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# Vikings in Maeshowe

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The prehistoric chambered cairn of Maeshowe on the Mainland of Orkney contains 33 medieval Norse runic inscriptions, carved by Norwegians, Icelanders or Orcadians in the 12th century. Inscription no. 1, high up on the inside wall above the low, tunnel-like entrance, is interpreted by Barnes (1994: 61-64) as follows:

**þatiruikiñkr...\*ākomutirhirtil**

*Þat er víkingr... þá kom undir hér til.*

That is a viking/Víkingr... then came underneath to this place.

As the translation suggests, it is not clear whether *víkingr*/Víkingr is to be understood as an appellative or as a personal name. Barnes' discussion of this aspect is rather brief and it deserves more detailed consideration.

Both the personal name Víkingr and the appellative *víkingr* occur in other runic inscriptions. There are 17 persons with this name in 18 inscriptions on Viking Age Swedish rune-stones, along with a possible instance of it as a byname in one inscription (Jesch, 2001: 45). The name persisted into medieval times as demonstrated in one Norwegian inscription on a playing-piece from Bergen (Olsen, 1957: 46-47). Magnus Olsen commented that Víkingr was common in western Norway, but not known in Iceland. The name does occur in Icelandic texts, but only for Norwegian ancestors of Icelanders mentioned in *Landnámabók* (S140, H323; cf. H184 in which the appellative forms a byname). In medieval Norway, by contrast, the name occurs more than 50 times in the period 1310-1512 (Lind, 1905-1931 *s.n.*). Both the Viking Age Swedes and the Viking Age and medieval Norwegians presumably bore it with pride.

The appellative *víkingr* is also found in runic inscriptions, though less commonly than the name, and also in skaldic verse. In three Viking Age runic inscriptions and 13 skaldic stanzas from the 10th-11th century (Jesch, 2001: 49-54) the appellative always appears in the plural. There are four instances in 12th-century verse, three of them in the plural (Gade, 2009: 399, 484-485, 525-526, 635). This plural usage suggests a rather different connotation than the personal name and indeed the skaldic usage is commonly pejorative, referring to the opponents of the hero being celebrated, as is observable in the 10th and 11th centuries, and dominant in the 12th- and early 13th-century examples (Whaley, 2012: 905-906; Jesch, 2014: 58). However, an incipient romanticisation of a singular *víkingr* is observable in the Orcadian bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson's *Jómsvíkingadrápa* (Whaley, 2012: 977-978). There are no examples of the personal name in skaldic verse.





*Inscription no. 1, Maeshowe, Orkney*  
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A personal name seems likely in Maeshowe, given that its 33 inscriptions contain 17 masculine names, not including those that form patronymics (Barnes, 1994: nos 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 28 and 29). There are also up to seven instances of feminine personal names (Barnes, 1994: nos 9, 10, 21, 23, 24, 30 and 32; these are only occasionally mentioned here since they occur in rather different contexts). Syntactically, the vast majority of these names occur as the subject of a verb, but three of the 17 masculine names (Barnes, 1994: nos 3, 9, 29) occur without any syntactical context. Where the personal names do govern a verb, the most common context is that of carving runes, especially the formulaic statement that *NN reist*, or *NN reist rúnar*, or *NN reist rúnar þessar* (Barnes, 1994: nos 2, 5, 7, 10, 12, 16, 17, 18 and 19; also with a missing name in 15 and a feminine name in 24). A further three inscriptions (Barnes, 1994: nos 8, 13, 20) say the same but with slightly different wording. In one inscription (Barnes, 1994: no. 20) the subject of the verb *reist* is an appellative (*maðr*) rather than a name. However, while carving is the activity most commonly associated with a name, two of the inscriptions consist of a name governing a verb that refers to other activities:

*Þorný sarð.*

Þorný (f.) fucked. (Barnes, 1994: no. 10)

*Hákon einn bar fé ýr haugi þessum.*

Hákon alone carried treasure from this mound. (Barnes, 1994: no. 28)

In a further six inscriptions, the male subjects of the main verb are not named, but rather referred to using pronouns (*þeir*, *sá*), a nominalised adjective (*fáir*) or appellatives (*Jórsalamenn*, *synir*, *Jórsalafarar*, *jarl*; Barnes, 1994: nos 4, 8, 14, 23, 24, 27).

It might be concluded from this that Maeshowe's *Vikingr/víkingr* is less likely to be a name, because names occur overwhelmingly in contexts referring to the carving of runes, while they are less often used in inscriptions referring to other actions. On this pattern, *víkingr* is most likely an appellative. However, since names could occur in sentences referring to other actions, this possibility cannot be ruled out.

Because the central part of the inscription is missing, the context of Maeshowe's *víkingr/Víkingr* is obscure, although it is likely that it is the subject of *þá kom undir hér til* ("then came underneath to this place"). The use of *þá* suggests a sequence of events, with a verb in the now-lost portion explaining what he did before entering. This would parallel some other Maeshowe inscriptions, many of which refer to the breaking and entering of the mound and the presence or otherwise there of treasure:

*Þat man satt, er ek segi, at fé var fært á brott. Þrim nóttum var fé brott fært, heldr en þeir bryti haug þenna.*

That will be true which I say, that treasure was carried away. Treasure was carried away three nights before they broke this mound. (Barnes, 1994: no. 4)

*... ga er mér sagt at fé er hér folgit ærit vel. Segja fáir sem Oddr Orkasonr sagði á rúnum þeim er hann reist.*

... [adverb?] is told to me that treasure is hidden here well enough. Few say as Oddr Orkasonr said in those runes which he carved. (Barnes, 1994: no. 8)

*Jórsalamenn brutu haug þenna.*

Jerusalem men [i.e., crusaders] broke this mound. (Barnes, 1994: no. 14)

*Jórsalafarar brutu Orkhaug. Hlíf, matselja jarls, reist.*

Jerusalem-travellers [i.e., crusaders] broke Orkhaugr. Hlíf, the Earl's houskeeper, carved. (Barnes, 1994: no. 24)

*Útnorðr er fé folgit mikit.*

In the north-west great treasure is hidden. (Barnes, 1994: no. 25)

*Þat var löngu, er hér var fé folgit mikit.*

It was long ago that great treasure was hidden here. (Barnes, 1994: no. 26)

*Sæll er sá, er finna má þann auð hinn mikla.*

Happy is he who can find the great wealth. (Barnes, 1994: no. 27)

Since it is highly unlikely that there ever was any treasure in Maeshowe, these references should be viewed as fictional, even if the rune carvers had actually broken into the mound. Other presumably fictional allusions include to the sons of Loðbrók, and Gaukr Trandilsson (Barnes, 1994: nos 20 and 23) who appear to be characters from Old Norse literature.

But there are other statements which seem to be more realistic accounts of goings-on in the mound:

*Ingibjörg, hin fagra ekkja. Mörg kona hefir farit lút inn hér. Mikill ofláti. Erlingr.*

Ingibjörg, the fair widow. Many a woman has gone stooping in here. A great show-off. Erlingr. (Barnes, 1994: no. 9)

*Þorný sarð. Helgi reist.*

Þorný fucked. Helgi carved. (Barnes, 1994: no. 10)

These presumably represent actual encounters of the rune-carvers Erlingr and Helgi. *Orkneyinga saga* (ch. 93) relates that Earl Haraldr and his men took shelter in Maeshowe during winter storms and they are unlikely to have been the only ones to have been in there, once it had been broken into.

Víkingr/*víkingr* could fit either of these patterns. On the one hand entering a mound in search of treasure is a suitable thing for a fictional *víkingr* to do. On the other hand, Víkingr could have been a real person who entered the mound to take shelter or with some particular activities in mind. If he was a real person, the onomastic evidence suggests that he was a western Norwegian, one of the followers of Earl Rognvaldr. If he was fictional then there must have been a story told about him which is, unfortunately, now lost. Although it is impossible to decide between these



explanations, I am inclined to the view that Maeshowe's Víkingr was a real person of that name who entered the mound for reasons unknown.

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