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A CAUTIONARY TALE: READING THE RUNIC MESSAGE IN *ATLAMÁL IN GRŒNLENZKO*

Tom Birkett

The 'Greenlandic' Lay of Atli

The poems *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál in grœnlenzko* are found adjacent in the Codex Regius manuscript of the Poetic Edda, and are noteworthy for treating exactly the same events in the legendary history of the Vǫlsungs and Niebelungs: the fateful journey of the brothers Gunnar and Hǫgni to the court of their brother-in-law, King Atli, and Guðrún's terrible exacting of revenge following their deaths.[1] Whilst the two

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Abstract: Of the many references to runes in the *Poetic Edda*, the depiction of the runic communication between Guðrún and Kostbera in the poem *Atlamál in grœnlenzko* is one of the most intriguing. This is due in part to certain authentic-sounding details, which have prompted

poems are very different in tone – *Atlakviða* darker, more allusive and

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a number of misguided attempts to reconstruct the message itself. In this article, I offer a reading of this much-discussed episode in light of the runic tradition in medieval Scandinavia and the treatment of the script elsewhere in the *Edda*, suggesting that rather than representing a realistic depiction of runic correspondence, it is best read as a poetic expression of contemporary concerns about long-distance communication within the North Atlantic littoral. In particular, I address the question of the conventional identification of this poem with Greenland, and examine the historical circumstances that may have occasioned the introduction of the runic sub-plot. I argue that the episode partakes in a sophisticated discourse about the possibilities and limitations of the written word, which can serve not only as a warning against the misreading of the runic message, but also against imprudent interpretations of literary texts.

Keywords: *Atlamál*, *Atlakviða*, Eddic poetry, Greenland, runes, Old Norse

disjointed, and generally considered to be amongst the oldest of the Eddic poems – the compiler of the Codex Regius either believed, or had some reason for wanting to claim, that both these poems originated in Greenland, first colonized by Norse settlers in the late tenth century. A Greenlandic provenance for *Atlakviða* is highly unlikely – impossible if the poem is to be attributed to the ninth-century skald Þorbjörn *hornklofi*, as Genzmer first suggested (1926, 134)[2] – and may reflect attitudes in thirteenth-century Iceland towards the alterity and isolation of this outpost of the Norse world (Larrington 2013, 151). However, there are elements in the latter poem which make the ascription to Greenland at least credible, if not conclusive (Finch 1993, 24). As Larrington suggests, the 'harsh frontier conditions in the colony, so distant from the courtly world of Continental European literature, might have prompted the poem's recasting' (1996, 217),

[2] Whilst rejecting this attribution, Dronke acknowledges that the poem may date to the ninth century (1969, 42-43). For an evaluative survey of attempts to date Eddic poetry, see Fidjestøl (1999).

thus setting *Atlamál in grœnlenzko* at a geographical as well as temporal remove from its counterpart in the manuscript.

There is certainly much in *Atlamál* that points to a composition date in the twelfth century (Dronke 1969, 111), and that suggests the adaption of the narrative to the realities of the Norse colonies, including the oft-cited homely, discursive tone and the harsh, insular environment, described as 'small, even mean' by one translator (Hollander 1962, 294). Indeed, in a notable change from the legend presented in *Atlakviða*, the brothers row energetically across the water to the court of the Huns, rather than making a journey through a landscape of mountains, plains and sprawling forests. The action is thus relocated from a continental backdrop of Myrkviðr and the Gnitaheiðr to the landscape of the Norse littoral – specified as the Limfjord area of Jutland (4/4), but superimposable on much of the North Atlantic coastline. In a further move towards familiarizing the setting of the poem, the court of Atli is also described simply as the *bú* (farm or homestead) (36/3), albeit a homestead surrounded by a

palisade and with a snake pit in the yard.[3] Such a merging of the local and the glamorous is perhaps allowed for in the opening lines of the poem, which state that 'Frétt hefir ǫld ofo / þá er endr um gørðo' (People have heard of the hostility that took place long ago) (1/1-2) and explicitly set up a distance between the events related and the poet's own age. As with many of the late *fornaldarsögur*, the treatment of 'times past' leads to a curious blend of historical naiveté – manifested in the representation of contemporary conditions and sensibilities – and a penchant for the outlandish.

The most compelling piece of internal evidence for adaptation to the realities of frontier society, however, is probably the fairly naturalistic depiction of the polar bear in sts 16–17, which Kostbera imagines rampaging through the homestead in one of her many prophetic dreams. As Dronke points out, where else but Greenland would Hǫgni automatically assume from the description that his wife

[3] All Eddic poetry is cited from *The Poetic Edda*, 3 vols. ed. Ursula Dronke. I, Oxford. 1969.

had been dreaming about a *hvítabiǫrn*? (1969, 110). As the interpolated dream sequence suggests, there is also a greater focus on the sensibilities of the characters in the later story, as well as some evidence of an updating of moralities. Whilst the conniving messenger Vingi is unceremoniously hacked to death by the axe-wielding companions (in a scene more reminiscent of the *Íslendingasögur* than heroic poetry), the trembling slave Hialli is released through the mercy of Hǫgni at the same point he is cruelly anatomized to reveal his un-heroic heart in *Atlakviða*. Similarly, although the terrible act of infanticide is lingered on in *Atlamál*, and includes a conversation between Guðrún and her children, this extended scene has the dual effect of humanising and vulgarising the devastatingly impersonal murders related in the earlier poem. In *Atlakviða,* we first encounter the children as Atli does, partaking in the horror as their dismembered bodies are served up by a mother enacting the darkest fears of patriarchal society.[4]

[4] On the symbolism of this act of child-killing – particularly in relation to anxieties about the expected behaviour of the exchanged woman –

Such significant changes to both the narrative and the emotional tenor of the story raise the question of just how closely the two poems are connected. Andersson is seemingly of the opinion that the poet of *Atlamál* was adapting a written text of *Atlakviða*, and perhaps combining this with details taken from a now lost exemplar (1983), whilst others have focused the plurality of the tradition, and its suppression in the integrative *Vǫlsunga saga* (Finch, 1981). Of course, rather than positing a two-step transmission of the narrative, we should also allow for the possibility of an intermediary exemplar or a more organic series of alterations, and the formal similarities are not so close as to preclude an entirely oral process of transmission and composition prior to the recording of both poems in the Codex Regius. Indeed, the difficulty of penetrating the transmission history of the heroic narrative – and the fact that we are presented with two quite different renditions of the same story side by side (one misattributed to Greenland), only

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and the difference in its portrayal in the two poems, see Larrington (2013, esp. 144-151).

serves to highlight the issues of alteration in transmission dealt with at a micro level in the runic sub-plot.

What is clear is that these two poetic accounts of the heroic deaths of Gunnar and Hǫgni arise from different historical and literary moments, and along with the conglomeration of both narratives in *Vǫlsunga saga*, they give us the opportunity to compare an early witness and later adaptation of a tradition, providing not only a stylistic referent by which to judge the antiquity of other poems in the collection, but also a gauge of shifting social realities.[5] In fact, we might say that the Greenlandic poem actively exploits the 'possibilities … [for] fictional texts to take up alternative versions of the past' (Glauser 2007, 21), constructing a cultural memory that is appropriate to the prevailing literary and social climate and perhaps even self-consciously dramatising the re-scripting that is taking place.

[5] For a more involved discussion of the 'remodelling' of *Atlamál*, see particularly Andersson (1983, 250).

Runes in the Poetic Edda

Perhaps one of the most important elements in the wider recasting of events in *Atlamál* involves the introduction of a runic message into the story – more precisely, a narrative sub-plot involving the writing, defacement and interpretation of a runic inscription. Runic motifs appear at regular intervals in the *Poetic Edda*, and are found in both the mythological and heroic sequence of poems. They include the strange catalogue of runic uses and imprecations in *Sigrdrífumál*, with its much-discussed references to *ǫlrúnar* and *bókrúnar*,[6] as well as the famous mythical etiology for the invention of runes in *Hávamál* and story of the runic initiation of the aristocratic class in *Rígsþula*. These episodes are greatly stylized, and though some of the references appear in poems of demonstrable antiquity, there is clearly a significant gulf between rune-writing as practiced in the Migration Age and the literary representation of the script. Runes in literature are often best read as

[6] This reference is most likely a mistake for *bótrúnar* (help-runes), a term attested in an inscription from Bryggen (Ög NOR2001;32) with a clear affinity to the Eddic poem.

poetic motifs of writing, expressing a conceptual rather than a concrete relationship to the surviving runic corpus, and interrogating the cultural impact of literacy (see Lerer 1991; Birkett 2012). This does not mean that these literary texts have no value for the runologist or epigrapher, or anybody with an interest in cultural attitudes to writing and exchange, but as subjective literary compositions, they always present a distorted mirror to the practice itself.

As a parallel, we might think of a more famous incident from the *Poetic Edda*: Óðinn's self-sacrifice in *Hávamál*, through which he gains knowledge of the runes. This episode can be read productively as a myth of social progress and social trauma, telling us much about the popular associations the script carried and the social implications of literacy. Óðinn is literally pierced with a spear (and perhaps figuratively incised) during his hanging from the gallows, and utters a pre-linguistic cry as he takes up the technology of writing, enacting both the physical qualities and linguistic referent of the written word. However, in discussing the development of the runic script, no sane critic of the poem would ever think to confuse this rich myth of origins with the historical realities of scriptural borrowing and adaptation.

The heroic poems of the *Edda* are admittedly of a slightly different order to the mythological poems – after all, the legendary landscape is in part characterized by human rather than divine interactions. We might expect, therefore, that poems such as *Sigrdrífumál* have a somewhat closer relationship to historical practice, as the action takes place in the world of men, albeit a distorted landscape of heroes and supernatural creatures. There are certainly some intriguing echoes of runic practice in this poem's catalogue of imprecations and appropriate writing surfaces, such as the indistinct correspondence between the combination of runes, leeks and beer in the poem, and the use of the formulas *alu* and *laukaz* on Migration Age bracteates, or the reference to carving *sigrúnar* (victory runes) on weapons. This last poetic reference to carving on various parts of the sword and hilt, and naming *týr* twice, bears a 'remarkable coincidence' to the **t** engraved on both sides of the Faversham sword-pommel, as Page has pointed out (1999, 80). Yet, despite these curious hints that poetic lore is somehow reflecting or feeding back into practice, any poem suggesting that runes should be carved on a mythical horse's ear,

a god's tongue, and the fingernails of a norn, should certainly be treated with a healthy dose of scepticism.

Is *Atlamál* any different, then? Bragg is emphatic in her avowal that this runic motif 'suggests nothing so much as monastic enthusiasm for cryptography retrojected onto a legendary cast of characters' (1999, 43) – an assessment that could be applied to a number of literary representations of runes. However, the situation is complicated in this instance by the fact that the runic motif was almost certainly introduced to the story at a period when the runic script was still in use across Scandinavia – not fossilized within communities of monastic antiquarians, as it came to be on the continent at a much earlier period. If the poem was re-worked in the Norse colonies sometime between the settlement of Greenland in the late tenth-century and the writing of the MS in the 1270s, we might expect the introduction of runes into the plot to represent a pertinent allusion to the realities of runic practice, or at least to the historical exigencies of a literate culture. Runes had a practical currency as a script of communication and exchange, and through this narrative embellishment to a legendary poem, we can perhaps make out, if not a statement on contemporary practice itself,

then at least something of the historical consciousness of the poet, allowing us to shed some further light on the re-scripting that is taking place throughout the *Edda*.

The Runic Sub-Plot

The runic message in *Atlamál* is an elaboration on the symbolic wolf-hair sent by Guðrún to her brothers in *Atlakviða*, a gesture intended to warn them against accepting Atli's invitation to come to his court. The first question is whether this alteration represents an attempt at 'modernization', as Finch suggests (1993, 24), or whether it betrays the influence of a different source text, reflecting an early poetic tradition. Responding to this question, Andersson posits a 'lost north German or Saxon lay' as a second source for *Atlamál*, which he attempts to reconstruct through a comparison of a conjectured **Niflunga saga* and the *Nibelungenlied*, suggesting that a key element in this tradition was the dispatching of a letter by Grimhild to the Nibelungs (1983, 247–49). This archetype would thus have provided the inspiration for the

written message that appears in the Greenlandic poem. However, Andersson is clear that other elements of the runic sub-plot – the reconfiguration of the message as a warning, the defacement of the writing, the character of Kostbera who reads the runes correctly – are to be thought of as later 'flourishes' by the poet of *Atlamál* (1983, 249). Even if we accept Andersson's suggestion of a lost German source, 'distinct enough to set in motion an extensive recasting of *Atlakviða*' (1983, 256), the development of this conceit into the complex narrative sub-plot that exists in *Atlamál* is something the Norse poet is alone responsible for.

In fact, there are very good reasons for thinking that the idea of the runic message cannot have been an original feature of the legend, not least the important proviso that there is nothing that really qualifies as runic correspondence written in the older fuþark. It is always important to bear in mind Derolez's estimation that what survives represents 'no more than one percent' of inscriptions carved (Derolez 1981, 20), but even if the finds do not provide a complete picture of the uses of runes in the Migration Age, it is nevertheless fair to say that the surviving inscriptions are limited in their applications and

‘certainly do not indicate a well-established communicative tradition’ (Odenstedt 1984, 116). Runes do not seem to have been used for trade or commerce, certainly, or for personal exchange, at least as we understand it today. Though there are examples of incomprehensible inscriptions (and incompetent rune-carvers) from all periods, there is also no clear evidence for the deliberate defacing of older fuþark inscriptions. The idea of a runic message originating from an early rendition of the legend is thus hard to reconcile with the known uses of runes during the Migration Age – it would represent, in short, the invention of a tradition of runic correspondence by an extremely farsighted poet.

The idea of a runic message, whether serving as a warning or otherwise, certainly has more relevance to the early medieval period, a time of settlement, colonization and extensive North Atlantic trade. A number of very interesting runic messages, including business correspondence and personal letters, have been uncovered amongst the finds at Bryggen in Bergen, and it is probably to this tradition of everyday communication that we should ascribe the reference in *Atlamál*. Rather than looking back to echoes of Migration Age, or

‘Germanic’ practice – a long-standing preoccupation of Eddic scholarship – we should ask what the portrayal tells us about the twelfth- or thirteenth-century use of the script; how the past is being reconceived to illuminate the present; and what literary effect the poet intends in his employment of runes.

A comparison with the earlier poem provides a useful starting point. In the narrative of *Atlakviða*, it is the wolf’s hair itself – wrapped around a ring sent from Guðrún – that represents the entirety of the message. It is essentially a non-linguistic communiqué, a symbol whose semiotics are not fixed but are relied upon as being understood within this context. In fact, though Hǫgni interprets the message correctly, understanding that ‘ylfskr er vegr okkarr / at ríða erendi’ (our journey will be wolfish, if we ride on this errand) (8/7–8), the warning backfires spectacularly. The brothers, who are initially offended by the implication that they, who possess the wealth of Sigurðr, should be enticed to Atli’s court by the mere promise of treasure, actually change their attitude on seeing the wolf’s hair, reading it as a challenge underlying the otherwise unappealing invitation. The warning, and their sister’s ‘officious fears’ have, as

Dronke points out, actually ‘forced them to accept’ within the accepted paradigm of heroic behaviour (1969, 14). The twisted message is as wolfish as the threat itself, and turns upon its sender’s intentions.

In *Atlamál*, the message is far more precise, using written language as the medium of communication, and lacking, one might think, the inherent danger of the ambivalent sign. Instead, in order to twist and change the message in a similar way, the poet introduces a ‘human by-play’ (Dronke 1969, 100): the defacing of the message and its decipherment by an astute reader, playing not on the mutability of the signs themselves, but on a message mediating the voice of the sender and ‘subject to contingency and alteration in the process of transmission’ (Glauser 2007, 24). This does indeed seem to fit with the process of domestication in the later poem, more concerned with personal and familial interaction than with the clash of kingdoms, but it also establishes written communication as an important theme in the later poem. In doing so it makes the same anxieties about mutable signs expressed in *Atlakviða* relevant to a textual community, perhaps specifically to a Norse diaspora greatly dependent on long-distance exchanges and a regular supply of goods from overseas.

The Cautious Reader

We have three main agents involved in the written exchange in *Atlamál*. Firstly, there is the writer of the message, Guðrún – the fact her name literally translates as ‘god-rune’ may itself have given support to the poet’s conceit. Then there is the villainous messenger Vingi who defaces the inscription; and finally there is Hǫgni’s wife Kostbera, the most perceptive of readers, who recognizes the treachery of the message. We are not told at the time how the messenger defaces the runes, only that ‘rengði þær Vingi’ (Vingi distorted them) (4/2). However, it is important that the runes are not simply discarded by the messenger, not only because it suggests they are inscribed on one of the proffered gifts, but because the poet intends the deceit to be conceived of as more complex, more troubling, than that furnished by the simple interception and destruction of a message. Guðrun is described as being at her wits’ end when she decides to write the message, as ‘scyldo um sæ sigla, en siálf né komscat’ ([the message bearers] would sail over the sea, and she herself could not go) (3/7–8). Vingi plays precisely on this fact that the speaker is absent, as well as

the special qualities of longevity and permanence associated with script, in effect appropriating the voice of Guðrún and the authority of the inscription and using it to help trap the brothers. It is a message as wolf-like as the hair in *Atlakviða*, but it plays instead with the particular dangers of written signs, signs that are read all too easily without questioning the interpretive context, and without understanding the inherent danger of written correspondence: the essential disconnect between the author and the reader.

Kostbera is, in some senses, the antidote to this danger. Not only is she a skilled reader, the poet telling us that 'hon […] inti orðstafi / at eldi liósom' (she spelt out the letters of the words, by the shining fire) (9/5–6), but she also goes beyond the unpicking of the letters, the poet telling us that 'kunni hon skil rúna' (she had discerning knowledge of runes) (9/4). The poet seems to be implying that Kostbera is not simply more skilled at making out letters by the light of the fire and reading the palimpsest (rather like a twenty-first century runologist in possession of a high-powered lamp), but that she understands the *process* and *nature* of writing as a semiotic system. She is able to comprehend that signifier and speaker are not one and

the same, and that even engraved words detached from context may be duplicitous. Indeed, she actively resists the simple attribution of the qualities of speech to the runes, explicitly holding her tongue ‘í gómi báða’ (behind clenched teeth) (9/8). Kostbera – the model for a cautious reader – recognizes that some deeper implication underlies the confusion of the written message that she sees before her.

We might wonder if the misconstruing of messages was not a common problem in the world of medieval rune writing. We frequently come across inscriptions that appear to mimic writing, the many pseudo-runes found amongst the Bryggen material being a case in point. There are numerous inscriptions that are contentious in their readings, and many more that are completely unfathomable, and unlikely ever to yield up sense. Whilst many of these may be due to ‘illiterate rune-writers’ slovenly habits’ as Moltke suggests (1985, 80), it is disingenuous to put all these instances down to sloppy copyists: some undoubtedly rely on textual conventions or contexts we are not privy to, or have simply been discounted by traditional runologists

because of their deviant character.[7] There are, however, still clear instances of runes carved amiss, and even on as carefully planned and executed a monument as the Ruthwell Cross we still find the occasional unambiguous mistake. In the early period, when the uses for runes were rather limited and where the act of writing perhaps took precedence over the information provided by the message, one might imagine that significant linguistic and formal deviations were not such a great problem as long as the text-object was authorised in some way as an expression of power or prestige. However, in a society using runes for business dealings and personal transactions (both represented amongst the Bryggen finds), the confusion caused by missing a letter or carving erroneous runes in a message could potentially have had very real consequences: to borrow the words of a famous French

[7] For a critique of this attitude, which draws on Queer Theory to expose prejudice towards 'abnormal' manifestations of literacy, see Williams (2008).

theorist, writing carrying authority but ambiguous in its referent could indeed represent a 'dangerous supplement'.[8]

Working on the assumption that this episode represents an authentic communicative situation, there have been numerous attempts not only to speculate on the nature of the inscribed gift (most logically a ring, following *Atlakviða*), but even to identify the runes carved, beginning with the editor of the Arnamagneanske Commission edition of *Edda Saemundar hinns fróda* (1818, 2: 422 n. 40). Bæksted gives an overview of the various attempts to solve this puzzle in his *Målruner og troldruner*, some of which make for interesting reading (1952, 99–110). On the basis of the information supplied in this poem, the linguist Lehmann even went as far as to propose that a widespread tradition of omitting letters to indicate treachery existed from an early date, translating ON *vant* in the phrase 'Vant er stafs vífi', (the woman is lacking a letter), with the more emphatic 'omitted' (1982, 47). Most

[8] Derrida uses this phrase, expressing what Rousseau saw as the unsettling and subversive nature of writing, as a basis for his deconstruction of the binary of 'full' speech and 'supplementary' writing in *De la grammatologie* (1967). See particularly 141-64.

interpretations use Kostbera's perusal of the message as the basis for their investigations:

Eitt ek mest undromk,	One thing I am most surprised by
—mákat ek enn hyggja—	– I still cannot work it out –
hvat þá varð vitri,	how it came about that a wise one
er skyldi vilt rísta;	should go astray in writing;
því at svá var á vísat,	for it seemed to make known
sem undir væri	that it would cause
bani ykkarr beggja,	the deaths of both of you
ef it brálla kvæmið.	if you raced off there.
Vant er stafs vífi,	The woman is lacking a letter,
eða valda aðrir.	or this is the doing of others.

(*Atlamál*, 12)

When faced with descriptions of runic writing in literature, it is always tempting to read substance from suggestion, and to attempt to 'solve' the puzzle through textual reconstruction, in this case to look for a

word or phrase that could be fundamentally changed in meaning by missing out a letter. This conundrum is particularly appealing as we can all too easily empathize with Kostbera's dilemma as a reader of runes: after all, she dramatizes what feels like a familiar situation for the runologist, attuned to the fact that construing a stave in a slightly different way, or making a minor alteration in word division, can lead to quite different interpretations.

The majority of interpretations work on the assumption that Vingi has changed the runic warning into an invitation, an additional 'explanatory elaboration' found in *Vǫlsunga saga* (Finch 1981, 126). The statement in the saga reads, 'sá Vingi rúnarnar ok sneri á aðra leið ok, at Guðrún fýsti í rúnum at þeir kvæmi á hans fund', (Vingi saw the runes and changed them around in such a way that Guðrún urged them in runes to come and visit him [Atli]) (Ch. 35), but this leaves us no wiser as to how the runes were altered. Kock suggests that the final letter of *bani* 'death' was erased by Vingi to leave *ban(n)* (1922, 228) – though it is hard to see how the resulting word, which has the primary meaning of 'interdict' or 'prohibition' according to Cleasby and Vigfússon (unlike OE *ban*, which carries the additional sense of

‘command’), constitutes an invitation (1957, 51). This sort of conjecture might in itself be based on a misplaced assumption – namely that the statement ‘biǫrt hefir þér eigi / boðit í sinn þetta’ (the bright one has not invited you this time) (11/7–8) implies that the inscription has literally become altered to act as an invitation, when all it seems to represent is an emphatic contradiction of the messenger’s false words.

In fact, the runes are described as being so distorted that ‘vant var at ráða’ (they were hardly able to be fathomed out) (9/10), and it thus seems that the poet imagined the message to be ‘modified by Vingi to make it incomprehensible’ rather than cleverly changed into an invitation with the addition of a few deft incisions (Antonsen 1999, 136). If the brothers insist on construing the runes as an invitation, it is because those less astute readers have read what they expected to see in the message, a state of affairs not uncommon amongst epigraphers today. An interpretation such as the last provided by Olsen (1943), involving runic ciphers and a word that changes its meaning when a single letter is altered, is very clever, but really nothing more than an exercise in scholarly ingenuity. The message itself is not related in the

poem, and the inscription is entirely hypothetical, lacking even the performative context of a poem like *Skírnismál* to suggest that it was expected to function as anything more than a literary conceit.

I would suggest with Bæksted that rather than being envisaged as a particular inscription and specific alteration, this wolfish message in fact represents only a 'vague suggestion' (1952, 323), albeit with a real-world referent. More precisely, it constitutes a distillation of all potential anxieties of miscarving and tampering – missing letters, runes 'svá viltar' (so confused) (9/9) that they cannot be made out, contradictions in meaning, and surprise at what has caused a 'clever one' to 'vilt rísta' (cut wrongly) (12/4). It takes a model reader like Kostbera, attuned to the vagaries of the script and able to read through the confusion, to recognize in the first instance that a competent rune carver would not make such a hash of things, and subsequently to comprehend the underlying message, not only 'literally a palimpsest' (Glauser 2007, 25), but also a poetic image of indexed meaning. The poet does not envisage an actual sequence of letters any more than the poet of *Rígsþula* envisages an authentic runic contest, or the poet of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* a particular syntax for the message

delivered in *valrúnar* (foreign / battle runes). It is realistic only in the sense that it represents a complex of very real problems, and its value lies in the fact that it remind us of the contingency involved in any act of communication: that reading correctly is not just about apprehending a linguistic message, but also about understanding the interpretative context that refines and situates the meaning of an utterance within a community of readers.

The Greenlandic Context

Both the potential for misconstruing the communicative context, and the consequences of misreading the sender's message would have been magnified by the geographical isolation of the Norse colonies, relying heavily on trade and contact with more populated settlements. This is particularly true of Greenland, dependent on goods such as tar, timber and (perhaps most importantly) brewing materials from Scandinavia (see Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson 2009). The vast distances between trading partners across the Atlantic may have given rise to certain reservations about the integrity of any written communiqué, and Lisbeth Imer's on-going work comparing the runic traditions in

Greenland may also throw further light on whether distinct practices evolved between the two isolated settlement areas themselves. On a purely practical level, with communications sent between widely dispersed communities in the Western and Eastern settlements, or with the recipient potentially as far away as Iceland or Norway, who could question the veracity of a received message? Of course, this is a situation that is not by any means exclusive to Greenland, and could apply equally to merchants in Bergen receiving goods from the Norse colonies, or indeed to trade and exchange between other settlements within the vast North Atlantic littoral. However, there is some evidence to suggest the *particular* applicability of a Greenlandic context to the runic sub-plot.

We know that runes were used in Greenland for a variety of purposes (Moltke 1936; Stoklund 1981, 1982, 1993; Imer 2009): as grave inscriptions, marks of ownership, Christian dedications, and idle demonstrations of runic skill, including the elaborate knot-runes reading **sbon**, 'spoon', found on a wooden spoon from Narsarsuaq (GR 64). The majority of inscriptions are of the brief mark of ownership variety, but the corpus includes longer inscriptions on memorial stones

and grave-slabs, and also on portable items such as bone and wooden objects. We may assume that such objects passed between Norse-speaking communities; indeed, we should properly regard the later runic finds in Greenland as 'a normal means of communication within this whole Norse complex' (Stoklund 1984, 144).

Runic correspondence of the sort found at Bryggen in Bergen and documented by Aslak Liestøl is not paralleled in the material from Greenland – indeed, it is hardly paralleled anywhere (Liestøl 1968, 17–27). This is not the place to enter into an involved discussion about the evidence for merchants from Greenland operating in Norway (see Johnsen 1981, 121–25) or the proposal put forward by Hagland that runic ownership tags found in Bergen and Trondheim could be indicators of the role of runes in overseas trade with North Atlantic settlements (1986, 16–31; 1988). However, it is certainly notable that Bergen was the main supply port for Greenland (Stoklund 1984, 144), and that 'most of the comparable material comes from Bryggen' (Imer 2009, 76). We might therefore expect that correspondence of a commercial, transactional and even political nature, reflecting the range of finds at Bryggen, also passed between such communities.

Whilst stressing the fact that Greenlandic inscriptions are very much part of the wider runic tradition, Stoklund also points out the 'important exception' of there being no merchants' labels amongst the material recovered from Greenland (Stocklund 1993, 531), leading us to wonder why such transactional material is not present in a colony trading with Bergen and employing the 'normal means of communication' within the Norse world.

Something that might have made communication between Greenland and its trading partners elsewhere in the Norse complex slightly more problematic are the slight variations in the script that developed in the settlement. These divergences are perhaps not as great as once stressed, Stoklund noting 'a tendency toward isolating the Greenland runes' when first published, perhaps 'influenced by the tragic fate of the Norse society in Greenland' (1984, 144). Nonetheless, there are some notable differences. As Imer points out, 'the fact that the Norse Greenlanders rarely used Latin letters sets them apart from other Norse areas' (2009, 75), and within the runic corpus such anomalies as the so-called Greenlandic **u** form with its dropped intersection between stave and branch and the collection of divergent **r**

forms would certainly have served to compound concerns about written communication and intelligibility outside the immediate context. Both of these Greenlandic forms are illustrated on a whalebone handle discovered at Vatnahverfi, and reading *Gunnarr á*, 'Gunnar owns' (GR 67). What is more, the first and final characters of this inscription are rendered as crosses with the addition of horizontal crossbars. See Fig. 1 below.



Fig. 1. Whalebone handle. **+=g=unnara=+**. *Gunnarr á*, 'Gunnar owns' (GR 67).

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There is no suggestion that this object ever left Vatnahverfi, or even the possession of Gunnar, but it does serve to illustrate the problem of

the development of non-standard forms within a wider scriptural community. We might expect that a reader used to normal (or different) forms would have some difficulty recognising the ligature of **k** and the Greenlandic **u** form, particularly with the addition of a crossbar, if not the open Greenlandic **r** form – making it hard to identify Gunnar's claim to ownership.

However, though such forms have come to be associated predominantly with Greenland, the problems raised in *Atlamál* cannot, in the end, be firmly localised to this particular context. Indeed, even within the corpus of Greenlandic runes there are a variety of forms, and there are among them almost as many standard **r** forms as divergent forms (Stoklund 1981, 144). Within a mobile and widely dispersed Norse trading community, the development of local variations and even individual idiosyncrasies are perhaps inevitable. Indeed, one only has to think of the divergence between Norwegian/Swedish and Danish runes to understand that potential confusion arising from the presence of variant forms within the Norse complex need not be restricted to Greenland. That said, the motif of a misleading message and a reader attuned to graphic variation, unusual

mistakes and their semiotic implications, would certainly have gained an additional resonance in an isolated community using runes for communication within the vast expanse of the North Atlantic littoral. Alongside the poem's frontier mentality (and an unambiguous reference to a polar bear) the runic conceit accords well with the attribution of the poem to Greenland.

Conclusion

If there can be no outright consensus about the Greenland connection of the poem, the introduction of the runic sub-plot to *Atlamál* should at least be localized in a society where transactions over long distances were carried out using runes, and where sea crossings (such as the journey across the Limfjord to Atli's court) were the normal means of travel and exchange. In other words, the conceit has its roots in the realities of trade and communication in medieval Scandinavia, and does not represent an early Germanic tradition.

Whilst it is clear that the runic sub-plot more accurately reflects the situation at the point at which the poem was reworked, rather than hinting at an ancient practice fossilized in verse, it still remains problematic to talk about the poem representing any kind of authentic runic 'practice'; either that of the Migration Age, or medieval Scandinavia. The poet's attitude towards his material in general is a creative one, localizing the action in a familiar world with familiar moralities, but greatly embellishing (and even hyperbolizing) some elements of the narrative, such as Gunnar's dextrous and rafter-splitting performance in the snake pit, and the various vivid dream interpretations that precede the brothers' departure. It is against the backdrop of the poem's overall scheme of lively but culturally relevant adaptation that we should read the complex sub-plot of writing and textual duplicity.

Despite these provisos, it seems rather unsatisfactory to dismiss the poet of *Atlamál* as an individual who 'seems not to have grasped the concept of functional runic literacy' (Bragg 1999, 43), particularly in light of the rather perceptive engagement with the problems of writing in general, and runic communication in particular, that we have

seen at work in the poem. After all, it is not a question of a runic message being accurately or inaccurately represented in the poem, but being developed into a relevant and engaged thematic concern which is played out in the deep past of the heroic world. Rather than imitating historical practice, the runes in *Atlamál* serve as a literary device used to explore anxieties about writing, human interactions in a geographically disparate society, and the mutability of the material text, the exact meaning of which always threatens to escape the control of the author. It is this literary engagement with a tangible material predicament that makes the episode such an 'effective picture of the treachery of writing' (Harris 2008, 344), and grants it lasting applicability. Indeed, Kostbera's example is one that readers attempting to trace the transmission of the narrative, reconcile different editions of the poem, or read through the layers of reconstructive criticism, are likely to find curiously prescient.

The poetic arts play a vital role in engaging with the perils and the value of writing as a cultural phenomenon and a technology that revolutionized communication and textual transmission. And yet, however consciously in dialogue with reality, poetry is always to some

degree an abstract medium – a reflection of existential attitudes rather than a performance of the real world. This is a simple observation, but if the re-scripting of the past in *Atlamál* truly has a message for modern readers of the poem, it is that the call to read cautiously all too often goes unheeded.

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