

Pondering Orkney's runic inscriptions

Orkney has many exciting runic inscriptions. So exciting, in fact, that 29 delegates came all the way from Sweden, Gotland, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Britain, USA and Australia to study and discuss them. This was all part of the "Orkney Rune Rede", the ninth full-day runic colloquium — a conference series usually run by Uppsala University in Sweden, but this year on a special outing to Orkney. I will give you the gist of what happened at the conference.

MIMMUR'S WELL NOTES FROM NORDIC STUDIES



By Dr Ragnhild Ljosland



Above: The Naversdale runestone, found in Orphir in September, 2013. (www.theorcadianphotos.co.uk)

Right: Rune Rede delegates visit Maeshowe. (Ragnhild Ljosland)



We had invited talks focusing on the runic material from Orkney, and were thrilled to hear insightful discussions both on the Maeshowe runes and the other finds from our islands — 56 in total, so far, although three of these have since been exposed as modern and three more are under suspicion. Still, that leaves us with 50 good ones, including Maeshowe. Four new finds have been made in this century, so we can only assume that there are many more still waiting to be found. One of these new finds is the Lord's Prayer in runes, which turned up on Sarah Jane Gibbon's farm at Naversdale, previously described in this column. Sarah Jane gave the conference a wonderful look into the historical and archaeological context of the find. To put it bluntly, it had been lying in the pigs' field — which is a bit comical to think about when you now see museum staff handling it with white gloves on — and it had formed part of a demolished drystone dyke. Where the stone for the dyke came from, Sarah Jane doesn't know, but she is speaking to people in Orphir who might remember something. It would probably have come from the farm itself or somewhere very close by, which is odd, as

there is no record of any chapel in the vicinity. Could it have been a private prayer or house blessing? Sarah Jane is working to discover more of the history of Naversdale, and I can't wait to hear more. New light was also shed on the metal pendant found by James Barrett's excavation team on the Brough of Deerness. The runes on this pendant look very strange — a bit like Christmas trees, with wild-growing branches. Could they be in the tree-like cipher code, like some of the Maeshowe inscriptions, which is also found in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts (as shown by Aya Van Renterghem at the conference)? Yet interpreting the Deerness runes as such didn't bring up any sensible text. But from a closer study of the Deerness pendant, Sonia Pereswetoff-Morath discovered that the runes are actually complex ligatures made from combinations of ordinary runes. She has not yet interpreted the whole text, but was able to give us a few words, involving talk of a "large payment" or "big secret", and a command to "go away". It was great to hear that the runes, are actually meaningful, and not just nonsense-runes, as we first thought.

It's also exciting to have another runic object whose function seems to have been as an amulet, in addition to the bear's or seal's tooth amulet from the Brough of Birsay, which was also discussed at the conference. Birsay itself was identified in Jan Ragnar Hagland's talk as a centre of runic literacy, along with Orphir. Many of the conference presentations discussed the 12th century Maeshowe runes. Judith Jesch asked whether Maeshowe inscription number one — carved high on the wall above the doorway — speaks of "a viking" or somebody by the personal name "Viking". She concluded that it was most likely "a viking" who came "here underneath" — not a raider, but a medieval person who had perhaps heard stories of the brave exploits of vikings in saga literature. There are also other inscriptions in Maeshowe that read like "mini-narratives", making references to sagas. Meanwhile, in the side-chamber, something else was going on. This is the inscription tour guides tend to leave out of the tour, or, if they do mention it, they go for the milder wording: "Thorny 'bedded', Helgi carved." Henrik Williams wanted to get to the bottom of what was going on here, as the Old Norse word here translated as 'bedded' is actually more akin to the f-word, and describes an active sexual act normally performed by men — but 'Thorny here is a woman. Henrik Williams' exploration of the possibilities did not end there, but I think I will leave it at that for the purpose of this column. Vivian Busch and Jana Krüger set out to check whether Maeshowe inscription number 20 (bragging that it was written by the man most skilled in runes in the Western Ocean, with the axe owned by Gauk Trandilsson in the south of Iceland) is in verse or not. This might sound easy, but earlier scholars have variously described it as metrical, not metrical, and as "bad verse". Vivian and Jana, who are working on a new, complete edition of skaldic poetry, were able to show how metrical rules from the skaldic tradition, did in fact, apply to the Maeshowe text, even if it involved some less commonly used variants of metres. Michael Barnes then entertained us all by singing the text of the inscription, in Old Norse, to the tune of *Oh My Darling Clementine!* Jay Johnston, from Sydney, shifted our perspective over to the Victorian excavators

and early commentators on Maeshowe, who were more excited by the runes than by the actual structure, and applied their Victorian beliefs about the "Old North" to what they saw. For example, they expected to see paganism, which led them to interpret Maeshowe as a "sorcery hall" for a female magician. My colleague Alex Sanmark and I had also prepared a talk about Maeshowe, seeing its runic "mini-narratives" in the light of archaeology and saga literature. Some of these "mini-narratives" are direct references to known stories from sagas: Gauk Trandilsson with the axe, for example, is a character in the famous *Njal's Saga*. "Loðbrok" and sons, in another inscription, may be a reference to the legendary saga of Ragnar Loðbrok and his sons. Other narratives have no direct reference to a particular saga, but seem to play on ideas that are found in many sagas, such as the idea of mound-breaking itself. Archaeological evidence shows that some of the great Viking Age burial mounds in Scandinavia were broken into not very long after the burial. Breaking into a burial mound in the Viking Age meant breaking a social rule, or taboo, and often the human remains were removed or disturbed, so it is not just a simple case of plundering for grave-goods. Modern research has suggested that reasons for breaking in could be to destroy a family's power by destroying their ancestor's grave mound, or to retrieve objects thought to have special powers, such as named swords, or to silence a troublesome ghost, or to use the human bones' in rituals, such as in the forging of special weapons. Underlying all this is an idea that the ancestor, though physically dead, is still "alive" in the mound. When Christianity was introduced, it became imperative to stop people using burial mounds for pagan rites, so mound-breaking is seen as a Christian act. Perhaps the

"Jerusalem-travellers" who, according to the runes, broke into Maeshowe and carved lots of crosses, were thinking along the same lines? With Christianity, the old way of viewing the ancestor also gave way to a belief in a more demonic inhabitant, known as draugr, troll or haugbui. In medieval saga literature, there are many stories about mound-breaking. The pattern is as follows: A magical fire, generated by the treasure, is observed above a burial mound. The hero breaks in through the ceiling, fights the incredibly strong and dangerous haugbui in single combat, wins by cutting its head off and escapes to the surface with treasure. We can see that, in the medieval saga literature, the old Viking-Age reverence for mounds has given way to a more fairy-tale-like concept, where heroism and treasure are in focus. Looking at Maeshowe, we can recognise each element of the saga mound-breaking narrative: Folklore records a magical light seen above Maeshowe at midsummer (F. Marian McNeill), just as saga mounds have "gold-fire" shining above them. There is a hole in the roof, interpreted by the 1861 excavators as having been made by the Norse, although there are, of course, other possible reasons too. And then six of the Maeshowe runic inscriptions talk about a treasure, which either was, or ought to have been, in the burial chamber, and speculate on why it is now missing. There is no mention in the runes of the fight against the inhabitant — the haugbui — but the figure is known from later Orcadian folklore in many tales, and, when James Farrer came to excavate Maeshowe, he was told by the locals that the mound was "formerly" inhabited by a "very strong" being named "Hog-Boy"!

Together, all of this closely follows the template for mound-breaking adventures in saga literature. We know that in the period — during Rognvald Kali Kolsson's reign in the 12th century — Orkney enjoyed a literary renaissance where saga literature and skaldic poetry was fashionable in a self-conscious way among the elite, while also aware of European literature. Earl Rognvald himself, for example, plays on both the skaldic style and the French troubadour style in the poetry he composed on his way to Jerusalem, all the while making sure it was recorded for posterity. In this climate, with old religious beliefs about mounds giving way to folklore, with Maeshowe perhaps losing local significance as governance became centralised to Kirkwall, and with saga literature being fashionable, it makes perfect sense that a group of adventure-seekers, seeing themselves as modern saga heroes, were inspired by saga stories to break into Maeshowe to look for treasure and seek fame. I would like to end by thanking everyone who was involved in making the Orkney Rune Rede such a great success: Henrik Williams and colleagues at Uppsala Runic Forum for letting the Centre for Nordic Studies "borrow" their event and for getting funding from the Swedish Royal Society for Humanities. Thanks also to everyone who contributed to the practicalities in Orkney: The St Magnus Centre, West End Hotel, The Brig Larder, Argo's Bakery, The Frozen Food Centre, J. & V. Coaches, Lucano, the Standing Stones Hotel, The Orkney Museum, and Historic Scotland at Maeshowe and Brodgar. All the delegates thought Orkney was fabulous and that the hospitality was excellent. Thank you!



Professor Michael Barnes discussing a runic inscription on the Ring of Brodgar. (Lynn Powell)



The runes on the broken stones at the Ring of Brodgar. (www.theorcadianphotos.co.uk)