

MICHAEL P. BARNES and R. I. PAGE:
The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain

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Looked at with strictly Scandio-centric eyes the post-Viking inscriptions discovered in the British Isles at large, including Ireland, could in a sense be perceived as evidence from a diaspora of runic writing, carrying as such an interest *per se*. Be this as it may. Runic inscriptions from the Viking Age onwards do at any rate, among many other things, form part of the evidence that needs to be taken into consideration in the scholarly debate about Scandinavian settlements in Britain – together with other kinds of evidence, archaeological, onomastic etc. The runic evidence in its entirety has, however, not been so easily accessible – not until the recent publication of volume 19 in the highly reputable Uppsala series of runic studies called *Runrön*. The appearance of this very important volume written by two of the nestors of modern runology, Professors Michael P. Barnes and R. I. Page, constitutes a final step in establishing a complete corpus of Scandinavian runic inscriptions in Britain. This final step consists of an edition of 56 + two possible inscriptions from Shetland (SH), the Orkney Islands (the Maeshowe inscriptions excepted) (OR), Scotland (SC) and England (E) – a significant part indeed of a total of about 140 known at present from the area of the British Isles as a whole. That is to say that the remaining 80+ have already been published elsewhere, first and foremost by the authors of *Runrön* vol. 19.

The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain is, primarily, a corpus edition. It is organized in two main parts, the first of which, the 'Introductory chapters' (ch. 1-9, pp. 19-113), has a great value of its own in addition to that of leading up to the second main part, the 'Corpus'. This latter part of the book includes, in addition to the edition of the 56 inscriptions, three appendices accompanied by bibliography and plates, mostly of excellent

quality (pp. 119-453). The appendices contain: 1) a presentation of the two uncertain inscriptions – one from the Orkney Islands and one from North Yorkshire, England (†OR 2 Unstan and †E 5 Settle); 2) a summary of inscriptions including transliteration, text and translation; 3) archive sources.

In addition to establishing the corpus and the *modus operandi*, the first part of the book highlights important issues of modern runology in chapters pertaining to the examining of inscriptions (ch. 3), rune forms and orthography (ch. 4), and the ever recurring issue of transliteration (ch. 5) – everything presented through the medium of what might in a context such as this appropriately be called ‘the quiet voice of reason’. Here is much to be learnt from two distinguished field runologists. Cautiousness is a distinctive feature of these two scholars’ approach throughout. Problems concerning inscriptions are meticulously reported and discussed in the Corpus part of the volume, methodologically formulated in the Introductory part as a principle: “We report the problems to demonstrate that runology cannot be an exact science, that it has an Uncertainty Principle almost as baffling as that identified for quantum physics and perhaps less susceptible to investigation.” (p. 49). This, of course, is a vital principle for everybody working in the field, even though it must be said that it has not always been adhered to.

In chapters 6 and 7 (“Language” and “Literacy”) the importance of the edited inscriptions for language history, in the broadest sense of the term, is analyzed and synoptically presented with the methodological acumen and clarity that characterizes the volume as a whole. The presentation is done with a side-view to the British corpus previously edited. These are chapters that add to our knowledge about Anglo-Scandinavian historical linguistics in general. As it is important and useful to other scholars to know what the runic material can and can not contribute to historical studies of language in this particular case, these chapters will be welcomed by scholars and readers far beyond the circles of “field” and “desk” runologists. Particularly interesting in this respect is Chapter 8 of the introductory part, carrying the somewhat enigmatic heading “Questions but no answers”. Three questions are asked in this chapter: 1) Are there any *runic manuscripta* relevant to our book? 2) What reservations should we have about early reports and drawings of runic monuments? 3) How diagnostic are “diagnostic forms”? In explanation of the latter question it should be added here that the term “diagnostic forms” is used by the present authors, in this book and elsewhere, to relate runic forms to different sets of runes, in this context first and foremost the forms used from about AD 800 onwards. The systematic differences between sets of runes “mean that certain forms are diagnostic of a particular type” (p. 53). The importance of the questions asked in Chapter 8 certainly exceeds the

relevance they may have “to our book” as phrased in question 1. By asking these questions the authors bring into the open methodological aspects pertinent to runological analysis in general. Where post-Viking runic material is concerned, it is important and necessary to ask them – the modest claim that there are “no answers” in the present context does not affect their importance in general to runological analysis. That is to say that the awareness of material such as that implied in questions 1 and 2 carries an importance *per se* to the runologist as well as to other scholarly users of edited inscriptions.

From what has already been mentioned above in general terms, it should follow that there is little, if anything, to add to the treatment of individual inscriptions in the corpus part of the book under review. There is, however, a lot to be learnt. An important body of runic inscriptions that has for a long time remained poorly documented has now been made easily accessible to the international community of scholars. It is a most welcome addition to our knowledge about medieval runes outside Scandinavia.