

The Early Runic Mini-Symposia: Some Personal Reflections

By Michael P. Barnes

For reasons I can no longer recall, I was invited in 1986 to join a group of Swedish runologists from Runverket (then based in Stockholm) on one of their spring and summer rune-stone painting forays. Participating, apart from me, were Marit Åhlén, Helmer Gustavson, Jan Paul Strid, a stone conservator whose name eludes me, and, I think, Riksantikvariets photographer, Bengt Lundberg, recording the progress of our work for posterity. The whole exercise on this occasion was centred on the Rök stone in Östergötland. For several days we were quartered in Ombergs Turisthotell, which lay nearby, seemingly run by a chap who doubled up as gardener, waiter, and, for all I know, chef as well. The hotel boasted an extensive menu, but it rapidly became clear that we were expected to follow the waiter's recommendation, which on most evenings directed us to *vätternröding*. For our midday repast we bought in some variety of *sik*, which we ate encamped round the Rök monument. Conversation at one point turned to a possible reunion the following year, and before we left we had resolved to meet again in Orkney and the Isle of Man in 1987. I was at the time working on the runic inscriptions of Maeshowe, and reckoned the input of fellow runologists could only benefit my endeavours. For the Manx leg of the trip, Ray Page had kindly agreed to come over and share with us his extensive knowledge of the island's rune-stones. The core group on this occasion consisted once again of Marit Åhlén, Helmer Gustavson, Jan Paul Strid and me, augmented by Thorgunn Snædal, and with Terje Spurkland representing Norway. James Knirk had been invited to join us as an honorary Norwegian but for practical reasons was unable to take part, and offered Terje as a replacement. In Orkney we stayed at the Kirkwall Hotel, some distance from Maeshowe. Our transport was

Barnes, Michael P. "The Early Runic Mini-Symposia: Some Personal Reflections."
Futhark: International Journal of Runic Studies 14–15 (2023–2024, publ. 2025): 225–32.
DOI: 10.33063/futhark.14.1076

an antique van, to which Marit had to apply all her considerable driving skills, were we to get safely to and from Maeshowe each day. While in Man (where transport was altogether smoother) we decided to put such runological get-togethers on a firmer and slightly more formal footing. Thus it was that Helmer came to issue invitations to the first runic mini-symposium, to be held on Gotland in 1988. (This and subsequent meetings up to and including No. 16, held in Eichstätt, Germany, in 2003, are more fully and soberly documented – year by year – in *Nytt om runer* 4–19).

It was a smallish group that foregathered in Visby, but about twice as large as the Rök and Orkney/Man cohorts. I can no longer recall with certainty all who were there, but seasoned runologists such as Ray Page and Marie Stoklund had been added to the mix. The idea was, I think, to bring together the foremost experts from such countries as engaged in field-runological activity (German participation was lacking, though it appeared at later symposia in the person of Klaus Düwel). Desk-bound runologists were definitely not included, and although the rising generation was represented by Henrik Williams and Svante Lagman, there was no talk in this era of involving PhD students and the like as a matter of policy. Short papers were read and discussed, but the bulk of the time was spent travelling to, examining, and offering opinions on runic carvings – as became the norm at these gatherings. My abiding memory of the Gotland symposium is the three-page document I had to carry with me, signed by Major L-O Pettersson, “Säkerhetschef”, allowing me as an alien to enter restricted areas of northern Gotland and Fårö. And prominent along the roads were signs in several languages, including Russian, warning travellers against proceeding without such permission. Protected by our documentation, however, we were able to visit and examine runic carvings over the whole of Gotland, as also on Fårö.

The 1989 mini-symposium – No. 2 in the series – was arranged by Marie Stoklund on Bornholm. Again, I cannot now call to mind all of those who took part, but I am fairly sure it was much the same group as the year before, with certain additions. I remember a hungry Ray Page, aided by Christine Fell, consuming bowls of very reasonably priced chips, and Jan Ragnar Hagland arguing at a discussion session in favour of *nynorsk* signage of runic inscriptions in Norway; Börje Westlund, too, had begun to lend his eloquence to our throng – indeed he may well have been one of the many vehemently disputing the necessity of *nynorsk* signage. A norm for the transliteration of runes – that evergreen topic – was also on the agenda, but as previously and since, no useful conclusion was reached. Of prime importance: large numbers of Bornholm’s stone inscriptions were

visited, studied and discussed in what became the usual manner; that is to say, participants crowded round the objects, often shielding the view from others, and offered their opinions on matters great and small.

1990 saw the mini-symposium move to England, with Ray Page and Chris Fell as the organisers, and with the then Anglo-Saxon runologist, David Parsons, as a welcome addition. This gathering – the third – became known as the “Northumbrian symposium”, since the sites visited were chiefly in the North of England, though by no means all were within the confines of Northumbria. The symposium in fact began in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, of which Ray was a fellow, where the damp, spartan student accommodation seemed to come as something of a surprise to certain of the participants. In Corpus, Ray showed us items of runic interest, in particular an inscription (if that is the right term) executed in dry-point in the margin of a medieval manuscript. And the numismatist, Mark Blackburn, made it possible for participants to examine the Anglo-Saxon runic coins of the Fitzwilliam Museum. From Cambridge the assembled runologists were whisked away by mini-bus to Slingsby Hall, near York, where we were put up in the most congenial surroundings and extremely well fed by Chris Fell’s brother and family. From there, two separate parties set out on long journeys to visit the most notable Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian runic inscriptions of the North (almost entirely stone). Most people went in the mini-bus, but for the ease and comfort of all Marit Åhlén was put in charge of Chris Fell’s small camper van, popularly known as the “Praguemobile”; she was joined by Jan Paul Strid, who found space to lie flat and nurse his bad back, and by me, whose job was to act as map reader and thus ensure that we did not lose sight of the mini-bus for any lengthy period of time. The Praguemobile had several notable features. Most remarkable was the tap affixed to the wash basin: when turned on it dispensed not water, but real ale. Distances between runic inscriptions are often considerable in the North of England, and one night was spent at a hotel in Armathwaite, Cumbria. Here the more discerning participants seized the opportunity to inspect Armathwaite station on the legendary Settle and Carlisle Railway (saved from closure by a vigorous local and national campaign and now once again a thriving part of Britain’s rail network).

In 1991 mini-symposium participants met in Hälsingland for the fourth gathering. Foremost on the agenda were the staveless runes, with visits to all the relevant rune-stones (as of course to others as well). Lena Peterson was in attendance, demonstrating the clear distinction in length between staveless **f** and **h**, for which she had argued cogently in her paper ‘The

graphemic system of the staveless runes' given at the Third International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions, Grindaheim, Norway, 1990. A half day was dedicated to various presentations by members of the symposium. Memories of this event cannot easily exclude the accommodation. Our quarters were in Forsa *folkhögskola* and proved to be, with one exception, the worst mini-symposium participants have had to suffer. The food was sparse and could border on the inedible, while the rooms were decorated with large notices informing guests that the consumption of alcohol was strictly forbidden, and threatening anyone foolhardy enough to break this decree with spine-chilling consequences.

In 1992 Jan Ragnar Hagland (in cooperation with Aud Beverfjord) invited a by now somewhat larger core group to the fifth meeting in Trondheim. This proved to be one of the busier symposia, with a couple of lectures thrown in, visits to museums as well as to Nidaros cathedral (with its many runic carvings), and an excursion to inner-Trøndelag. Participants were able to examine, *inter alia*, some of the loose objects discovered during excavations at the Trondheim site known as Folkebibliotekstomta, the Kuli stone (insofar as the painting of the runes allows one to see clearly anything runic on this much worn artefact), and the agglomeration of runic graffiti at "Skrivarberget", Ystines.

The sixth meeting, held in Copenhagen at the invitation of Marie Stoklund, was also action-packed. It included a lengthy visit to the Danish National Museum where many Danish and some Greenlandic runic inscriptions have found a home. There were also trips to the older-*futhark* Stenstad stone (of Norwegian provenance) and to some important early Viking-Age inscriptions, all located in the vicinity of Copenhagen. I note that Michael Lerche Nielsen, then a PhD student at Copenhagen's Institut for navneforskning, was invited for the first time. He was there principally to act as guide on the excursion, but his inclusion shows that the mini-symposium was gradually widening its horizons.

German participation seems to have become well-established at this stage, for in 1994 we were invited by Edith Marold to Schleswig for the seventh gathering. Although a range of inscriptions from the Schleswig area were examined (a great many loose objects and not least the Hedeby stones), this proved to be a very different kind of meeting from those participants had become used to: more formal and involving the delivery of a great many papers, to be gathered and published in one of the impressive *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* (No. 25 in the event). Perusal of this volume will indicate more or less who was present and what they were all up to (though Tineke Looijenga, the

first Dutch representative, is invisible since her paper was not included). For those who took part it is instructive to study the 21-page ‘Diskussion zum Thema Handelssprachen und Runeninschriften in Haithabu und vergleichbaren Handelszentren’ led by Helmer Gustavson and featuring “Diskussionsbeiträge” by Jan Ragnar Hagland, Karin Fjellhammer Seim and Marit Åhlén. I think I can state with confidence that the printed version bears absolutely no relation to what was actually said on the day. My firm recollection is that all four participants were anxious to abandon the venture (most people at this stage were more than ready for a drink), and only rose to the challenge when cajoled by Klaus Düwel, keener than most to hear what they had to say. In the event this proved to be next to nothing: the audience listened inattentively to some fifteen minutes of waffle, which gradually petered out. Possibly too much was being asked of participants. Certainly the excursion to the Dannevirke and other places of interest proved a strenuous exercise: anyone lagging behind on our extensive wanderings was geed on by two formidable ladies who would brook no backsliding or delay. By the evening many had trouble summoning up enough energy to eat the delicious spread that awaited us in Schleswig.

The eighth runic mini-symposium took place in 1995 in Oslo and Fredrikstad. It was arranged jointly by Universitetets oldsaksamling, Oslo, and Runarkivet, in the person of James Knirk. After a morning in Oslo visiting Runarkivet and the rune-stone store on Bygdøy, where many of the important inscriptions in the older *fubark* had found temporary accommodation, participants were bussed to Isegran (Universitetets arkeologiske stasjon) in Frederikstad, where they were to stay for the duration of the symposium. On the first full day, runic inscriptions and rock carvings in Østfold were examined, followed after lunch by the delivery of short presentations. The highlight of the symposium was an excursion through Bohuslän all the way to Lödöse, taking in, *inter alia*, the Kalleby, Hoga and Rävsaal stones, and ending with an examination of many of the loose objects discovered during the Lödöse excavations. The weather on the day of the excursion was distinctly rainy, and the path from the bus to the Hoga stone led through muddy fields. In order to spare participants’ footwear and nether garments, the organisers kindly issued everyone with large white plastic bags, the overall effect of which was to make a gathering of bedraggled field runologists look like a group of intrepid scientists entering the site of a nuclear disaster.

The ninth runic mini-symposium (1996) was arranged by Börje Westlund in collaboration with Svante Lagman. Participants were invited

to Linköping, and the main object of the meeting was to offer hands-on experience of the many notable rune-stones of Östergötland. Högby, Ingelstad, Kälvesten, Ledberg, Oklunda and Rök were all examined, to name but a few. There was also a visit to Vadstena, and a brief lecture and discussion session. A precious memory from this symposium is of James Knirk up on high (possibly on someone's shoulders) taking shots for himself and others of the runes on the top of the Rök stone.

In 1997 the symposium moved to Jutland for its tenth gathering, more precisely to Hald near Viborg. Marie Stoklund was the organiser, ably assisted by others, including Michael Lerche Nielsen. This was a meeting very much in the mould of the previous year's gathering in Östergötland, with visits to notable rune-stones in the forefront. Time was, however, also set aside for discussion of runic corpus editions, and the presentation of new finds. *Nytt om runer* 13: 33 informs us further that during the meeting an informal runological e-mail network was established. Whatever became of that, I wonder?

The eleventh symposium took place in the Isle of Man in 1998. It had many organisers: As well as me, there was Judith Jesch, David Parsons, Ray Page and Sir David Wilson. With so many stalwarts in charge, it is remarkable that no better accommodation than the boys' dormitories in King William's College, Castletown, could be found. Participants were offered iron bedsteads with lumpy mattresses in rooms of four or five; the dormitories otherwise were almost bare, save for pictures of scantily clad females which decorated most of the available wall space. Such meals as the College provided were hardly in the five-star category (though the symposium "banquet" showed promise). Without doubt, these lodgings were the worst mini-symposium-goers have had to put up with. In fairness it should be pointed out that things seem to have improved greatly in the intervening years. The current King William's College web-site shows modern (if still largely dormitory) accommodation and speaks of "sumptuous catering". The symposium otherwise was a great success. Virtually all of the Manx rune-stones were inspected, including those in the Manx Museum; and the Iron-Age hill fort and Viking ship burial site at Balladoole – complete with interpretation by Sir David Wilson – was thrown in for good measure. On the second evening of the symposium, Sir David and Lady Eva provided participants with a delicious home-cooked meal at their home in the Old Lifeboat House, Castletown.

These personal reminiscences of the early runic mini-symposia have grown rather more extensive than I intended. Since meetings closer in time will be more familiar to many of today's participants, I will content myself

with listing them, interspersing odd comments as seems appropriate. The most recent meetings (from 2004 onwards) I will simply enumerate.

The twelfth meeting took place in Groningen in the Netherlands in 1999, and was organised by Tineke Looijenga. I was not myself present, so can offer no insights (but see *Nytt om runer* 15: 38–9). For reasons that escape me, it had been decided not to hold a symposium at all in the following year. This I thought a shame, since it had up to that point been an annual get-together. I therefore took it upon myself to issue invitations to the usual suspects, urging them to undertake the hazardous journey to Orkney and Shetland. Virtually everything of runic interest in the islands was examined – even Eshaness II, though this Shetland gravestone is so worn its inscriptions can only be seen under cover with the help of artificial light. I still treasure the pictures I have of participants lying flat on the ground, covered with blankets, trying to make out something of what was once there. For anyone ignorant of the context, these images must suggest a comedy sketch rather than serious runological investigation. Orkney and Shetland 2000, then, became the thirteenth annual runic mini-symposium.

Three excellent meetings were arranged in the immediately following years: by Per Stille in Lund (2001, the fourteenth); by Henrik Williams, Jan Paul Strid, and Mindy MacLeod – Kalmar, Öland and Blekinge (2002, the fifteenth); and by Klaus Düwel, Edith Marold, Alfred Bammesberger, and Gaby Waxenberger in Eichstätt, Germany (2003, the sixteenth). These gatherings are fully described in the relevant numbers of *Nytt om runer*: Lund in vol. 17: 41; Kalmar, Öland and Blekinge in vol. 18: 28; Eichstätt in vol. 19: 31–3. As the three pages dedicated to the Eichstätt meeting indicate, this was a symposium with a difference. In the manner of the Schleswig gathering in 1994, it was more of a general workshop, with emphasis on the exchange of ideas and in particular the presentation of papers, culminating in publication – again in one of de Gruyter's unaffordable *Ergänzungsbände* (No. 51). Time was, however, also set aside for the examination of inscriptions, thus honouring the spirit of the mini-symposia.

With Eichstätt regular written reports on the annual gatherings of field runologists come to an end, for with volume 19 of *Nytt om runer* (2004; publ. 2006) publication of this most useful bulletin of runic research regrettably ceased. For knowledge of subsequent runic mini-symposia, we must rely on our memories and such pre-prints, hand-outs, etc. as have survived attempts to de-clutter our offices, homes and computers. Fortunately, symposia nos 17–29 will be present in the minds of many or most

of today's participants, and details of academic and social interest can be sought from those who attended. I was present at some of the meetings, but by no means all, and my recollections are therefore patchy. The most sensible thing I can thus do is to end with a simple list, giving (1) the year of each meeting after 2003, (2) the number of the meeting in the series, and (3) the venue. It is sincerely to be hoped that someone at a future date will consider adding their personal recollections of the post-2003 meetings to the remarks I have made here.

- 2004: 17, Bergen
- 2005: 18, Copenhagen
- 2006: 19, Östergötland/Småland
- 2007: 20, Gotland
- 2008: 21, Paris
- 2009: 22, Sigtuna
- 2010: 23, Schleswig
- 2011: 24, Uppsala
- 2012: 25, Stavanger
- 2013: 26, Mora
- 2014: 27, Oslo
- 2015: 28, Bornholm
- 2016: 29, Isle of Man
- 2017: 30, Skara
- 2018: 31, Trondheim
- 2019: 32, Sundsvall
- 2022: 33, Uppsala
- 2023: 34, Copenhagen
- 2024: 35, Oslo
- 2025: 36, Orkney