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RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS AS INSTANCES OF PROTO-BOOKS*

Abstract

The paper argues in favour of understanding a certain number of runic inscriptions carved on stones as culture-dependent instances of Scandinavian proto-books, for they fulfill precisely the same functions as contemporary books.

1. Introduction

“It seems that Viking Age Scandinavia emerged as a relatively distinctive ethno-linguistic entity at ca. 800 A.D. From that time the Viking Age is said to mark a period of transition from prehistoric to historical times. Viking Age culture started to be reasonably well documented owing to travelling foreign diplomats, monks and tradesmen who described their ventures into the north of Europe, and last but not least, to a number of runic inscriptions documenting the life and ways of the Vikings. Archeological sources show that ‘the heart of Viking lands’ – Jutland – was flourishing at that time. The number and size of its forms was growing and its inhabitants were making ready for offensive combat in order to capture new lands. By the year 800 A.D. Scandinavian speech communities were forming a new cultural and linguistic entity which had fossilized and considerably expanded by the end of the Viking Age. The conversion to Christianity was connected with abandoning the worship of pagan gods and the acquisition of new cultural values which at that time could not have been more foreign to the mainstream Vikings. Nevertheless, conversion to Christianity significantly strengthened Scandinavian royal powers and their links with the rest of

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southern Europe, which resulted in changes in the social reality and construction of Scandinavian speech communities. There is only one way of showing the above, namely by an analysis of the linguistic records of the society in question" (Chruszczewski 2006: 17). These records are in the form of runic inscriptions which can be perceived to be instances of proto-books.

2. On the definition of a book

In the history of science there are still a few widely-used, but actually undefined basic notions such as "time," "ethnicity," "language" or "book." It needs to be said that there were quite a few attempts to define those terms, but the best one can do in this regard is to either adhere to one of the plausible definitions or to come up with a new one. Either of these ways is risky. There were many attempts to define what the book is. In 1964 UNESCO states that it is "a printed non-periodic publication containing at least 49 pages (excluding the covers) and intended for the public" (after Migoń 1984: 8). It would be very difficult to agree with the above, because, according to the above definition all short books for children, would not actually be books at all.

One can say that any book is a particular type of a document which may be regarded as an archive of the intellectual repertoire of the epoch in which it was produced. One of the issues upon which researchers agree is the fact that books can be divided into those made by hand (i.e. manuscripts – singular and unique productions which very often are works of art and masterpieces of craftsmanship) and into printed books, which are made much faster than manuscripts, and in far greater numbers since the time of Gutenberg's invention.

Therefore, one should have in mind that, among other definitions, a book can also be a handmade form of text transmission, and the form of the "text transmission" can be expressed in a number of ways. If one agrees with the above, then stones bearing runic inscriptions could also be seen as very specific – and culturally determined – forms of a primal period of the development of "proto-books" in Scandinavia. It was a very common message-transmission form in Viking Age Scandinavia (until today, there remain over 6000 runic inscriptions mainly in Denmark, Sweden and Norway).

In the theoretical research on books it is almost impossible to work out such a definition which would contain all isolated features of the book and still could satisfy all researchers. In one of the attempts at such a definition Muszkowski (1972, see also Migoń 1984: 18) emphasizes the fact that it is the book which materializes in a graphic form the essence of culture in which the book is produced. It is Barenbaum (1977, 1984, see also Migoń 1984: 23) who in his definition of the book underlines the freedom of choice as regards the graphic form of books as well as various materials which can be used during the book production process (stone, clay, skin, papyrus, silk, wood, paper, synthetic materials). Certainly, book production materials depend to a large extent on the historical and cultural circumstances of the epoch in which the book is produced.

Thus, one can have Sumerian clay tablets, and two-meter-high stones which were used as material on which information was stored and distributed. One can guess that inscriptions were made on such material so they can last for a long time. Carvers of such stone-carved inscriptions must have been well-aware of the fact that *verba volant, scripta manent*.

Another commonly known fact is that the ways of the graphic expression of ideas evolve along with their authors (Głombiowski 1980: 26, Migoń 1984: 12). Books are supposed to meet social expectations of their time, and fulfil a series of, one can say, utilitarian functions. It is important to note here that either the content, the form, or the location of a literary work in the form of an inscription, can tell us much about the function of the inscription. It was so with inscriptions placed by a ford or a bridge. They functioned as warnings against possible dangers that a traveller could encounter, but they also informed about the author and / or the endower of the inscription. One needs to know that due to particular historical circumstances and the writing culture in which written sources were born, quite often the sources under discussion were neither meant nor required to be transported away from the original place of their creation.

3. On the structure of a book

There are usually three basic components of any book. They are: the text, the writing / script, and the material. It should be kept in mind that the shape of a book depends on its material, and the book's functions depend on a number of variables (see also Głombiowski 1980: 25, Migoń 1984: 18). Głombiowski (1984: 89) is certain that "it is the social and historical embedding which allows us to fully recognize all possibilities of the formulation and reception of the contents that a book can have." What is more, it would be difficult not to agree with Głombiowski that it is the non-verbal context – in which a literary work has to function – that has the fundamental influence on its perception. According to this researcher "it is the type and the level of education, along with the esthetic taste and the social patterns of the participation in culture which have the decisive influence on the quality of the reception of literary values" (Głombiowski 1980: 128). One can risk a thesis that as far as "the esthetic taste and the social patterns of the participation in culture" are concerned, one can learn a great deal by reading literary works common in a given culture.

4. On the functions of a book

Not so long ago – just about thirty years ago – a significant part of scientists working upon the definition of a book was of the opinion that the basic function of books is to strengthen the religious ideology, the political system and the school knowledge. One can defend such a hypothesis under the condition of the

restricted distribution of books. In other words, if there are few books on the market, their production is in the hands of the king (or any national government), then one can presume that under such circumstances only the most important and centrally established political and ideological goals would be fulfilled. Nowadays, in the majority of democratic states the above would be hardly plausible due to the fact that everybody is entitled to their own opinion, and the general access to the book-production process is relatively easy.

At the beginning of the Viking Age (ca. 800–1100 A.D.) the Danish king – Harald Bluetooth – fully realized how important it was to preserve the information about the adoption of a new religion and the extent of his political influence. The information was preserved in the form of the then quite common stone inscription. “The Jelling rune-stones and their verbal messages in particular are also visible signs of a response to the ethno-cultural development of the society ruled by king Harald Bluetooth” (Chruszczewski 2006: 80). Consider the Jelling rune-stone message:

[Side A]: “King Harald commanded this monument to be made in memory of Gorm, his father, and in memory of Thovi (Thyre), his mother” –

[Side B]: “that Harald who won the whole of Denmark for himself, and Norway” –

[Side C]: “and made the Danes Christian” (see also Moltke 1976 / 1985: 207).

“Needless to say, the stone itself, being a 2,5 meter-tall-three-sided monument is an impressive sight. And when we add to the above also the meaning of its message, we are facing a truly royal ‘certificate’ of Denmark’s conversion to Christianity” (Chruszczewski 2006: 80). In a similar way, in the old days, Polish royal typographers who had the exclusive right for printing and selling statutes and chronicles, contributed a great deal to the preservation of the state’s political system. I fully agree in this regard with Głombiowski (1984: 27) who is of the opinion that “the book’s function as well as connected with it its external form (...) are fully dependent on the structure of the society which has its purposes for which uses specific books.” There is another function of the book which can be seen in runic inscriptions of the Viking Age. It is the influence on the preservation of cultural achievements.

Thanks to the runic notations one can trace the passage from paganism to Christianity. There are inscriptions which testify that at least some Scandinavians adopted new values and started to consider them their own. One of the examples of such inscriptions can be observed while considering the the Hørning rune-stone currently located in the Moesgård Museum. The inscription reads “Toke the smith set up the stone in memory of Thorgisl, Gudmund’s son, who gave him gold (?) and freedom (or less probably: proclaimed him a member of the family and free)” (Moltke 1976 / 1985: 316). This is the only known rune-stone raised by a freed slave – Toke – who became a quite skilful rune-carver. Doubtless both Toke and Thorgisl, Toke’s former master, were Christians. The Hørning Stone is also a clear example of the social changes and fluctuations

which were triggered by the conversion of the Scandinavian society to Christianity (Chruszczewski 2006: 222). The above function of the inscription could be regarded as the identity function, for it testifies about the newly acquired values.

The stones from Gotland, which seem to establish the first stage in the development of communication in the Viking Age, fulfill also the esthetic function in their artistic expression. There are also rune-stones fulfilling the literary function, however, there are just few instances of this type. It needs to be said that runic inscriptions as proto-books functioning as the necessary tool of social communication fulfilled also the information-warning purpose. The inscriptions would at times warn you with whom it would not be advisable to do business. Consider the Svenstrup stone inscription, which reads: “Thorgot (a man) [or] Thorgund (a woman) raised this stone in memory of his / her father Asved. Alas, he was betrayed with Ilde’s sons. [Or:] He woefully met deceit with Ilde’s sons” (Iversen 2000: 38, Moltke 1976 / 1985: 311, 312, 334). This rune-stone is a curious family memorial stone which records the treacherous death met by Asved and Ilde’s sons. Another rune-stone recording such an event was found on the Isle of Bornholm (Vester Marie stone 5) and reads: “Skoge betrayed the innocent man” (Moltke 1976 / 1985: 312). The stone can also be read as a memorial placed in the exact location where Asved and Ildes’s sons could have been ambushed (see Moltke 1976 / 1985: 311), which tells us a little about the way in which the Viking Age disputes were sometimes settled (Chruszczewski 2006: 179–180). It seems obvious that runic inscriptions – as many others – established also an intergenerational link. According to Migoń (1984: 13) the fact of admitting a literary work to the category of books depends also on “the typicality of the material used for production of works of that type in the period of time under discussion.” Głombiowski (1984: 67) is of a similar opinion, adding that “the transmission of the text – undertaken in full knowledge of the importance of the task – is the result of the competent artistic construction in which the book creator’s goal is to produce – out of many various elements – a coherent and harmonious unit which would express its author’s will, and would be done in accordance with the generally accepted principles of the esthetic reception common to the society under question.” With the above in mind, it is not just the information, but also the material on which it is placed that establish the focal issue upon which hinges the quality of social reception of that information. It is thanks to their “material substance” through which books or the described runic inscriptions enter the general system of culture. On the basis of the above, Głombiowski (1984: 40) notes that “no sooner than together with the entire material and spiritual culture the full role of the book as a social tool sustaining, integrating and providing historical continuity can be fully appreciated.”

5. On the readership – not only in the times of the Vikings

At the end of this short work it needs to be stressed that in spite of the contemporary obvious downfall in readership, it is still the book which is “one of the

three basic social means of the transmission of thoughts. Similarly to voice and image which served the man, since the beginning of his existence, the purpose of establishing social contacts with other representatives of the species, writing in all its developmental forms served the same purpose, but turned out to be a better tool, because of its independence from space and time" (Głombiowski 1966: 7). One also should add that runic inscriptions as proto-books functioning as indispensable tools of social communication fulfilled also the information-warning function. At times they indicated whom it would be quite dangerous to have contacts with. Inscriptions also served the function of intergenerational links which have the potential to last for a very long time in extremely adverse conditions. The authors of rune-stones were well aware (regardless of the fact whether they were literate or not) of the fact that their works were fully congruent with the culture in which they functioned and that the information which they placed on the stones could be comprehended by those who approached the stones.

The runic inscriptions themselves seem to fulfil all the functions which are nowadays fulfilled by books. Even when separated from the material on which they were carved, runic inscriptions can be described and analyzed on the text-linguistics level as "literary works." The same inscription can also be understood in the broader sense of a "proto-book" which would comprise the text of the message, and the entire semiotics of extra-linguistic communication of information, such as: its often harsh colour used to paint runes, or mythological scenes and characters interwoven in the inscriptions. The most common was the image of a snake surrounding the whole stone. What is interesting is also the fact that the production of rune-stone inscriptions must have required from its carvers much more effort and many more integrated skills than it is the case with book authors today. Obviously, due to the popularity of rune-carving and most probably because of the high income there were also many frauds who were merely copying the same inscription model counting perhaps on the illiteracy of its immediate receivers. But setting these cases aside, the Viking Age rune-carving artist was usually the creator of the final version of the inscription, the sculptor, the grapheme painter, and quite often also a man of letters in one person, which places him / her (?) on a much higher level than the majority of our contemporary literary authors. What is more, in our times it is the readership, and in the Viking Age it was the social reception of rather common rune-stones with runic inscriptions that undoubtedly was a determinant of culture participation in a given time and place, for any inscription is also a text of its particular culture.

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