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A Note on the Rhythms of Rök (with special reference to l. 20)

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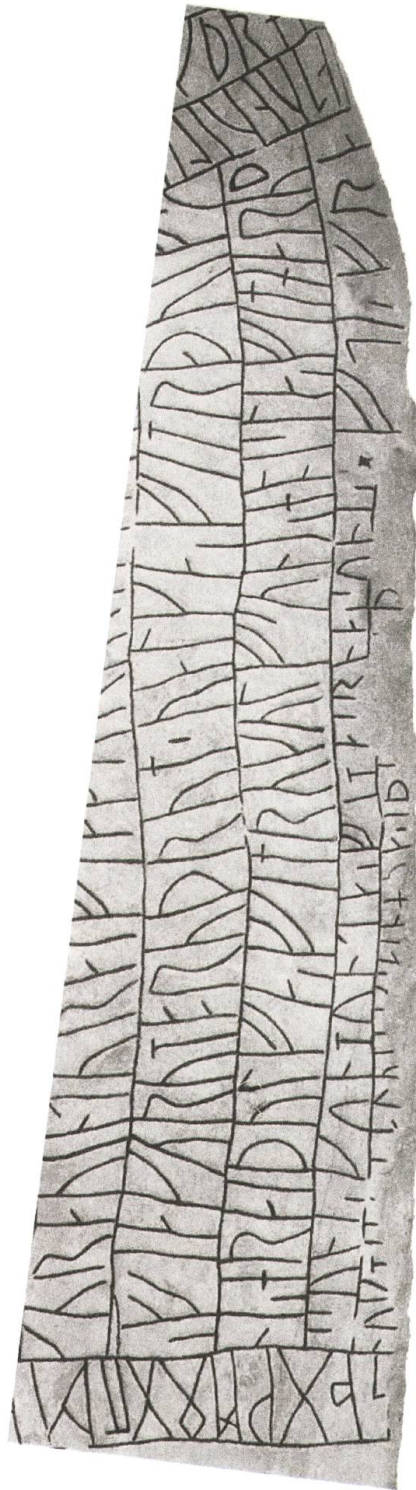
One of the accomplishments of Jürg Glauser has been to put ‘mediality’ squarely in the center of studies in Old Norse literature and philology. We may have largely forgotten the messianic prose-poetry of Marshall McLuhan, but through Jürg’s genial organizing and hosting ideas associated with mediation have become firmly embedded in our conceptual world. And a medium – whether as a generic class or as an individual realization – will have, besides its ‘message,’ also its ‘rhythms’ – recurrences and variations. So complicated a textual performance as the early ninth-century Rök inscription is bound to have a complex and unique rhythm, whatever elements of generic regularity it may also reflect, so that a full study of rhythm as a component of Rök’s style would be precluded by the present brief format.

This note focuses, instead, on the role of a single damaged but largely reconstructable line in the ecology of the inscription’s rhythms, line 20 in the standard edition of Elias Wessén. The reading order of lines and total interpretation of the inscription are of course crucial to such a study, and I take my previous work on Rök as the platform for further analysis. This work adopts Wessén’s order, with the exception of the last two lines. Most other recent readers have also accepted large parts of Wessén’s basic exposition.

In a larger study, rhythms might be distinguished in the following domains:

- contents: body of the inscription, viewed in formal/structural terms;
- language: vocabulary and syntax of the content;
- ritual/formulaic: the *sagum*-repetitions with their framing power;
- genres: e.g., contrast of verse with poetic prose; *greppaminni* and its variants;
- language representation: the different *futharks* and ciphers used and their visual representations;
- graphics: placement of lines in different forms of representation; all visual aspects, including continuities and gaps.

The opening ‘formula’ (N. raised this stone after N. [with optional characterization of the dedicatee]) stands alone to introduce three content segments in a rising rhythm: individual heroic (Theoderic), corporate heroic (the twenty kings), and mythic (the Baldr analogue). Every Rök scholar agrees on lines 1-2 and most on their relation to the body of the inscription (3-28), if not to the structure of that body, but my reading of the rhythm of content here depends on my overall reading of the inscription. For me, the two heroic segments contrast in themselves and pose



*Rök Stone, side C (back), trimmed to highlight lines 18-20
(© ATA: Riksantikvarieämbetet)*

a problem that is resolved in the mythic segment. Stripped, as far as possible, of its interpretation, we might say that the content of 3-28 constitutes a rhythm: $a - b - C$, where a and b are of the same kind relative to C , whose capitalization indicates its contrastive weight. The content rhythms are accentuated by the ritual/formulaic structure: each segment is constructed of a series of two hinting questions and an answer: $a - a$ (or b) - C ; the function of the questions is to lead to the climactic answer. We will have to forego any verbal analysis of the content but will return to the ritual formulas.

The genres of Rök of course include the memorial dedication (1-2) and the structuring *greppaminni* genre, which contains the three narrative blocks. One of the answers is itself a recognizable genre, a stanza in *fornyrðislag*, the only real verse in a matrix of *Kunstprosa* and possibly from a separate source. In section one, this genre contrast is susceptible to interpretation as a simple $a - C$ rhythm; more certainly the verse itself has a rhythm of its own. Widmark's (1992: 29-31) explanation of *mög-* and the integration of *greppaminni* into the discussion (Lönnroth, 1977) are among the most important recent contributions to Rök scholarship.

The representation of the language of the inscription has its own rhythm: the dedication (1-2) and sections one and two, lines 3-11 and 12-19 (also 20) are basically in short-twig runes, the inscription's default for telling plain tales plainly. At line 21, where the mythic section begins, the ordinary alphabet is largely replaced by a mixture of ciphers and ordinary runes used in non-ordinary contexts; a first contrast, therefore, is between ordinary and extraordinary modes of writing. The latter begin with a version of the older *futhark* (21-22), the first line of which is stood on its head. With line 23 comes the first form of cipher, shift cipher, carried through the whole line, but the next line, 24, switches back to standard short-twig runes for its first part, then, after a marker, back to shift cipher for its second part. Line 25 (feeding in *boustrophedon*-style and, like 21, upside down) switches back to the standard until a marker, whereafter the line finishes in the second type of cipher, called numerical. The rest of the inscription (26 down side D; the windmill runes of 28 [C top field] and finally 27 [E top of the stone]) continues in numerical cipher except for a few short-twig runes that help out on the two last lines. In terms of rhythm, then, and using the same notation as above, we could speak of the pace as $a - C$, where a is ordinary and C extraordinary; or, if we bring in the content rhythm, a notation of $a - a - C$ would seem justified. Much more complex would be the rhythm within the cipher section, and of course rhythms of language representation intersect with several aspects of the graphics of the stone in a complexity that we have no space for.

We turn instead to the damaged line 20, which I reconstruct as:

nu'k minni með öllu sagi ein: hvaR iðgjöld þá sunaR/magaR aftir, frá

Now I will speak in conclusion a special *minni*: Who received compensation for his son after [death], I have learned.

I am of course drastically simplifying here, but the first half of the line through *sagi* reflects a certain amount of consensus. *SunaR* and *magaR* are alternatives, and the whole latter part of the line is a reconstruction/surmise based on the work of predecessors as well as spadework and guesswork of my own. The most advanced reconstruction and interpretation by my predecessors was Ottar Grønvik's, but that is vitiated by mistakes of detail and too close dependence on his overall interpretation. Perhaps the latter objection will be raised to my own work, but let us accept it for the sake of the rest of the present argument.

Regular recurrences and variations of the ritual formula introduce the questions:

- l. 3: *Sagum mǫg-minni þat: hverjaR ...;*
- l. 5: *Þat sagum annart: hvaR...;*
- l. 12: *Þat sagum tvefta: hvar...;*
- l. 14: *Þat sagum þrettaunda: hváriR...;*
- l. 21: *Sagum mǫg-minni þat: hvaR...;*
- l. 23: *Sagum mǫg-minni: [h]vaim...*

The verb of enunciation is each time followed by its object (*mǫg-minni*) or an adjective standing for the object (e.g., *Þat tvefta [minni]*) and by an interrogative pronoun or adjective heading the question itself. (*Hvar* [12] interrupts this pattern with an interrogative adverb, which, however, fits the sound pattern.) The formula thus has a refrain-like regularity broken by its last occurrence within the answer of the myth section in l. 26: *Sagum mǫg-minni: Þor...* Here the verb and object are not extended by a question but by a declarative sentence, of which *Þor* is the object and *sefi via vari* the subject: "Thor (it was whom) the Kinsman, respecter of shrines, engendered at ninety." One could translate simply "the Kinsman ... engendered Thor" but for the effect of the syntax and spatial relations on the stone. Here the ritual formula is used out of place to topicalize the object of the verb and deictically to point out the importance of this, the inscription's climactic sentence.

After reconstruction, it appears certain that l. 20, too, is a variation on the ritual formula: "Now I say" avoids the archaic *sagum* and introduces a colloquial 'k, but it follows the pattern with *mǫg-minni* and a clause beginning *hvaR*. The latter part of the line, after *ein*, is probably too doubtful to insist on, but I have offered thoughts on the line's function in the whole. Probably it introduces the whole third section with a summary cast as another hinting question, though if we integrate *fra*, following Grønvik, as the ancient "I have heard" topos in the mouth of the 'k, then the question is only implicit. In any case, l. 20's violation of the regular rhythm of the *sagum* formula, like that of l. 26, focalizes the final section. If we dare to try to notate the ritual formula for comparison to the notations of other domains, we might come up with: $a^3 - a^5 - a^{12} - a^{14} - A^{20} (C) - a^{21} - a^{23} -- A^{26} (C)$. Lines 20 and 26 fall out of the established rhythm, exceeding earlier repetitions in importance and passion, hence the comparison of the *A*'s to earlier *C*'s.¹

¹ After submitting this article, I came across an elegant text-linguistic study of the *sagum* formula which must at least be mentioned: Melnikova, 2010.

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