RUNES AND OLD NORSE: LEARN AND TEACH
AN EXCERPT ABOUT RUNES FROM LESSON 3 OF
VIKING LANGUAGE 1: LEARN OLD NORSE, RUNES, AND ICELANDIC SAGAS

LESSON 3
DENMARK: RUNESTONES AND AN EARLY VIKING STATE

Skalat maðr rúnar rísta, nema ráða vel kunni – Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar
(A man should not carve runes unless he knows well what he is doing)

Figure 3.1. The Small Runestone of King Gorm the Old (Gormr inn gamli) at Jelling, Denmark. Front (left) and back shown. Gorm was the last pagan king of Denmark. He founded the Jelling Dynasty.

CULTURE – RUNES
Ancient Scandinavians wrote in runes, and surviving runic inscriptions are a main source of social, historical, and linguistic information. Runes are an alphabet, not a pictographic or a syllabic script. Just as we might call our alphabet the ABCs, the runic alphabet was composed of runic letters and called the futhark, named after the first six runes or runic characters, F√N®ÝR®K®. Runes were carved on wood, stone, bone, antler, and metal. They are found on weapons, jewelry, everyday items, wood,
and bark. Runes were used for identification, commemoration, messages, and magic. Runic inscriptions are the closest written sources to the speech of the Viking Age.

The earliest runes date to the first century CE, and runes were then used in Scandinavia for the next 1300 years or more. Almost surely, runes were adapted from writing systems employed in the Roman Empire. At that time, there was considerable contact between the Roman world and Germanic peoples. Speakers of Proto-Norse and other Germanic languages probably adapted the letters of either Latin or Northern Italic alphabets to fit the sounds of their own languages. They modified the letters in order to make them more suitable for carving.

Those who designed the runes used straight strokes, a feature which worked well with wood grain and on stones. Messages were usually short due to the limitations imposed by pieces of wood, strips of bark, bones, or tablets of wax. The use of pen and ink and the art of preparing pages of vellum for manuscripts were unknown in Scandinavia before the conversion to Christianity.

Runes were common in Viking times, and the Norse often left traces of their runic writing where they traveled. Spelling was not standardized and letters were often left out of words. For example, -m- is missing from the word $kubl$ (=$kumbl$) and -n- from $kunukR$ (= $konungr$) in King Gorm’s stone pictured above and translated in the reading selection below. Rune carvers sounded out words, and missing letters sometimes reflect lightly pronounced sounds that were easily dropped. Words were abbreviated and word divisions often missing. Modern runologists sometimes differ on how to translate an inscription.

Runes were carved by members of all social classes, but property owners most frequently paid for and raised runestones. Many runestones honor the dead, and they often indicate the wealth and authority of those who erected the monuments. Inscriptions proclaim family relationships, authority, inheritance and property claims. Runestones, such as those at Jelling, announce the claims of aristocrats and royalty. Runes were sometimes written in poetic meter (see the runic verses and runestones in Viking Language 2: The Old Norse Reader). Note that the following runic passage employs two -r runes: $R$ and $A$. These two characters were sometimes used in the same inscription (see the discussion of the two -r runes in Section 3.5, Runic Sounds).

**READING – THE SMALL RUNESTONE AT JELLING, DENMARK**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RUNES</th>
<th>TRANSLITERATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(front)</td>
<td>kurmR : kunukR :</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>karþi : kubl : þusi :</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>aft : þurui : kunu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(back)</td>
<td>sina : tanmarkaR : but</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gormr konungr gerði kumbl þessi ept
Þurvi (Þyri) konu sína, Danmarkar bótt.

**VOCABULARY**
aft (Þyri) prep [w acc] after (in time); in memory of; [w dat] after, along
bót <acc bót, pl boetr> f adornment; improvement; compensation
Danmǫrk <gen Danmarkar> f Denmark
eptir (also ept/af) prep [w acc] after (in time); in memory of; [w dat] after, along
gerða (also gor) vb make; do, act
gerði 3sg past of gerða
Gormr <-s> m Gorm (personal name); first king of the Jelling dynasty in Denmark

**STANDARDIZED OLD NORSE**

King Gorm made these monuments in memory of Thyri, his wife, Denmark's adornment.

**RUNES: THE ELDER AND THE YOUNGER RUNIC ALPHABETS**
The futhark had several regional variations, and after its appearance in the first century CE, it continued to change over time. Different Germanic peoples, including Goths, Anglo-Saxons, Frisians, and early Scandinavians, used somewhat different runic alphabets. Into the eighth century, the basic runic alphabet consisted of 24 letters. This early futhark is known as the Elder Futhark, which divides into three groups or families called ættir.

**THE ELDER FUTHARK (24 LETTERS)**

Roughly 260 of the approximately 350 known Elder Futhark inscriptions are found in Scandinavia. The remainder are from continental Europe, with some from as far east as the Black Sea. Surviving inscriptions in the Elder Futhark are usually short and appear on artifacts such as jewelry, tools, and weapons. Typically they are found in graves and bogs and on materials that have the best chance of preservation, such as bone and metal. Presumably, there were longer inscriptions on wood, leather, and other organic materials, but most have been lost. The 65 or so early inscriptions found on runestones appear mostly in the late Elder Futhark or Proto-Norse period and principally in Scandinavia. The Elder Futhark is given here in order to provide background for better understanding the Younger Futhark of the Viking Age. From here on the lessons and exercises teach the Younger Futhark.

**THE YOUNGER FUTHARK OF THE VIKING AGE (16 BASIC LETTERS)**

Around the start of the Viking Age in late 700s, the futhark was shortened to 16 runes. This shortened alphabet is known as the Younger Futhark. The Gørlev Runestone from Sjælland (the island of Zealand in Denmark) dates from ca. 900; it preserves an early complete Younger Futhark.

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4 A full Elder Futhark is carved on the Gotlandic Kylver Runestone from ca. 400 and the Vadstena Bracteate from ca. 600.
The runic letters of the Younger Futhark are simpler than those of the Elder Futhark. Each letter in the Younger Futhark has only one vertical mark or ‘stave’ and can be carved easily and quickly. The runes of the Younger Futhark are called ‘long-branch runes,’ because they are carved with full or long vertical strokes. With local variations and differences among carvers, the Younger Futhark’s 16 long-branch runes were the common form of Old Norse writing throughout the Viking Age. Like the Elder Futhark, the Younger Futhark divides into ættir, but the ‘families’ are shorter.

Inscriptions in the Younger Futhark have been found in many overseas regions of Norse activity, some at a great distance from Scandinavia. For example, an inscription from the fourteenth century was found in the north of Greenland. A runic inscription found in Iceland from around the year 900 was carved on a stone spindle whorl and names a woman called Vilbjǫrg as the owner. Detailed descriptions of runic writings are also mentioned repeatedly in the sagas. Many inscriptions in the Younger Futhark have been found in the British Isles, and runic inscriptions have also been found as far away as Greece and Russia. Especially in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Byzantine Empire and the Caliphate of Baghdad were frequent destinations for Norse traders and warriors.

**SHORT-TWIG RUNES, A VARIANT OF THE YOUNGER FUTHARK**

Short-twig runes are usually found in Sweden and Norway. They grew in popularity toward the end of the Viking Age and in the following medieval centuries. Short-twig runes were easier to carve than long-branch runes, and they were often used as a kind of cursive script among traders. Some inscriptions mix the two systems, such as those found on the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea, where Viking Age settlers came from different regions of Scandinavia.

**LATER RUNIC VARIATIONS**

Additional variants of the Younger Futhark appear toward the end of the Viking Age. For example, eleventh-century dotted runes added sounds such as /e/, /g/, and /y/.

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<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>g</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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In the mid-eleventh century an expanded medieval futhark came into use in Norway and a few other areas. Sometimes called ‘futhork,’ it incorporated short-twig runes. This alphabet, like other revised, later runic alphabets, continued in active use for several centuries after the Viking Age.

Following the conversion to Christianity, runic writing was increasingly influenced by medieval Latin. In some instances, runes were used to carve Latin inscriptions. One such inscription, dating to the end of the twelfth century, is found on a leather shoe from Bergen. It has a phrase known from Virgil (*Amor vincit omnia*, ‘Love conquers all’) written partially in short-twig runes and long-branch runes: *(omnia:uinciþ:amor, note the short twig for the letter ‘i’ in uinciþ, ‘conquers’)*. *Uinciþ* in long branch runes is *in*.

**RUNIC SPELLING AND STANDARDIZED OLD NORSE**

Spelling often varies among runic inscriptions because of differences in pronunciation, regional dialects, personal ability in distinguishing sounds, and the lack of a recognized spelling standard. For example, *gerði*, the past tense of *gera*, is spelled *karþi* on the Jelling stone in this lesson.
but takes the form \( \text{þr} \) (\( \text{þr}/\text{gr} \)) in the Swedish Ramsund inscription (Lesson 5).

Similar spelling variations widely exist in Old Norse manuscripts. For example, the infinitive form of the verb gera ‘do, make’ is spelled gor, gor, gorva, gorwa, giorva, gior, and gjora in different manuscripts. To overcome the problem of variation, scholars adopted a standardized Old Norse spelling for saga editions, dictionaries, and transcriptions of runic writing. Standardized ON is based principally on Old Icelandic, the most conservative of the Old Norse dialects and the one that we know most about because of the large number of written sources.

**SOUNDS OF THE 16 LETTERS OF THE YOUNGER FUTHARK**

**Consonants (Voiced and Voiceless).** Because the Younger Futhark has only 16 letters, single runes often represent more than one sound. For example, the runic symbol \( b \) represents the consonant sounds /b/ and /p/, and \( t \) represents /d/ and /t/. The difference in these similar sounds is the distinction of /b/ and /d/ being **voiced** while /p/ and /t/ are **voiceless**.

Like English consonants, Old Norse consonants are voiced or voiceless. The distinction is whether the vocal cords vibrate while the air passes through (producing voiced consonants), or do not vibrate (producing voiceless ones). The results are varying sounds altered one from the other by an obstruction of the free flow of air. For instance, compare the voiceless /s/ in English ‘singer’ to the voiced /z/ in ‘zinger.’ A similar distinction is found in the voiced \( ð \) and voiceless \( þ \) pronunciation of the single \( Þ \) rune, serving for both sounds. Demonstrate this distinction for yourself. Put your fingertips on your throat when you make the above sounds: you will feel the buzz of voicing in the voiced consonants and not in the voiceless ones.\(^5\) Try also to feel the difference when pronouncing \( v \) and \( f \): \( v \) is voiced whereas \( f \) is voiceless. One can guess that Viking Age individuals who devised and used the Younger Futhark and its variants understood this distinction.

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\(^5\) The buzz in the throat comes from the vocal folds inside the larynx, known as the voice box. The larynx sits in the neck above the windpipe (the trachea) and in front of the food pipe (esophagus).
Multiple Vowels. Single runes also represent several distinct vowel sounds with some overlap. For instance, the rune Ъ represented the vowel and semi-vowel sounds /u/, /v/, /o/, /y/, /ø/, and /w/. The two а-runes show considerable overlap with Ъ and Ъ representing the sounds /a/, /æ/, /o/, and /ǫ/.

Runic Sounds of the Viking Age, Discussion

Sounds. As symbols, characters, and letters in an alphabet, individual runes reflect sounds. The following discussion of these sounds relies on the International Phonetic Alphabet, which provides a uniform system of letters and symbols for writing speech sounds.

Two r-runes, Р and ɭ. A noticeable feature of the futhark is the presence of two r-runes. In the Elder Futhark, Р represents the sound /r/, while ɭ represents the sound /z/. In West Scandinavia (Norway and Iceland), these two sounds merged by the early Viking Age into the trilled r. In East Scandinavia (Denmark and Sweden), the two sounds generally merged following the dental consonants /t/ and /d/, but otherwise remained distinct until the end of the Viking Age. The modern convention is to transliterate the Р rune as lower case r and the ɭ rune as upper case R.6

Vowel sounds for /a/: Ъ and Ъ. Two runes for variants of the vowel sound /a/ are Ъ and Ъ. The Ъ rune represents /a/ as in modern English ‘father,’ while Ъ is nasalized sounding much like /æ/ in English ‘tank.’

Some vowel and consonant sounds. The Younger Futhark did not distinguish between a number of vowel and consonant sounds in use during the Viking Age. For example, the runes Ь, Ъ, and Ъ are letters for the vowel sounds /i/, /a/, and /u/, but there are no specific runes for the common sounds /e/, /o/, and /o/ (although the rune Ъ, originally used for /a/, came also to be used for /o/).

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6 See Elmer H. Antonsen, *Runes and Germanic Linguistics*, in *Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs* 140, New York: Mouton de Gruyter 2002, pp. 87 and 304-307. As regards these two runes, Antonsen writes: ‘these two phonemes were consistently and correctly distinguished by writers in runes in Denmark until after the beginning of the 12th century.’
Similarly there are letters for the consonant sounds /b/, /t/, and /k/, but not for /p/, /d/, and /g/.

It is not certain whether rune carvers saw the lack of separate letters as much of a problem. As explained below, they often employed one letter for several similar sounds, a solution which simplified spelling but not reading.

**Runes † and ††.** The runes † and †† (representing the sounds /n/ and /m/) were often dropped before certain consonants. Hence on the Jelling Runestone, the word konungr is spelled ††††††††† (kunukR), dropping the second /n/.

The long-branch m-rune is carved in two variants: Υ and ††.

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**Exercise – Runic Script.** Following the example below, transliterate the runes and change them into standardized Old Norse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Runic Script</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Standardized Old Norse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ex: †††††††††</td>
<td>tanmarkar</td>
<td>Danmarkar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. PNR††</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. FNR††</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. H†††</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. BN†</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. †††</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reverse the process above and write the following words in runes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standardized Old Norse</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Younger Futhark: Long-Branch Runes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. konungr</td>
<td>kunukR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. konu</td>
<td>kunu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. kumbl</td>
<td>kubl</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. þessi</td>
<td>þusi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. bót</td>
<td>but</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Reading – Gorm and Thyri (Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar in Mesta)**

King Gorm and his wife Thyri are also known from Icelandic writings. *The Greatest Saga of King Olaf Tryggvason* contains the following passage. Both the thirteenth-century Icelandic saga and the tenth-century Danish runestone agree in their reference to Queen Thyri as Danmarkarbót (‘Denmark’s Adornment’).

**Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta (63. kap)**

Gormr, sonr Hǫrða-Knúts, var mikill maðr ok sterkr. Hann var atgervimaðr. En ekki var hann kallaðr vitr maðr.


**The Greatest Saga of King Olaf Tryggvason (Ch. 63)**

Gorm, son of Horda-Knut, was a big and strong man. He was an accomplished man. But he was not called a wise man.

Gorm married a woman called Thyri. She was the daughter of Earl Harald of Jutland, who was called Klakk-Harald. Thyri was a beautiful woman. She was the most notable of women in the northern lands. She was called Thyri, Denmark’s Adornment.

**Note.** Old Norse has two words for ‘not’: eikki and eigi, while Modern Icelandic only employs ekkí.

**Vocabulary**
❖ af prep [w dat] of, by; off (of), out of, from
❖ atgervimaðr m man of accomplishments
❖ á prep [w dat] on; upon; at; in
❖ dóttir <acc, dat, & gen döttur, pl dœtr, dat
dœtrum, gen dœtra> f daughter
❖ eikki adv not
❖ en conj but; (less frequently) and
❖ er rel particle who; which; that
❖ fá <fær, fekk, fengu, fenginn> vb get, take,
    procure; grasp; marry; fekk konu got married, lit
    got a wife
❖ fekk 1/3sg past of fá
❖ friðr <f frið, n fritt> adj beautiful, handsome, fine
❖ hann <acc hann, dat honum, gen hans> pron he
❖ heita <heitir, hét, hétu, heitinn> vb be called
❖ hét 1/3sg past of heita
❖ hon <acc hana, dat henni, gen hennar> pron she
❖ Hǫrða-Knútr <s> m Horda-Knut (personal name)
❖ jarl <-s, -ar> m earl
❖ Jótlandi (dat) n Jutland
❖ kalla <-að> vb call
❖ kallaðr ppart [past participle] of kalla called
❖ Klakk-Haraldr <s> m Klakk-Harald (personal name)
❖ kona <gen pl kvenna> f wife; woman
❖ maðr <acc mann, dat manni, gen mans, nom &
    acc pl menn, dat mœnnum, gen manna> m man;
    person, human being
❖ mestr superl adj greatest
❖ mikill <f mikil, n mikit, comp meiri, superl mestr>
    adj big, tall, great; much
❖ Norðrlǫnd <dat Norðrlǫndum> n pl Northern
    countries or region, Scandinavia
❖ ok conj and
❖ skǫrungr <-s, -ar> m notable man or woman, leader
❖ sonr <dat syni, gen sonar, pl synir, acc sonu> m son
❖ sterkr adj strong
❖ var 1/3sg past of vera
❖ vera <er; var, váru; verit> vb be
❖ vitr <acc vitran> adj wise
CULTURE – GORM THE OLD AND THE DANISH JELLING DYNASTY

Prehistory. Our knowledge of Danish history begins in the fifth or sixth century with the legendary Skjoldung Dynasty. This famous family had its royal seat at Hleiðr, modern-day Lejre, on the central Danish island of Zealand (Sjælland, ON Sjáland). The Skjoldungs figure prominently in the Icelandic Hrólfss saga kraka (The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki) and Old English Beowulf. Both epics are set in Denmark during the sixth-century Migration Period, and, although written and preserved in places outside of Denmark and far distant from each other, many of the same people appear in both tales.

Although there are relatively few reliable historical sources for Danish history until the mid-10th century, Frankish writings tell of Danish kings from the early 9th century such as Godfred, who opposed Charlemagne and the Frankish Empire. In the 930s-940s, a new family of overlords emerges in Denmark in central Jutland (Jótland) with a power base at Jelling (Jalangrsheiðr). Members of the Jelling dynasty immortalized themselves through ambitious building programs and monuments. Among these monuments are the two runestones whose runes we read in this and the next lesson.

Gorm the Old (Gormr inn gamli) was the founder of the Jelling dynasty and the last pagan king of Denmark. King Gorm’s Runestone is the earliest native documentary source to use the term ‘Denmark.’ During Gorm’s lifetime, Hedeby (ON Heiðabýr, Heiðarbýr, or Heiðarbaer; ‘town’ or ‘dwelling [baer] on the heath [heĭðr]’) became a major trading center for goods moving between the Baltic region and Western Europe (see the accompanying map of Viking Age Denmark). Large numbers

Figure 3.3. Viking Age Denmark (Danmǫrk) is marked by horizontal lines. It included parts of what is today southern Sweden. Although the smallest of the Scandinavian countries, Denmark had the highest percentage of arable land and was the wealthiest and most densely populated of the Viking states. Exposed to attacks from the Frankish Empire to the south, Vikings to the north, and Slavic pirates on the Baltic Sea (ON Eystrasalt), Denmark developed early into a cohesive monarchy capable of resisting foreign threats.

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of goods were made in Hedeby’s workshops, and merchants arrived in Hedeby with all manner of trade goods, exotic wares, and silver. Some of the trade goods came up the great rivers of Russia from places as far away as the territory of the Volga Bulgars, the Khaganate of the Khazars, regions of Central Asia, the Greek Byzantine Empire, and the Caliphate of Baghdad.

Once in Hedeby, trade goods from the Baltic and further east were transported west, across the base of the Jutland Peninsula. The goods were first carted on a short land road protected by the Danevirke (ON Danavirki), the fortified ‘wall of the Danes.’ Then the goods were loaded onto barges and transported on a small river leading to the North Sea coast for shipment to Frisia, Britain, and Western Europe. Another major land route from Hedeby went north and with a branch leading west to the Viking Age port at Ribe (ON Ripar) on the west Jutland coast facing the North Sea. These land routes connected the Baltic Hedeby with ports on the North Sea, helping to avoid sailing along the northern coast of Jutland through Eyrarsund and Jóttlandshaf (modern straits of Öresund and Kattegat) – waters where Vikings lay in wait. The long, east-west Limfjord (Límafjǫrðr) cutting across the north of Jutland was another east-west sailing route that offered some protection from piracy.

About the year 930, Gorm’s kingdom probably included all of northern and central Jutland. The southern part of Jutland, including Hedeby, seems to have come under his power a few years later, giving him control of the valuable trade route protected by the Danevirke. Gorm’s authority east of Jutland is more difficult to determine. It probably extended at times to the islands of Funen (Danish Fyn, ON Fjón) and Zealand (Danish Sjælland, ON Sjáland), areas which outsiders, such as the Franks and peoples of England, considered Danish. At times Gorm’s power may have extended across Eyrarsund strait to Skåne (ON Skáney), Halland, and Blekinge (ON Bleiking), in modern Sweden.

A Sample Runestone from Lesson 9

The Fläckebo (Hassmyra) Runestone commemorates a Swedish húsreyja (lady of the house). The carver of this stone uses a variant Ŝ for the /o/ rune Š, as well as two variants for the /s/ rune, ʂ and ʃ interchangeably.

**RUNES**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{BU} & \text{NT} \times \text{YN} \text{BR} \times \text{MR} \text{YR} \times \text{TR} \times \text{NI} \times \text{RI} \times \text{HT} \times \text{NP} \times \text{T} \times \text{I} \times \text{IA} \times \text{IP} \times \text{TM} \times \text{H} \times \text{YN} \times \text{TH} \times \\
\text{MR} & \times \text{RI} \times \text{HT} \times \text{I} \times \text{N} \times \text{I} \times \text{I} \times \text{N} \times \text{TR} \times \text{YN} \times \\
\end{align*}
\]

**TRANSLITERATION**

buonti kuþr hulmkoetr lit resa utfer oþintisu kunu seno kumbr hifrya til hasuimura iki betr þon byi
Translate:


VOCABULARY

búandi & bóandi (also bóndi) <gen
bóanda, m farmer; head of a household, husband
bý (var of bú) <dat pl byum> n home, house, household; farm; estate
góðr <f göð, n gött> adj good
Hólmgautr <-s> m Holmgaut (personal name)
Hasvimýrar m pl Hasvimyrar (place name, see myrr below)
hýsfreyja (var of húsfreyja) f housewife
kona <gen pl kvenna> f woman, wife
kømr (var of kemr) 2/3sg pres of koma
látar <lætr, létu, látinn> vb to allow, permit; have something done
mýrr <acc & dat myri, gen mýrar, pl myrar> f moor, bog, swamp
Óðindísa f Odindisa (personal name), disa f ’goddess’
Rauð-Balli m Red-Ballí (personal name)
ráða <ræðr, réð, réðu, ræðinn> vb to advise, counsel; rule, govern
reisa <-ti, -tr> vb to raise; látar reisa [stein] have a stone raised
rista <-ti, -tr> vb to carve, cut, engrave
Sigmundr <-ar> m Sigmund (personal name)

Figure 9.5. Fläckebo Runestone, Västmanland, Sweden. Known as the Fäckebo ’a’ Stone.
Viking Runes and Old Norse
Learn & Teach

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