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THE CORPUS OF OLD NORSE METRICAL TEXTS
IN RUNES FROM BERGEN
(SUMMARY)

During the thirteen years of archaeological excavations following the 1955 conflagration at Bryggen (the Wharf) in Bergen well over 550 runic inscriptions were brought to light; subsequent excavations of more limited character elsewhere at Bryggen have expanded the corpus to nearly 650 (for overviews of the material see Aslak Liestøl's article in Viking 27 [1963] and Karin Fjellhammer Seim's in The Bryggen Papers, Supplementary series No 2 [1988]). Prior to these digs only nine medieval inscriptions were recorded from Bergen, and only some 500 from all of Norway. The great majority of the previously known inscriptions were associated with churches, usually carved or scratched as graffiti into their woodwork, or hewn or cut on gravestones. The inscriptions from Bryggen were overwhelming evidence of a robust runic tradition in the urban environment during the high and late Middle Ages in Norway, and new insights were gained especially into the fields of trade and commerce (the area to which over 20% of the inscriptions belong), Latin knowledge (i.a. goliardic verse and ecclesiastical texts), and everyday life (personal relationships, love and eroticism, religion and magic). Quite exciting was the discovery of Old Norse poetry, both Eddic and skaldic verse, the existence of which refuted the standard assumption that these genres had all but disappeared from Norway after the 11th century, except as practiced by Icelandic skalds at the court. Some of these metrical texts illustrate the copying of verse, others must be original records and represent personal, occasional poetry; many might be classified as love lyrics.

The late Aslak Liestøl, curator of the Runic Archives at the University Museum of National Antiquities in Oslo, whose task and good fortune it was to study the inscriptions, corresponded with

various colleagues and published, in Maal og Minne 1962, together with Wolfgang Krause and Jón Helgason, the first complete skaldic strophe from Bryggen; various researchers' interpretations of yet another verse were published in the same journal in 1964. In his overview in Viking (pp. 22-50) Liestøl presented, in a somewhat popular form, many of the metrical texts in runes from Bryggen. This presentation, restructured and reworked so as to encompass suggestions evoked by the earlier overview, was published in Icelandic translation in Skirnir 1965 (with tracings of all included inscriptions). Since then the poetic texts have received little scholarly attention. In Maal og Minne 1984 Karin Fjellhammer Seim dealt with one word in the strophe interpreted by various scholars in Maal og Minne 1964, and in Maal og Minne 1986 she published a verse and identified it as a quotation from Haraldr Harðráði's Gamanvisur. In an article in the Festskrift til Alfred Jakobsen (1987), Jonna Louis-Jensen improved on the interpretation of one of the half-strophes in Liestøl's overview in Viking (the same improvements were presented in Skirnir 1965).

The corpus of metrical texts in medieval runes in Norway is not large. Magnus Olsen considered some 20 of the 602 inscriptions published in Norges Innskrifter med de yngre Runer (=NIyR) to be at least partially in verse or approximations of verse (see Index 4 Sprog s.v. Ordkunst [V:293]; some of these are from the Viking Age). Of the c. 175 urban inscriptions from Oslo, Tønsberg and Trondheim discovered since the publication of the fifth volume of the corpus edition, NIyR, very few encompass verse, a notable example being A39 from Tønsberg, which contains an occasional strophe in Eddic meter with erotic content (see Kevin Gosling's forthcoming article). (The texts not yet published in the corpus edition are in the following referred to by their registration numbers in the Runic Archives at the University Museum of National Antiquities in Oslo; B in a signature indicates Bryggen/Bergen, A any other part of the country.) The alliterative inscription A104 from the Old Church in Bø, Telemark, is more a riddle than a poem (see James E. Knirk, "Runeinnskriftene i Bø gamle kyrkje," s. 77-80). The rock-face inscription from Esøya, A232, has been interpreted as an occasional verse in Eddic meter (see Jan Ragnar Hagland, "Ljóðaháttur og landlege").

On a list in the Runic Archives Liestøl registered 29 of the texts from Bryggen as metrical. Of these thirteen were presented in the overview in Viking and twelve in the article in Skirnir; a

total of fifteen were published. Those in Latin on this list appeared in the first fascicle of *NiYR* VI (1980): N603, N604, and N605. (An inscription subsequently identified as the beginning of a Latin hexameter has been published preliminarily by Helge Dyvik in *The Bryggen Papers, Supplementary series No 2*, p. 6.) In notes in the Runic Archives, Liestøl identified additional inscriptions as possibly poetic, and I have similarly identified some further texts. The fragmentary condition of a number of the inscriptions complicates in many instances the determination of their metrical nature. Liestøl's registration includes, however, definite skaldic verses as yet unpublished, for example B548:

ǫlber·ek·ypiseliu·áragja[---
sekferbapuaerþaygr[---
:uilldak:grinnis:gillidi:farþnn[---
núhauaskaldafstáidare[---

An even longer fragment is preserved in B320:

---]þ:boþi:raf:skirru:ok:sotrif:mep:sorh:nu:?a[---
---]ka??:til:hugannar:en:huseot:til:fahnab[---
---]o????r????p??:????k:hafi:opallast:[---
---]???:ir:ek:huhpa:mer:til:fahnabbar:um:hial[---

An example of a line possibly from a skaldic poem is B57: eikils ytj blokum. Examples of end-rhyme are also registered, for instance B535: ---]??aknek:sahia:per:sompunant:reyrna:af:mer:atek:skal:una:per:enku:usrenmer:u[---, although not all of these need be poetic (e.g. B403: gup:er:alt:ma:blese:sigurp:prest:er:mek:a). The majority of the inscriptions were originally read and transcribed by Liestøl. After the technical conservation of the runic objects from Bryggen in the 1980s, a number of the inscriptions may actually have become easier to read.

This paper has two aims: 1) to entice other scholars to work with the metrical texts in runes from Bryggen, and 2) to provide the scientific basis for such research. I have not yet, at the time of the writing of this summary, had the opportunity to control the readings in the Runic Archives with the objects themselves at Bryggens Museum in Bergen. Diplomatic transcriptions of the entire metrical corpus plus tracings of all inscriptions for which illustrations have not previously been published will constitute the bulk of the paper. Possible interpretations will also be suggested, including the presentation of information from some of Liestøl's working notes. Revised archaeological datings based on correlations carried out in the 1980s will be cited.

I hope the few transliterations presented above have been sufficient to whet the scholarly appetite.

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