

# Yggr on the Rök Runestone

Henrik Williams and Staffan Fridell (Uppsala University)

The highly problematic sequence **sakumukmini** in the runic inscription on the Rök runestone has been interpreted in over a dozen different ways (Williams 2021, 119 f.), with its explanation affecting understanding of the entire text. Fridell and Williams (2022) have defended the interpretation of **sakum** as *sagum*, literally ‘I say’, and Ottar Grønvik (1990, 31; cf. Williams 2021, 238 f.) has shown that **mini** represents *minni* ‘divine myths’. As regards the intermediate **uk**, Holmberg et al. (2020, 18) and Williams (2021, 239 f.) revive a proposal by Rolf Nordenstreng (1912) that this represents an oblique form Ygg of a name for Odin corresponding to Old West Norse *Yggr*.

Jackie Nordström, however, in her own article on the Rök inscription (2023, 13), identifies a serious problem with this solution:

Rörande Holmberg et al:s tolkning av **uk** som *Ygg*, en dativform av *i*-stammen *Yggr* motsägs detta av dativformen **trąki drąngi** på rad 24. I fornisländskan föll ofta dativ-*i* bort hos *i*-stammar som slutade på långt *g*, *k* eller *ng* (Noreen [1923]: § 389). På Rökstenen från 800-talet står dock *i*-et kvar [...], likt *u*-et i **ualraubu valraubu**, **sunu sunu** och **strąntu strąndu**. Det hade behövt stå **uki** *Yggi* för att Holmberg et al.:s (2020) tolkning skulle kunna stämma.

‘As regards the interpretation by Holmberg et al. of **uk** as *Ygg*, a dative form of the *i*-stem *Yggr*, this is contradicted by the dative form **trąki drąngi** in line 24. In Old Icelandic, dative *-i* often disappeared in *i*-stems ending in long *g*, *k* or *ng* (Noreen [1923]: § 389). On the ninth-century Rök stone the *i* remains, however, just like the *u* in **ualraubu valraubu**, **sunu sunu** and **strąntu strąndu**. For the interpretation of Holmberg et al. (2020) to be correct, it should have been **uki** *Yggi*.’

Noreen (1923, § 389) lists *Yggr* among *i*-stems and in Note 2 remarks that the dative ending *-i* very seldom occurs among these; it was upon this statement that Williams uncritically built his interpretation. He also failed to recognize the parallel to the declensional suffix in *drąngi*.

Jackie Nordström and Henrik Williams have engaged in intense discussion of this problem, with her solution (2023, 13) being the interpretation of **ukmini** as *ungmænni* ‘youth, young man’. Williams (2021, 290 f.) argued against this solution. For a while they both considered a suggestion by Niels Åge Nielsen (1969, 26) to interpret **uk** as *ok* ‘and, also’. This would be orthographically and syntactically acceptable but appears, to our minds at least, less convincing. A construction ‘I/We say also the *minni*’ following the memorial formula seems curiously lacking in content and obscures any direct recipient of the runic text, while a Runic Swedish *YggR* fulfills that function admirably. Let us therefore re-examine whether this interpretation may, after all, be possible.

Nordenstreng (1912, 3) convincingly argues that **sakumukmini** should be interpreted as “Vi säga Ygg den hågkomsten” (‘We say Ygg that recollection’) or more precisely “Vi påminna Ygg om det” (‘We remind Ygg of it’). He also remarks on (p. 2) the lack of any other viable alternative – the common people could not possibly have grasped the content as it stands – and he continues (p. 3):

Nej, det kan aldrig ha varit meningen, att någon människa skulle lista ut Rökstenens innehåll. Så konstfullt är detta dolt i de förvirrande runtecknen, att endast runornas herre och skapare kunnat utleta det.

Men *han* bör också ha kunnat det, och *han* bör ha funnit särskilt behag i att göra det. Just en sådan inskrift bör ha varit långt mera i hans, den store gåtgissarens smak, än en vanlig enkel klar inskrift, som kunnat med lätthet läsas av både *múgr* [= folkets breda lager] och *ungmænni* [= ungdomen]. Och till honom var givetvis den unge kämpe gången, till vars ära Rökstenen är rest. Vad mera är, om jag inte tar fel, är han t. o. m. nämnd vid namn, inte en, utan flere gånger på stenen. Ty detta obegripliga *sakumukmini* kan ju läsas *sagum Ygg minni*, och jag tror att det *bör* läsas så.

‘No, it can never have been the intention that any human should work out the content of the Rök stone. So artfully is it concealed in the bewildering runic characters that only the lord and creator of the runes could find it out.

But *he* should also have been able to, and *he* should have found particular pleasure in doing so. An inscription like that should have been much more to his taste than an ordinary, simple, clear inscription which could have been read with ease by both *múgr* [= the broad mass of the people] and *ungmænni* [= the youth]. And it was to him, of course, that the young man in whose honor the Rök stone is erected had gone. Furthermore, if I am not mistaken, he is mentioned by name, not once, but several times on the stone. Because this incomprehensible *sakumukmini* may of course be read as *sagum Ygg minni*, and I believe it *should* be read in such a way.’

Not only did Nordenstreng come up with this constructive interpretation that no one to our knowledge had considered prior to its adoption by Holmberg et al. but he also beat them to the realization that the dead son was bound for a sojourn with Odin (vide supra): ‘And it was to him, of course, that the young man in whose honor the Rök stone is erected had gone.’ Nor do we think that Rök scholars have given his argument about the true audience for the runic text enough consideration. The fact that the inscription must, at least in part, have had a supernatural recipient is indicated by the incredible complexity of the textual features of the written characters themselves as well as the fact that it cannot even be read in its entirety by a person less than seven feet tall (Williams 2021, 227).

Nordenstreng continues (1912, 4):

Vidare reser sig den frågan, varför Odin icke är kallad vid sitt vanliga namn, utan vid det mindre vanliga *Yggr*. Ja, orsaken är svår att veta. Att Odinsnamnet *Yggr* nyttjades i sammanhang med strid och död var likväl rätt vanligt på västnordisk språkbotten (t.ex. *Grímnismál* v. 53: *Eggmóðan val nú mun Yggr hafa*); och att detta namn icke eljes är uppvisat på östnordiskt område bevisar ingalunda, att det icke förekommit, ja talar icke ens i nämnvärd mån emot min gissning. Det var ju icke ett namn, som kunde ingå i ortnamn. Någon skriven litteratur från hednatiden har vi icke i Sverige, och i den muntliga traditionen kunde namnet icke gärna i kristen tid kvarleva för att sedan upptecknas. Var skulle vi då kunna finna det annat än i runinskrifter? Och det är mycket begärt, att det ska finnas i mer än en sådan. Jag tror, att man i allmänhet bör vara försiktig med att påstå, att ett ord eller ett namn är specifikt västnordiskt, därför att det ännu inte har blivit uppvisat i östnordiskt språk.

‘Further, the question arises why Odin is not called by his usual name but by the less common *Yggr*. Well, it’s difficult to know the reason. The use of the name *Yggr* for Odin in connection with battle and death was nevertheless quite common in the West Norse dialect (e.g. *Grímnismál* stanza 53: *Eggmóðan val nú mun Yggr hafa* [“A corpse wearied by the edge of a sword *Yggr* will now have”]); and the fact that this name is not shown elsewhere in the East Nordic area in no way proves that it did not occur, indeed does not even speak to a significant extent against my guess. It was not a name that could be included in a place name. We have no written literature from pagan times in Sweden, and in the oral tradition the name could not easily have remained in Christian times to be recorded later. Where then could we find it except in runic inscriptions? And it is a lot to ask it to be in more than one such example. I think that in general one should be careful about claiming that a word or a name is specifically West Norse because it has not yet been attested in an East Norse language.’

In place names, we find only the element *Óðin-*, never any of the nearly 170 *heiti* for Odin (cf. Falk 1924). The reason is that these *heiti* (many with an origin in Sweden according to Falk, p. 38) belong to the literary tradition, just as the Rök stone text does.

So, does the criticism by Nordström preclude **uk** representing *Ygg* with no dative case marker? She is perfectly correct in pointing out the parallel between *Yggr* and *drængr*. But did these really need to follow the same declension pattern in the ninth century?

The word *dräng* was probably originally an *ija*-stem, i.e. *\*drangijar* (Bjorvand and Lindeman 2019, 201) featuring a combination of short vowel + consonants (velar nasal + voiced velar stop) in the stressed syllable. An alternative view suggests it was instead an *i*-stem *\*drangir* (Kroonen 2013, 100). The dative singular **trāki** *drængi* on the Rök stone is however a strong argument in favour of an original *ija*-declension. During the Early Viking Age, the Old West Norse word conformed to the declension pattern of *i*-stems (Bjorvand and Lindeman 2019, 201). In East Norse the plural retained the *ja*-declension earlier allotted to *ija*-stems with a root ending in a velar consonant (Fulk 2018, 51), while in West Norse the nominative plural became *drengir*, accusative *drengi* (attested on the Piraeus lion as **trikir**, probably the work of a West Norse carver; Snædal 2014, 25).

The dative singular **trāki** *drængi* on the Rök stone should be regarded as an example of the retainment in Old East Norse of the old regular declension, while a dative lacking an ending in Old West Norse is the result of influence from the *i*-stem declension (cf. Boutkan 1995, 214).

There was also, during the Viking Age, a clear later tendency in East Norse for plurals to conform to the pattern of the *a*-stems: nominative *drængar*, accusative *drænga* (Sm 93, Vg 184, U 767, U 808, Vs 3, Vs 22, DR 295, DR 330). The inscriptions which retain plural *ja*-declensions – nominative *drængiar*, accusative *drængia* – are usually somewhat older (Sö 155, Sö 163, U 802, Ög 64, DR 1). At the same time, a geographical pattern is suggested, as the innovation appears more common and is earlier in the south.

*Yggr* is a *ja*-stem *\*ugjar* where *g* is regularly lengthened (geminated) early on before *j* to *\*uggjar*. This word in Old East Norse would regularly develop as follows:

- N *\*uggjar* > *\*yggir* > *\*yggR*
- G *\*uggjas* > *\*yggis* > *\*yggS*
- D *\*uggjai* > *\*yggjē* > *\*yggji* > *\*yggi*
- A *\*uggja* > *\*yggi* > *\*ygg*

It is in the genitive, where the word can be declined as either *yiggs* or *yggjar*, that its alignment with the *i*-stems in Old West Norse can most clearly be seen. The ending *-ar* is borrowed from the *i*-stem declension (cf. Syrett 1994, 102 f.; Boutkan 1995, 214, 245; Fulk 2018, 160) but realized after velar consonants as *-jar*.

We might expect either *Yggi* (*ja*-stem form) or *Ygg* (*i*-stem form) as the dative form on the Rök stone: both are possible. There is no compelling reason to assume that the words *drængr* and *Yggr* must follow the same pattern in this respect, even if one might argue that a uniform declension would be more expected.

However, Bengt Hesselman (1913, 54) offers a reasonable explanation to the retained dative-*i* of *drængr* while *Yggr* simultaneously exhibits a form without an ending:

de gamla ändelserna *-e* och *-o* uppträda särskilt ymnigt vid sådana enkla stammar, som tillhöra språkets allmännaste och oftast brukade ordförråd [...]. Det är ju ett allmänt bekant och erkänt faktum, att ofta brukade ord länge behålla ovanliga böjningsformer.

‘The old endings *-e* [by which Hesselman refers to the ending *-i/-e* of the *a*-stems in the dative singular] and *-o* [the corresponding ending *-u/-o* of the *ō*-stems] appear especially abundant at such simple stems that belong to the commonest and most often used vocabulary of the language [...]. It is, as you know, a generally noted and recognized fact that words that are often used retain unusual forms of declension for a long time.’

*Drængr* is indeed a more frequently used word than *Yggr*.

In conclusion, we may ask whether there is any real evidence that *Yggr* and *drængr* could have been declined with different dative case endings. In Old West Norse poetic language, *drengr* may be declined in the dative case as both *dreng* and *drengi* (Jónsson 1901, 34). In the genitive the word is unfailingly declined as *drengs* (p. 33 f.). *Yggr* is not attested in the dative case but is in the genitive case declined both as *Yiggs* and *Yggjar*, with approximately 24 instances of each. This could indicate that *Yggr* should also tend more towards *i*-stem declension in the dative as well, i.e. more often show a form without an ending.

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