

A Misidentified Separator in U 924

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Abstract

In this short notice I comment on the reading of U 924, a Viking Age runic inscription in Uppsala Cathedral. Most importantly, I point out that U 924 does not contain the sequence **auk**, as published in *Upplands runinskrifter*, but rather **+ uk**. A handwritten note from Helmer Gustavson proves that the correct reading has been known with some certainty since at least 1976, but this information has apparently never been published. I also provide some brief comments concerning the use of **a** and **n** in the inscription.

Keywords: Helmer Gustavson, separator, U 924, Uppsala Cathedral, Elias Wessén, word divider

Embedded in the floor to the left of Charles De Geer's tomb in Uppsala Cathedral is a Viking Age runestone, with siglum U 924. Only part of the runestone is accessible for study, resting as it does underneath a load-bearing pillar structure. Elias Wessén's transliteration in the Swedish corpus edition (*SRI*, 9: 15) of the visible section of the text band is given here, though the bracketing of characters 1, 34, and 35 is my own. Both runes and separators have been numbered, for reasons that will become clear shortly.

...[a]istin + fnþur · sia auk stia + bþurþur sin [+ k]...

5 10 15 20 25 30 35

As indicated by my brackets, two runes and a separator are illegible in the runestone's current state. Wessén's examination of U 924 in the fall of 1951 seems to have benefited from the removal of mortar where the wall/pillar meets the runestone, mortar which has been replenished in the intervening years. Figure 1 and figure 2 show the inscription as it looked in 1951.

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Fig. 1. U 924, Bröderna Östlings foto AB, Upplandsmuseet, 1951. Accessible at [Digitaltmuseum.se](https://www.digitaltmuseum.se/obj/0000900) (Identifier Ö000900; CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).



Fig. 2. U 924, C.-E. Claesson, Uppsala-bild, 1951. Photo from the original negative (Neg 2439-16; ATA; Public Domain).



Fig. 3. Separator between **a** and **u**. Photo: Eric Lander, 2025.

U 924 has not attracted a great deal of attention in the literature. Treatments have been cursory (Gustavson 1986a, 21; 1986b, 35; Bengtsson 2010, 395; Åhlén 2010, 82). Aside from my brief comments above on the current condition of the runestone, I have two observations to make about this inscription.

The first is that character 17 is not a long-branch **a** at all, but rather a separator + (as seen elsewhere in the inscription). There are two short intersecting perpendicular lines, both deeply carved. There is no doubt that the vertical of these two lines does not reach up to the border lines of the text band, as seen in figure 3.

Thus instead of **auk ok** we have the less common but nevertheless abundantly attested **uk ok**. While it was not uncommon for photographs like the one in figure 2 to be retouched before publication in *Sveriges runinskrifter*, it is worth mentioning that this does not appear to be the source of the error in question. The original photograph published in *Upplands runinskrifter* (SRI, 9: plate 2), available in Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet (hereafter ATA) at Riksantikvarieämbetet, has indeed been retouched in various spots (perhaps most notably the upper and lower parts of the damaged **n**-rune's main stave), but character 17 is not

one of them. This is also clear from the **a**-rune in figure 2, developed from the original negative.

I am not the first to make this observation. The separator immediately preceding **uk** was properly identified as such already in the woodcut signed by Hadorph and Helgonius that appears in Peringskiöld's *Monumenta Ullerakerensia cum Upsalia* (1719, 43) and in Göransson's *Bautil* (B 425), even though various other elements of U 924 are not accurately depicted there. Moreover, Magnus Källström (pers. comm.) informs me that there is a handwritten note about U 924 in Helmer Gustavson's personal copy of *Upplands runinskrifter* at Runverket which reads: "Av 15 **a** syns inga spår av nedre och övre delarna av h[uvud]st[av]; 15 **a** bör därför tecknas - eller läsas som ett sk[iljetecken]." The note is signed with Gustavson's initials and the date 3/6-76, i.e. 3 June 1976, which is when Helmer Gustavson (along with Carl Magnus Rosell and Frey Bark) was on site to paint this and other cathedral inscriptions (according to a document in ATA dated 1976-09-23 and with Dnr 005187). Gustavson's observation from 1976 appears to have gone unpublished. Even his later writings mentioning this inscription (cited above) do not amend the transliteration published in *Upplands runinskrifter* (SRI, 6–9).

This brings me to my second observation. Contrary to Wessén's claim in *Upplands runinskrifter* (SRI, 9: 15; repeated by Bengtsson [2010, 395]) that the carver of U 924 could not keep his **a** and **n** apart, there does appear to be a certain regularity in his use of these runes (see also the brief comment by Thompson [1975, 39]): **a** is a short-twig rune with its branch to the left side of the main stave (characters 9 and probably 1), while **n** is either (i) a short-twig rune with its branch to the right side of the main stave (characters 16 and 23) or (ii) a long-branch rune (with a downward-slanting branch, as with character 6 and probably also character 33). Put differently, as far as the short-twig runes are concerned, the slope of the branch is irrelevant; the important feature is whether the branch is on the left or the right side of the vertical stave. For long-branch runes the slope of the branch surely does make a difference, but reading character 17 as + removes the one potential long-branch **a** from this text, and thus we have nothing to compare with long-branch **n**.

While the transliteration above – apart from the misidentified separator – may be suitable and even preferable for descriptive purposes, it would not be out of the question to entertain the following transliteration:

...[**a**]istin + **f**þur · sin + **uk** stin + **b**þurþur sin [+ k]...

None of the above changes what has long been understood to be the correct transcription of U 924, given below (where the first component of the father's name could well be *Frøy-*, as pointed out by Wessén, or even *Æi-*, according to Lagman 1990, 46–49).

... *Øystein*(?), *faður sinn*, *ok Stæin*, *brōður sinn* ...

The commas setting off the appositive phrases *faður sinn* and *brōður sinn* from the rest of the sentence are an editorial decision, of course, but they represent a reasonable assumption about the prosody of apposition. With this in mind, it is tempting to speculate that the separator + signals the kind of noticeable pause and shift in intonation typically associated with commas. This is, however, highly uncertain. To mention just one issue, we do not know if (alleged) [k]... is (i) the start of *gōðan* (in which case + interrupts an appositive phrase *brōður sinn gōðan*), (ii) the beginning of an intercessory prayer *Guð hialpi*... (which may or may not be compatible with a comma-intonational analysis of +), or (iii) something else entirely.

Many questions about U 924 remain, but hopefully these notes bring some more order to the runography of the unknown carver whose handiwork came to make up one small yet integral part of the very constitution of Uppsala's cathedral.

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