carving memorial stones can be regarded as a prolongation of the Iron Age traditions of creating costly furnished burials and large monuments, marked by for instance mounds or stone settings. In the late Iron Age, inhumation graves were more common and grave goods richer and more diverse than before (Müller-Wille 1993a: 58). These items are generally interpreted as the personal belongings of the deceased and equipment for the journey to a realm of the dead and the afterlife (Gräslund 2002: 47; Roesdahl 1982: 166), simultaneously indicating rank and status (Jesch 1991: 27-28; Wason 1994: 93-94). Thus grave goods also had a function for the living. As remainders of funeral rites they represented the economic and social status of the family involved.

Many Swedish Viking Age runestones were erected on or close to such burial grounds, more than with other landscape features such as roads or waterways (Gräslund 1987: 250-256; Klos 2009: 83, 114-118). They seem to have been placed particularly with grave mounds and (round) stone settings (Klos 2009: 85-87), which are Vendel Period and Viking Age burial-types (Müller-Wille 1993a: 59 fig. 4). Furnished graves became less common from the late tenth century onwards (Müller-Wille 1993b: 237), and when Christian burial customs gradually replaced the older practices, runestones became mainly part of the new tradition. Although the chronology of both runestones and burials is difficult to determine precisely (e.g. Stoklund 1991), pre-Christian burial practices and the erection of runestones seem to have overlapped chronologically for some time during this transition period. For example, a considerable number of eleventh-century and some early twelfth-century pre-Christian burials have been found in Uppland (Broberg 1991: 49-62), which is during and even after the runestone-carving fashion (by that time a largely Christian affair) had reached its peak there. Even the burial grounds where runestones were erected did not have to consist exclusively of older graves, but could contain burials that were more or less contemporary, and possibly pre-Christian (Gräslund 1987: 255-256, 259).

There is usually no more than one runestone per burial ground, and they seem not to have been connected to any grave in particular (Klos 2009: 301). Thus, although often associated with burial grounds, runestones functioned differently from grave markers such as the early Iron Age uncarved *bauta*-stones, Iron Age mounds and stone settings, and medieval grave-stones, which were all directly associated with individual graves. However, also when they were erected at locations other than burial grounds, runestones fulfilled similar purposes to the furnished and marked graves, in particular public commemoration of the dead and display of the social and economic status of the living. This suggests that in the later Viking Age these functions could be executed more and more away from the grave.

Apart from through their location and materiality, these functions of runestones were also fulfilled with the help of their carvings. The memorial inscriptions and decorations vary in elaborateness and thus in the information they convey im- and explicitly about the commemorated person(s) and the commissioner(s). This role of figural images in visual communication on runestones is the subject of my doctoral research. Most of the items that ninth- to early eleventh-century burials could include as grave goods were also depicted on runestones, such as ships, weapons, tools, clothing, and animals like horses, dogs and birds. Also in graves, but less certainly or less frequently represented on runestones are wagons, jewellery, vessels with food and drink, and additional people.

Weapons on runestones

Weapons are depicted in various forms on Viking Age runestones. They occur as a single motif,¹ held as an attribute by a human figure² and used in action.³ A small number of stone fragments contains depictions of weapons of which the context is now unknown.⁴ Although the objects on these fragments can be identified as specific weapons, they are not taken into account here because of their uncertain context. Additionally, several human figures on runestones are depicted with objects that could possibly represent a weapon.⁵ Since these attributes cannot be identified with certainty as a type of weapon, or indeed as any other object, these stones are left out of consideration here.

A special position has to be assigned to the hammer. Only once it is depicted as attribute of the god Þórr, in his struggle with the Miðgarðsormr on U 1161 Altuna.⁶ The Þórr's hammer occurs more often on runestones as a symbol.⁷ The hammer is in origin more a tool than a weapon and it is depicted as such as part of the smith's tools that identify Regin on Sö 101 Ramsundberget and Sö 327 Gök. It is only presented as weapon on U 1161 Altuna, although the symbolic hammers on other stones perhaps also refer to how the god used his attribute. Nevertheless, the fact that this tool is only used as a mythological weapon, and is mostly depicted as a symbol and not as an attribute, places it apart from the other weapons and it will therefore not be discussed here further.

Half of the swords carved as attributes on runestones also represent a mythological weapon: Sigurðr's sword Gramr, forged from the fragments of his father's sword which in turn came from Óðinn (see note 3). A further four swords are held by figures on horseback (Vg 119 Sparlösa, U 678 Skokloster, U 691 Söderby, U 1161 Altuna) and two by standing warriors on Ög 181 Ledberg. Three of the equestrians' swords are raised, while the one on U 678 is tucked under the rider's arm. The upper figure on the front of Ög 181 holds his sword almost horizontally at waist-height and the sword of the figure below him points vertically downward; both seem to be suspended from their bearers' waists.

Only the figures on Ög 181 Ledberg and U 691 Söderby can be identified as male by their beards, but this does not mean the other riders are female. The heads of these equestrians and of the standing men on Ög 181 are without exception pointed, though they vary strongly in shape. These contours suggest headgear of some sort, presumably helmets or possibly conical leather caps (Graham-Campbell 1980: 68). In contrast, only two out of five of the visible heads of Sigurðr are depicted with a shape that suggests headgear (on Sö 101 Ramsundberget and U 1175 Stora Ramsjö).

The spears depicted on runestones are mostly combined with swords: both weapons are held by the upper figure on the front of Ög 181 Ledberg and U 678 Skokloster is decorated with an equestrian with a sword on one side, while the horseman on the other side holds a spear. These men, like the sword-wielders, are depicted with headgear (on the front of Ög 181 this is the same man).

The spear on U 855 Böksta has a different context. The horseman holding it is accompanied by two dogs chasing an antlered animal. This prey is also attacked by a bird, while a larger bird of prey or carrion-eater is depicted on top of the runic band. This hunting

¹ On Vg 124, the inscription band is distinctly shaped like a sword, depicted vertically on the stone, with a horizontal hilt at the top. The inscription band on U 999 follows the contours of the stone, ending in the centre in a spearhead. This is the only decoration on these stones.

² Swords on Ög 181 (2x), Vg 119, U 678, U 691, U 1161; spears on Ög 181, U 678, U 855; an axe on DR 282 and possibly Sö 324; bows and arrows on Sö 324, U 855.

³ Swords used by Sigurðr to penetrate the runic serpent, alias Fáfnir, on Sö 101, Sö 327, U 1163, Gs 9, probably on U 1175, Gs 19, and possibly on Gs 2; an axe on Sö 190.

'In action' here means that the weapon interacts with another element of the decoration (other than the figure holding it). This is why the spear on U 855 is not mentioned here; although it is part of a hunting scene, the spear is not in contact with the prey.

⁴ Swords on Nä 21, N 98; a spear on Ög Hov 23-4.

⁵ The long thin objects held vertically by standing figures on Gs 2, Gs 19; the tapered object held vertically by the lower horseman on N 61; the cross- or hammer-shaped object on U 901, used by one man to touch (consecrate or strike?) another man, who holds the upper body of a third man.

⁶ On the other stone that is decorated with this scene, DR EM1985;275, Þórr is depicted without his hammer, but in the company of the giant Hymir.

⁷ Sö 86, Sö 111, Vg 113, DR 26 (2x), DR 120.

scene is accompanied by a smaller human figure on skis with a bow and arrow, who is discussed in more detail below. That this spear-carrier does not seem to wear any headgear, at least not pointed like the other figures with swords and spears, might be because this is a hunting scene rather than a battle-related image.

Long-shafted axes are depicted on two runestones, once carried over the shoulder by the man on DR 282 Hunnestad 1 and once used by the man on Sö 190 Ytterenhörna to strike(?) the opposing quadruped on the head. Both men are depicted with strongly pronounced beards, pointed headgear and tunics.

Also only two figures have bows and arrows as attributes. The skier with bow and arrow that accompanies the hunter on U 855 Böksta fits Snorri's discription of Ullr as the god of the hunt, an archer and a skier (*Gylfaginning* 31, *Skáldskaparmál* 14; Silén 1983: 88) and the addition of the image of a hunting god to a hunting scene seems appropriate. The skier is also depicted with a beard, but his head-shape is pointed, in contrast to that of the horseman.

The other bow and arrow are held by the kneeling figure on Sö 324 Åsby, who is depicted *en face* with tendrils coming from behind its head. Similar tendrils protrude from the head of the human figure wearing an animal mask on Vg 56 Källbyås, who can be interpreted in a ritualistic context (e.g. as berserker Price 2002: 373; for parallels of masked or animal-hide wearing figures see 171-174, 369-374). The archer's round eyes and long nose are comparable to the ritualistic masks or godly faces on the so-called mask-stones and faint traces of a similar interlace pattern can be discerned in the archer's face on the stone.⁸ The figure is depicted without details of clothing, but with rings or cuffs on its ankles and wrists. This is another feature that it has in common with figures such as on Vg 56. The figure holds the bow and arrow in its stretched-out left arm and had a small axe in the other.⁹ Since this archer appears to be masked and dressed similarly to figures that seem to have a ritualistic character, its bow, like Ullr's, has a supernatural or ritualistic context. The small axe similarly differs in context from those held by the standing men, not only in size.

Vg 119 Sparlösa is an early ninth-century runestone (except for the eleventh-century inscription on side E). The other runestones with human figures with weapons are all eleventh-century monuments and most can be placed in relative chronology to each other according to their style (Gräslund 2006): DR 282 Hunnestad 1: first half of the century; Sö 190 Ytterenhörna and Sö 324 Åsby: second quarter; U 855 Böksta: second to third quarters; U 1161 Altuna: third quarter; U 691 Söderby mid to late eleventh century. U 678 Skokloster was carved in the same century, but in a seventh- or eight-century style with Ringerike and Mammen features (Wessen and Jansson 1949-1951: 179; Fuglesang 1980: 89-90). Ög 181 Ledberg cannot be dated more precisely. The carvings on Vg 124 Ryda and U 999 Funbu are Viking Age, but have no stylistic features that allow a more specific dating. The stones with Sigurðr are all eleventh-century carvings too, with Sö 101 Ramsundberget and Sö 327 Gök from resp. the first half and the second quarter of the century, and the Upplandic and Gästrikland monuments from the late eleventh century.

A comparison with weapons in burials

All these stones are from central Sweden, except for DR 282 Hunnestad 1 from Skåne. Apart from on the Sigurðr-stones, most swords and spears are held by horsemen. Two groups of elaborate graves with horses from tenth-century central Sweden have been examined with respect to the weapons they contain: twenty-four chamber burials on Birka and fourteen boat graves from Vendel, Valsgärde and Tuna (Sundkvist 2001: 194-195). Approximately three-quarters of these burials contained spears, roughly half included swords and arrow-heads, a third contained large knives, and axes were found in just under a tenth. Finally, 90 percent of the chamber burials and two-thirds of the boat graves included shields.

⁸ The stones decorated with faces or masks with interlace patterns are mostly from Södermanland and Denmark: Sö 112, Sö 167, Sö 367, Vg 106, DR 62, DR 66, DR 81, DR 258, DR 314 face C and D, DR 335, DR MJy69, DR Aud1996;274. They are generally interpreted as ritualistic(?) masks (e.g. Moltke 1985: 252-253), faces of Óðinn (Snædal Brink and Wachtmeister 1984: 39) or, on the most of the Sörmlandic stones, of Christ (Hultgård 1992: 89). Other, more varied faces without such interlace patterns are carved on: Sö 86, Sö 95, U 78, U 128 (with upper body), U 508, U 670, U 824, U 1034, U 1150, Nä 34, DR 286, and possibly Sm 103.

⁹ This can be seen on a photo from 1928-36 (Brate and Wessén 1924-36: pl. 16) and traces of it are still visible on the stone, though they are no longer painted in.

The ratio between the various weapons on runestones does not correspond to that of the weapons found in these graves. Large knives are not depicted as such on known runestones and swords are depicted two to three times as often as spears, axes, and bows and arrows, also when not counting the six instances where the swords belong to Sigurðr. It should be noted that due to the small number of stones under discussion, not too much value can be attached to this: if for instance two more stones with spears were found, these proportions would alter considerably. However, that axes are found rarely in graves with horses does correspond to how they function on runestones: they are never depicted as the attribute of an equestrian, but always of a standing man. Depictions of words and spears, on the other hand, are held mostly by horsemen and they are also the most common weapons in these horse-graves.

A similar pattern can be observed in tenth-century Danish graves, where swords and spearheads are also found mostly in graves with riding equipment (Näsman 1991: 167). Two burial-types with particular grave goods can be observed on Jutland. One combined riding equipment and sometimes horses with swords and spears, while another group without horses or equestrian objects contained axes instead. Moreover, when grave goods included more than one weapon, these were swords, spears and axes in approximately equal amounts, but when only one weapon was deposited in a burial this was almost exclusively an axe (Näsman 1991: 167-169). Late Viking Age graves with an axe as single weapon are also found on Gotland (Trotzig 1985). This tendency to combine swords and spears with equestrian equipment and/or horses on the one hand and have axes be the only weapon of a horse-less man on the other is also seen on the runestones.

As mentioned above, the majority of the burials with horses from central Sweden contained shields, of which there is a notable lack on the runestones.¹⁰ The depictions of horsemen with weapons might better fit the Danish equestrian graves, in which there is a strong presence of swords and spears with a less prominent presence of shields than in non-equestrian burials with more than weapon (Näsman 1991: 169 fig. 5). The depiction of the warrior on Ög 181 Ledberg is more in accordance with this latter type of burial, in that he is equipped with both sword, spear and shield.

These burials with distinct grave-good patterns are generally interpreted as graves of people from various social groups. The Viking Age graves with horses and riding equipment that occur particularly in central Sweden, on Gotland and in Denmark, have been interpreted as burials of men fighting for or otherwise connected to the leading dynasties in those areas (Birka, Gräslund 1989: 162; Central Sweden and Gotland, Burenholt 1991: 147; Denmark, Näsman 1991: 171-172). The axes in the other burial-type are also seen as indicators of the deceased's rank and social role, which is thought to have been different from that of the warriors in equestrian graves (Näsman 1991: 171-174; Trotzig 1985). Since the weapons on runestones occur in combinations that seem to mirror the contents of these burial types, they might also have functioned as indicators of rank and the social role of the commemorated person.¹¹

Size matters

Wealth and status could also be communicated through the size of the runestones. The Upplandic equestrian stones are distinctly taller than the average height of runestones in that region of ca 1.65 m (Thompson 1975: 71): U 1161 Altuna is 2.42-1.96 m, U 691 Söderby 3 m, U 678 Skokloster 2.50-2.20 m, and U 855 Böksta 2.57 m. The stones with men with axes are of more modest size, although Sö 190 Ytterenhörna (1.94 m) is still slightly taller than the Sörmlandic average which is around man's height (Brate and Wessén 1924-36: xvii) and DR 282 (1.53 x 1.70 m) was part of the Hunnestad monument, which consisted of multiple stones. Ög 181 Ledberg is 2.42 m tall. Vg 119 Sparlösa is not particularly large with a height of 1.77 m, but it is highly carved with other images and inscriptions. The erected stones decorated with Sigurðr in Uppland and Gästrikland are sized around or just above average of resp. 1.65 m and 2.10 m, while the Sörmlandic Sigurðr-carvings, Sö 101 Ramsundberget (4.7 m wide)

¹⁰ The rider on the back of Dr 96 carries a shield, but instead of a weapon he seems to be holding a triangular banner or flag on a stick. Similarly, the horseman on the pre-Viking Age U 877 is equipped with a shield and a stick-like object, which might be a kind of short spear, but could also be something else.

¹¹ As Näsman (1991: 172-3) has suggested for the axe-carrying man on DR 282.

on a rock wall and Sö 327 Gök (ca 2.5 x 1.65 m) on an erratic block of ca 5 x 3m.

When Vg 119 Sparlösa is left out of consideration as an early variety and the Sigurðr-stones as carvings of a particular mythical hero, it becomes apparent that the stones with sword- and spear-wielding equestrians are significantly larger than those with standing men with axes. This is true both compared to each other as well as in relation to the average in their regions. There are only two axe-stones, so the numbers do not provide very solid ground for a conclusion. Nevertheless, this discrepancy in size underlines the difference between the two types of depicted warriors, which was also indicated by the corresponding combinations of grave goods. Both might indicate a difference in status between them, and thus possibly also between the commemorated persons and their families.

The inscriptions

As discussed above, furnished and/or marked burials and runestones have much in common with regard to their function and meaning, and the same is true for weapons as attributes on runestones and as grave goods. One of the main differences between runestones and graves, however, is that the first generally contain a runic inscription, which forms part of the context of the images and vice versa.

U 855 Böksta with the hunting scene and DR 282 Hunnestad 1 with the axe-man are carved with an inscription that consists only of the memorial formula (the same is true for the other inscribed stone of the Hunnestad monument, DR 283). All the other inscriptions on runestones with weapons contain one or more pieces of additional information (see table).

Table 1. *Inscription elements.*¹²

	commemoration formula	carver signature	guð / kistr hialpi and hans	spell or invocation	information about death or life
Vg 119 Sparlösa	✓	✓		<i>rað runaR þaR rægi[n]kundu <iu> þar</i> interpret the runes of divine origin there	- <i>gaf...at gialdi</i> gave...as payment - <i>Alrikr ugð[i]t? Æivísl</i> Alrikr feared(?) not Eivísl - <i>sigmarr hæti</i> is called celebrated-for-victories - <i>mæginiaru?</i> great battle(?)
U 1161 Altuna	✓	✓			<i>baðiR fæðrgaR brunnu</i> both father and son(s) were burned
U 691 Söderby	✓		✓		<i>myrðan</i> murdered (or <i>goðan</i> ¹³ good, worthy, respectable, of good birth)
U 678 Skokloster	✓	✓			
Ög 181 Ledberg	✓			<i>þistill/mistill/kistill</i> thistle, mistletoe, casket	
U 855 Böksta	✓				
Sö 190 Ytterenhörna	✓	✓	✓		
DR 282 Hunnestad 1	✓				

Of these optional elements, the carver-signatures and Christian prayers are common and formulaic additions to the memorial formula. Listed in the last two columns are the other additions that occur in this group of inscriptions. These are all of the more unconventional and notably less formulaic type of phrases that can be interpreted as spells or invocations, invitations to interpret the monument and highly specific information about the death or life

¹² The normalisation and English translations of the inscriptions in this paper are taken from the *Samnordisk runtextdatabas*, unless stated otherwise.

¹³ Stille 1999: 33-34.

of the commemorated person(s) (Palm 1992: 136). These unusual additions all occur in inscriptions on stones decorated with sword-carrying men.

On none of these stones, however, is this the only figural decoration. The men on Ög 181 Ledberg also hold a spear (the upper) and a shield (both) and are accompanied by images of dogs and a ship on the front and two unarmed warriors and a battle-wolf on the back. The rider with the sword on U 691 Söderby holds a cross in his other hand and is carved above a quadruped. The equestrian on U 1161 Altuna is combined with a depiction of Þórr fishing for the Miðgarðsormr and a figure on a large ladder-like structure with a bird on its shoulder, while the other side of the stone shows a struggle between a large bird and a quadruped. On Vg 119 Sparlösa, the horseman is accompanied by two dogs and above him, from bottom to top, two beasts, a ship, two birds, and a building-structure. Other sides of the stone are decorated with a struggle between two large birds and the face and upper-body of a human figure.

Hence, although the figures with swords are the common denominator of these stones, it is not certain that the individual additions in the inscriptions are connected exclusively to them. Moreover, such additional inscription-elements are not restricted to these stones. Similar information occurs on stones with other or no figural images. Nevertheless, all five inscriptions on the stones decorated with men with swords contain an addition of some sort; the four horsemen have a carver-signature and/or a Christian formula and three of them, plus Ög 181 Ledberg, also contain various uncommon, more exclusive additions.

There are four runestones decorated with unarmed horsemen and readable inscriptions. Of these, only half contain additional inscription-elements of the more exclusive type, *hvita-vaðum* (baptismal clothes) and *meðan st[æi]n[ar](?)* (while the stones? [stand?])¹⁴ on U Fv1973;194 Uppsala and *en hann varð dauðr i Bogi(?)* (and he died in Bogi(?)) on U 375 Vidbo Kyrka, while U 599 Hanunda only contains a carver-signature as additional element and the inscription on U 448 Harg consists of the memorial formula only.¹⁵

The inscriptions on three of the Sigurðr-stones are completely legible (Sö 101 Ramsundberget, U 1163 Drävle, Gs 9 Årsunda), and one for the most part (Gs 19 Ockelbo). The inscriptions on Gs 9 and Gs 19 contain no (legible) additions to the memorial formula. U 1163 adds that the commemorated father was *sniallr* (quick, bold)¹⁶ and the inscription on Sö 101 mentions a *bro* (bridge) was made *for salu* (for the soul of) the commemorated person. Although these stones are also decorated with men with swords, the inscriptions contain significantly fewer optional additions and of a different kind when the sword is held by Sigurðr than when it is the attribute of an equestrian or standing warrior.

Conclusion

The weapons on runestones occur in varying contexts: bows and arrows are held by supernatural or ritualistic figures; axes are the attributes of standing men with headgear but without other weapons; swords are depicted two to three times as often as the other weapons and are held by Sigurðr, by helmeted men on horseback, and by a standing warrior; spears are also held by the latter two, and once by a hunter.

Depictions of Sigurðr differ from the other figures with swords not only in their combination with other images from the Sigurðr-stories, but also in their equipment (lack of headgear). Differences between the two groups can also be observed in the size of the monument and the variations in the inscriptions.

The numbers of stones under discussion here are only small, especially of those with weapons other than swords. Nevertheless, there seems to have been a tendency to combine swords and spears with equestrian equipment and/or horses on the one hand and have axes be the only weapon of a horse-less man on the other can be observed, which can also be

¹⁴ The 'stand' is my addition, based on that this phrase occasionally found in other runestone inscriptions.

¹⁵ One of the fragments of U 1003 is also decorated with an unarmed equestrian, but not enough of the inscription survives to interpret it. Of Sö 239 only the bottom half survives, which shows the body of a horse with the rider's leg and the beginning and end of the memorial formula, but it is uncertain whether the rider carried a weapon and what the rest of the inscription said.

¹⁶ The same adjective is used on, among other stones, Gs 2, as well as the Christian phrase *guð hialpi and*. However, although this stone is most likely decorated with scenes from the Sigurðr-cycle, it is uncertain whether there was also a Sigurðr with sword carved on the top part.

observed in burials, despite the fact the ratio between the particular weapons depicted on runestones differs from that between those deposited in burials. The stones with sword- and spear-wielding equestrians are also significantly larger than those with standing men with axes and the variations in their inscriptions further set apart the stones decorated with human figures with swords from those with other weapons.

Since the weapons on runestones occur to a large extent in similar combinations as in certain burial types, and furnished and/or marked burials and runestones have much in common with regard to their function and meaning, they might likewise have functioned as indicators of rank. The size of the runestones with particular weapons and the use of unconventional inscription-elements might also indicate a difference in status between them, and thus possibly also between the commemorated person and their family.

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