· 3 ·

Tradition and Innovation: the Function of Ambiguity in the Three Scandinavian Runic Conversion Monuments

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Det ruller i Horizontens Himmel
og sagtelig skielver Hav og Jord.
De gamle Guders brogede Vrimmel
forsvinder, og kommer ej meer til Nord.
Istedet for Lundens ærværdige Minder
man idel Kirker og Klostere finder.
Kun hist og her
man fiern og nær
en Höi og en opreist Kampesteen skuer,
som minder om Oldtidens slukte Luer.

From 'Hakon Jarls Död, Eller Christendommens Indførsel i Norge' by Adam Oehlenschläger (1803)[1]

In the following, we will observe not only one *opreist Kampesteen* but as many as three stone monuments from Scandinavian

1. From: Adam Oehlenschläger: *Digte*, Fr. Brummers Forlag, Kbh. 1803: 16–22.

antiquity: Harald's stone at Jelling, Denmark (DR 42)[2]; the Frösö stone in Jämtland, Northern Sweden (J 66); and the stone on the island of Kuli, Norway (N 449). What justifies a grouping and discussion of these three runic stones is not only the happenstance that the locations of these runic monuments are not far from where respectively the recipient, the wife of the recipient, and the contributor to this volume come from, but also the content of the inscriptions on the monuments. All three refer to an official act of conversion to Christianity – and with it the religious, cultural, and legal inclusion of Scandinavia into a common-European civilisation. Both the missionary stage that led up to the conversion and the practical implementation of the legal decision were of course lengthy processes, but a formal act of conversion that the three stones refer to will have been momentous in the progression towards a religious shift. In addition to being the only contemporary Scandinavian written evidence for acts of conversion, the three runic stones are also the first Scandinavian sources of the names of the young nations 'Denmark'[3] and 'Norway', and the region 'Jämtland' in today's Sweden.

The attention in this piece, however, will for once not be on linguistic aspects of the inscriptions, and neither will it be on the historical implications of the inscriptions. The following will rather home in on how the three monuments functioned as a medium of communication in their respective milieus, and how the message conveyed can be regarded as ambiguous in relation to tradition and to the new world view they announce. After a brief demonstration of how the transition to a new belief system could be experienced at an individual level, the

2. Signum in *Scandinavian Runic-text Database* 2020.

3. 'Denmark' is first mentioned on Jelling 1, the stone erected by Gorm c. AD 958, before the name is repeated on Jelling 2, the stone raised by his son Haraldr.

focus will be on how religious syncretism and cultural blending and ambiguity can be observed in the inscriptions and artistic expressions of the three monuments.

The personal dilemma

According to Widukind's account[4] the cleric Poppo, who AD 963–65 baptised King Haraldr, did not deny the existence of the heathen gods that the Danes believed in, but they existed in his opinion in the form of demons. Syncretistic ideas of this kind, where elements of two competing belief systems are present, are witnessed also in individuals other than Poppo. Even royals who had been baptised sometimes struggled to follow the straight and narrow path, and some even abandoned their new religious belief and went apostate. King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, who was brought up a Christian in the English court before he claimed the Norwegian crown and began missioning c. AD 930, seems to have at least partly lapsed from his Christian faith and was buried in a half-heathen and half-Christian manner.

A window to how the individual may have experienced the belief change is passed on to us in an unusually personal account by the contemporary skald Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld. The Icelandic poet first serves the pagan Earl Hákon of Hlaðir, and then the Christian King Óláfr Tryggvason, and he converts to Christianity at the behest of Óláfr. The switch of religious allegiance is the theme of his so-called 'Conversion Verses'.[5] The religious oscillation in these verses is commonly seen as showing a progression from paganism through to gradual acceptance of Christianity,[6] but they can just as well be read as

4. Widukind, Book 3: 65.
5. *Hallfreðar saga*: 46–50.
6. See for example Whaley 2003: 237.

much more unstructured and almost desperate utterances from a man in religious agony; a man who is in a liminal position between two spiritual camps.[7] The last of the 'Conversion Verses' may illustrate how Hallfreðr negotiates the pagan and the Christian worlds:

> *Sás með Sygna ræsi*
> *siðr, at blót eru kviðjuð;*
> *verðum flest at forðask*
> *fornhaldin skǫp norna;*
> *láta allir ýtar*
> *Óðins blót fyr róða;*
> *verðk ok neyddr frá Njarðar*
> *niðjum Krist at biðja.*
>
> That is the custom of the chief of the people of Sogn, that sacrifices are forbidden; we must shun most of the long-held decrees of the norns. All men throw Óðinn's sacrifices to the winds, and I am forced away from Njǫrðr's kinsmen to pray to Christ.[8]

The verse portraits a man who reluctantly feels he must follow what he sees as inevitable. There is no religious conviction behind his choice to give up the old gods, just a resigned capitulation to the changing times, to what everyone else does, and to the shifting politics of power.

Hallfreðr's personal account gives us an insight into the mental quandary at least some will have felt during the conversion. What about those who raised the conversion stones? We know that King Haraldr was baptised just before he raised the

7. Goeres 2011.
8. The translation is from Goeres 2011: 58.

stone in honour of his heathen father and (probably) Christian mother. We will never know his inner feelings, but we may be permitted to see Haraldr behind some of the choices made concerning the monument in honour of his parents. What we will see of Haraldr in the following is not someone in inner torment but rather someone proud of who he is and where he comes from, and someone willing to take on anything new only if what is new can be expressed within a context he recognises. His choice to raise the monument at Jelling is significant, and we will see that the choice of sites for his own monument, as well as the other two conversion stones, may indicate concession or adaptation between two cultures and belief systems.

Let us now present the three monuments and the locations they are placed in before we focus on some particular aspects of the inscriptions and the ornamentation in our hunt for ambivalence or compromise. The general impression of the three places – Jelling, Kuli, and Frösö – is that they are all locations associated with pagan cultic activities. All of them show an exceptional concentration of archaeological remains of pre-Christian burials or ritual constructions.

Jelling

The earliest, and in all respects most impressive, is the Jelling monument. Located in central, north-east Jutland, the two runestones at Jelling are part of a tenth-century royal monument from the reigns of King Gormr ('Gorm the Old') and his son, Haraldr ('Harald Bluetooth'). The complex – the origin of which is likely to pre-date this era – consists of two large mounds: the smaller runic stone created c. AD 958 under King Gormr (Jelling 1) and the large runic stone dating to the reign of his son, Haraldr (Jelling 2), raised AD 963–65. A stone church

now stands on the site of earlier wooden churches. Recent excavations have established evidence of a c. 360-metre-long ship setting and a palisade surrounding the whole monument. The sheer scale of the complex is striking even today, and the ambitious royal power behind the monument is evident.

Excavations in the 1970s established the likelihood that Gormr was first interred in the northern of the large mounds at Jelling and that he was later reburied by the altar of the first wooden church built next to the mound.[9] It is further likely that this *translatio* was done by his newly baptised son, Haraldr, but we take note that Haraldr did not attempt to eliminate the mounds. The mounds may have been left in respect as part of a memorial site, but now with a church at the centre of the complex.

In addition to the runes that run over the three faces of Jelling 2 (A, B, C), the large boulder is decorated with elaborate ornamentations. In transliteration, the inscription runs as follows (with letters in parenthesis indicating runes where the reading is uncertain):[10]

A **: haraltr : kunukʀ : baþ : kaurua ¶ kubl : þausi : aft : kurm faþur sin ¶ auk aft : þourui : muþur : sina : sa ¶ haraltr (:) ias : soʀ · uan · tanmaurk**

B **ala · auk · nuruiak**

C **(·) auk t(a)ni (k)(a)(r)(þ)(i) kristno**

The text reads as follows in English:

9. Pedersen 2017: 7–8.

10. The transliterations and translations of the three inscriptions are from *Scandinavian Runic-text Database* 2020.

A King Haraldr ordered these monuments made in memory of Gormr, his father, and in memory of Þyrvé, his mother; that Haraldr who won for himself all of Denmark

B and Norway

C and made the Danes Christian.

Kuli

The runic stone on the island of Kuli is humbler in all respects. The monument consists of a single stone, erected on the island of Kuli, Smøla in Nordmøre. The almost-two-metre-tall, slender, and four-sided slab carries a hollowed-in cross on one of the broad sides and a runic inscription in two vertical lines on one of the narrow sides. Each line begins with a small cross, and the text is read from the bottom up. Both lines go all the way up to the top edge of the stone. The stone was shortened in modern time, leaving the possibility that the text may have been longer. On linguistic grounds, the stone is dated to the very beginning of the millennium, and it is likely to refer to a formal acceptance of the Christian faith during the reign of King Óláfr Tryggvason (AD 995–1000).[11] In transliteration, the established reading of the inscription (which we will return to) runs as follows:

þurir : auk : hal(u)arþr : rai(s)(t)(u) · stain : þins(i) · aft u(l) f(l)iu(t) […] ¶
tualf · uintr · ha(f)(þ)i : (k)r(i)(s)(t)(i)(n)·(t)umr : (u)iri(t) · (i) n(u)riki […]

11. Kruse 2021a: 26–28.

Figure 1: The author showing the cross on the broad side of a replica of the original runic stone at Kuli.
Photo: Svein Olav Kruse.

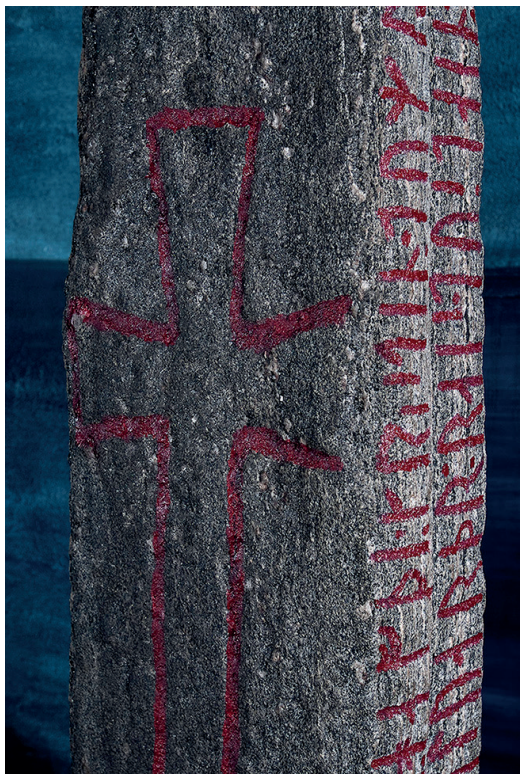

Figure 2: The middle part of the Kuli stone.
Photo: Åge Hojem/NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet.

In English this will read as follows:

> Þórir and Hallvarðr raised this stone in memory of Ulfljótr […]

Christianity had been twelve winters in Norway […] There is a large number of burial mounds and cairns on the island of Kuli, most of them dating to the older Iron Age. The likelihood of ritual activity is suggested by a stone setting with a central, white, phallus-shaped stone.[12] Not far from Kuli is *Nerdvika*, in 1559 written 'Neruigh', from **Njarðarvík*, containing the name of the god *Njǫrðr*, associated with seafaring and with fertility. Bergljot Solberg[13] has suggested a pattern where there is a link between stone phalluses and the cult around *Njǫrðr*.

The neighbouring island of Edøy must be seen in connection with Kuli through both proximity and ownership. Edøy also has unusually many Iron Age finds, including a star-shaped stone setting, which has been associated with cultic activities, possibly around Yggdrasill.[14] There are relatively fewer mounds dating to the Viking Age, but they are larger and would have been more dominant in the landscape. In 2019, a ship of c. 17 m and preliminarily dated to the Viking Age was found on Edøy, close to one of the earliest churches in the region. The important location of Kuli and Edøy – at the beginning of the protected sailing course to the north and a dangerous stretch of open sea to the south – will have been of significant motivation behind the many finds on the islands, and probably also for the raising of the runic stone.[15]

12. Ellingsen 2021.
13. Solberg 2001.
14. Orten Lie 2014.
15. Kruse 2020.

Frösö

The stone from Frösö is the only runic stone in Sweden that mentions the christening of an area, in this case Jämtland. The stone is dated from around AD 1050. In transliteration the text can be read as follows:

> **austmoþ[(r)] kuþfastaʀ sun ‘ lit ra(i)[(s)]… …(-)[(n)] (þ)(i) no auk| |kirua bru þisa| |auk h[on] [li](t) kristno eo(t)alont (o)sbiurn kirþi bru (t)riun rai(s)t auk (t)sain runoʀ þisaʀ**

And in English:

> Austmaðr, Guðfastr’s son, had this stone raised and this bridge made and he had Jamtaland Christianized. Ásbjǫrn made the bridge, Trjónn and Steinn carved these runes.

The inscription is on the broad face of the stone and runs inside a zoomorphic band made up of a stylised serpent biting its own tail. Some of the text spills over outside the serpent. There is a cross in the middle of the upper part of the stone. The design of the stone is typical for Central Swedish runestones of the eleventh century. This is significant because Jämtland was a Norwegian province in the Viking Age, while the layout of the inscription and the cross point to a Christian influence from Sweden and not from Norway, as one would have expected.[16]

16. Some have argued that the name of the commissioner of the monument, *Austmaðr* (‘the man from the east’) can also be seen as a Swedish indication, but this is a personal name, given by birth, and not a byname, given in his lifetime, and can therefore hardly be carried by a man who has come from Sweden to Jämtland.

The onomastic surroundings to the stone are noteworthy. The name *Frösö*, in 1263 written 'Fræseyiar', means 'the island of *Frö/Frey*', the god of fertility. To the south-west is another large island called *Norderön*, in 1438 written 'Nærdrø', containing the name of the god *Njǫrðr*,[17] and there is a small island in the middle of the lake, Åsö, with the likely meaning 'god's island'. The place-name element *hov* appears five times around the lake, out of thirty-five such named locations in the whole of Sweden. Place-names with *hov* are usually associated with cultic locations, and possibly large halls with religious functions.[18] Additional cultic names appear in the vicinity: *Vi* ('sacred place'), *Ullvi* (with the name of the god *Ullr),* and *Odensala* (with the god's name *Oðinn)*. This exceptional concentration of cultic names complements the archaeological findings on Frösö, as we will see later.

Figure 3: The Frösö stone.

17. *Svenskt ortnamnslexikon* 2003: 223.
18. Ibid.: 242–243.

Runes announcing Christianity

The three stone monuments proclaim the arrival of Christianity in the medium of runes. It is not an obvious choice. It is conceivable to imagine that this could have been the moment in Scandinavian history where Latin scripture started to be used in such contexts, for the Christian culture was closely linked to the Latin writing system, and Latin scripture was already used by some in the Scandinavian elite at the time. The first coins made for Northumbrian Viking chieftains around AD 900 made use of Latin script. One name is Latinised: 'Siefredus' (*Sigfriðr*), and the coins are equipped with Latin phrases like 'Dominus Deus Rex'. They have clearly been issued in a Christian milieu, following an Anglo-Saxon pattern, and the first coins issued in Scandinavia were also based on English coinage. Around AD 995 the two kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Sweyn Haraldsson (Forkbeard) both made use of the same Anglo-Saxon moneyer, Godwine, to issue the first Norwegian and Danish coins.

The use of Latin script on coins was as unquestioned as the use of Latin script on parchment, which, in the form of minuscules had been successfully standardised and utilised under the Carolingian revival, while on the British Isles, the insular variant of Latin scripture was still preferred in the tenth century for manuscripts in the vernacular. The choice of runes for the stone monuments, however, will have been based on a long-standing Scandinavian tradition where runes had been used on raised stones. In this sense, the format of the medium of the raised stone will have been more important than the message: the announcement of the arrival of Christianity.

Pragmatically, the choice of runes gives away the intended audience of the message. While the exact rate of literacy is up for debate, runes will of course have been the most familiar writing

system in Scandinavia at the time. While the runemasters themselves may have had contact with a learned Christian milieu (as argued below), their intentional readers were not from such circles but rather from the local population. The seminal choice to make use of the traditional Scandinavian writing system introduces a chapter in the history of western European Christianity where runes, and not only Latin scripture, could be used in sacral contexts; a chapter that culminates in the eleventh century with hundreds of Swedish runestones with a Christian content.

The inscriptions

The runic inscriptions on Jelling 2, Kuli, and Frösö are traditional in so far as they are commemorative stones, containing the expected raiser formula 'NN raised this stone after MM'.[19] We will have known about King Haraldr from other sources than his runestone, but on the Kuli stone, three named individuals, otherwise surely forgotten, step forward: *Þórir*, *Hallvarðr,* and *Ulfljót*,[20] and on the Frösö stone we meet an unusually long list of personal names: *Austmaðr*, *Guðfast*, *Ásbjǫrn*, *Trjónn*, and *Steinn*, providing us with an invaluable impression of naming habits at the time. In this context, we take note of the fact that pagan names, even names that directly refer to heathen cult, such as *Guðfast* ('firm believer of (heathen) god') and Ásbjǫrn

19. An unusual aspect of Jelling 2 is the commemoration of both parents, and the Frösö stone exceptionally does not commemorate a deceased person.
20. The last name, *Ulfljót*, is carved at the end of the line and is very worn and difficult to read. After Liestøl first proposed the reading *Ulfljót* (Liestøl 1957), many who have written about the inscription have avoided transliterating the name because they have found the reading too unreliable. A new reading of the inscription with the use of new visualisation techniques has confirmed Liestøl's reading to be the most probable and relatively secure (Kleivane 2021: 156).

('(heathen) god + bear'), seem not to be regarded as a problem worth playing down in a Christian context. It shall in fact take hundreds of years yet before Christian personal names dominate over the traditional Scandinavian names.

The Frösö stone is one of relatively few that is not raised in memory of a deceased person. The inscription does, however, contain the expected phrase with the name of the person who raised the stone. What is unusual with our three stones is that they in addition to the raiser formula provide extra information. In the case of the Jelling stone, the addition comes in the form of a long relative clause, supplying exactitude about Haraldr: 'that Haraldr who won for himself all of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian'. It is the only Danish runic inscription to contain self-praise of the monument's commissioner,[21] a self-confident young king listing his hitherto achievements.

Instead of incorporating the relative sentence immediately after the name *Haraldr*, the clause comes at the end, almost as an afterthought. We can of course excuse the grammatically slightly awkward syntax by the lack of any precedents for this kind of solipsistic formulation,[22] but there is clearly planning behind the phrasing, for the inscription looks to be arranged to follow the layout of the decorations of the three faces of the monument. We notice that the phrase *Danmork* is on the main face of the stone, while (*alla) ok Norwæg* comes on a separate side, making it possible for Haraldr to claim that he had won the whole of Denmark but not necessarily all of Norway.[23] As already pointed to, the final phrase 'and made the Danes Christian' is cleverly arranged

21. Nielsen 1974: 164.
22. Jesch 2013: 13.
23. This reflects the reality that certainly Vík (the area around the Oslo Fjord) was under Harald's control at the time. The inscription probably counts Harald's formal overlordship over Earl Hákon Sigurðsson, who was the *de facto* ruler over Norway (Kruse 2021b).

on the third face of the stone under the victorious Christ figure, completing the innovative and successful cooperation between the runemaster and the decorative artist – and perhaps with the involvement of the commissioner himself, Haraldr.

The text on most runestones from Denmark before Jelling 2 is arranged vertically, like Jelling 1, and commonly the lines run *boustrophedon*, i.e. 'as the ox turns in ploughing'.[24] The inscription on Jelling 2 runs horizontally, and each line starts from the left. This, and the unusually long text on the first face of the stone have understandably made scholars[25] suggest manuscripts or books as the inspiration for the arrangement and the length of the text. An evident part of the argument is that the ornamentation on the stone reflects the medieval book illuminations, as already mentioned.

The text on the Kuli stone is much shorter, and a book or manuscript inspiration behind the inscription is far from evident. Recently, however, it has been argued that the inscription's provision of a precise number of years since the introduction of Christianity is so unique and unexpected in the runic corpus that the inspiration may come from Christian manuscripts. Elise Kleivane[26] makes the point that the runemaster at Kuli is likely to have had a foot in the learned literary tradition using Latin script on parchment that came to Norway with English missionaries in the tenth century. One may add that it would not be surprising if the runemaster[27] had also come into contact with annals or chronicles, where it was customary to first state a point of reference according to the death of a bishop or a king. If this is a correct assumption, it can have a consequence for how the inscription should be read.

24. Although this is not the case on Jelling 1.
25. E.g. Roesdahl 1999.
26. Kleivane 2021: 161–165.
27. Certain features in the runemaster's Old Norse may be seen as interference from Old English (Kleivane 2021: 166).

The reading of the inscription was established by Aslak Liestøl.[28] He set up the following line arrangement:

A line: *Þórir ok Hallvarðr reistu stein þenna ept Ulfljót* […]

B line: *Tolf vetr hafði kristindómr verit í Nóregi…*

Liestøl arranged the two lines in the inscription into A and B in a manner that has since become the 'official' reading, where line A – meant to be read first, according to Liestøl – actually comes *under* line B in the actual inscription when read horizontally. Following Liestøl, the reader first identifies those who raised the stone and the person in whose memory the stone is raised before we are told when the monument was created.

Liestøl could lean on a solid tradition within runic inscriptions for this arrangement of the lines. The memorial aspect in the raiser formula, which typically runs 'NN raised this stone after MM', is a common feature in all areas where Viking Age runestones are found,[29] while an indication of time is highly unusual. From this reasoning it is fair to assume that Liestøl found that the important message in the Kuli inscription intentionally will have been the raiser formula in what he called line A, and that the additional information in line B was a tangential extra that should be read at the end. If, however, it is correct that the idea to inform about the time of the event originates in a learned or annalistic practice, it is of importance to notice that in this tradition, the custom is to *first* inform about the time. Following this argument, the reading of the Kuli inscription should first state the time and then who did what. This reading will respect the writing practice that may be the inspiration

28. Liestøl 1957: 283.
29. Barnes 2012: 68.

behind the formulation both when it comes to the arrangement of information and the established reading of manuscripts where the scripture is always read from the top down and from left to right. Consequently, the reading should run (in translation):

> Christianity had been twelve winters in Norway […]
>
> Þórir and Hallvarðr raised this stone in memory of Ulfljótr […]

In sum, when analysing the Kuli inscription, we ought to give concession to the possibility that a writing tradition other than the runic lies behind the unusual information about time, and if so, we should allow for a reading of the inscription that pays respect to the reading practice in this tradition.

The Frösö stone is the most northerly runestone in Sweden and the only one found in Jämtland. The inscription informs us that in addition to letting the stone be raised and converting Jämtland, *Austmaðr* also let a bridge be built, and that *Ásbjǫrn* built the bridge. From this we read that while the latter was behind the actual building of the bridge, *Austmaðr* – clearly a chieftain with the contacts and power to convert a whole district, if we are to believe his own words – was initiating and probably financing the building of the bridge.[30]

This is not the place to discuss the likelihood of a bridge actually having been built from where the stone was placed, across the sound from the island over to the mainland – a distance close to 300 metres. More relevant here, it is worth noting that the

30. A wooden construction found close to the Kuli monument was long interpreted as a bridge but is now categorised as an unspecified structure. The bridge at Ravning Enge is presumably built by Harald Bluetooth but is not mentioned on the Jelling 2 inscription. Neither structures are considered in this article.

inscription mentions the completion of the bridge twice, thus giving it more prominence than the christening of Jämtland. In this way too, the Frösö stone links up with Central Swedish stones where bridgebuilding is a major topic in the commemorative inscriptions. A high percentage of runestones are located close to a bridge or a crossing, and of the seventy-six stones in Uppland and Södermanland with the word 'bridge', more than half have a cross.[31] The point has been made that on quite a few of these stones there is even a link between the cross and certain words in the inscription, where the arms of the cross point either to the name of the deceased or to the word 'bridge', and in that way link the person or the bridge to Christianity.[32] In the case of the Frösö stone, the left arm of the cross points to one of the two times 'bridge' is mentioned.

In both Norse pagan belief and in Christian cosmology, the bridge takes on the symbolic role as the liminal place between the living and the dead, and also the stage the traveller is in between departure and arrival. Both are dangerous stages, and bridges can help the transition. Many Scandinavian deposits of valuables and weapons by locations involving crossings confirm the importance given to such locations,[33] as do medieval Old Norse texts where we hear about *Gjallarbrú*, the bridge over to the world of the dead, and *Bifrost*, the bridge to the world of the gods, and in medieval Christian iconography, the bridge to Paradise becomes a frequent motif. In a situation where the bridge was a familiar symbol with a similar meaning in both pagan and Christian belief systems, it could be implied as a useful image that could help the transformation from the old to the new cosmology.

31. Lund 2005: 121.
32. Ibid.: 122.
33. Ibid.: 109–117.

The Kuli stone: a recycled *bautastein*?

A monument can have had changing functions over time, and the Kuli stone may help to illustrate this point, for there is good reason to believe that the runestone on Kuli is a recycled raised stone.

Raised stones without inscriptions are in Norwegian referred to as *bautastein*. They are notoriously difficult to date, but the practice is likely to pre-date raised stones with runic inscriptions, and they may run as a parallel practice. A stone with a similar shape and geology to the stone on Kuli was discovered in the graveyard by the early medieval church on the neighbouring island Edøy,[34] and in the walls of the church are smaller pieces – possibly broken-up larger stones – with the same geological signature; a type of stone which is not local and is likely to have been transported over to the island.[35] There is a good chance that the runestone on Kuli will once have been a *bautastein*, and possibly one of several on the islands of Edøy and Kuli.

The prominent placement of many such scripture-less stones as part of grave structures and on top of burial mounds gives reason to believe that at least some will have had a commemorative function after a person or an event. A raised stone, however, is all that is left of a process of communication where, in most cases, we will never know the sender, the meaning of the message, and the intended receiver. As long as there is no inscription to communicate the purpose of the erected stone, its function will vanish with the memory of the person or event it was meant to pay tribute to. If a commemorative inscription is added to a standing stone, it secures at least the intention of the stone, although we are of course still left to interpret the complexity of the message.

34. This stone is now put up by the entrance of Edøen Mekaniske Verksted.
35. Heldal 2021: 129–132.

A monument can synchronically carry diverse messages to different but overlapping social layers. In the socially top-down type of conversion that took place in Scandinavia – as everywhere else – the newly Christened aristocracy will have seen the three monuments as externalised visual markers of their religious adherence, while locals – maybe still in a hiatus between beliefs – may have associated both the use of a standing stone and the use of runes with tradition and stability; a fact that will have lessened the impact of the message proclaiming a break with tradition.

During the tenth century, there was a tendency that many large burial mounds in the central Vestland region were no longer adorned with a bautastein but rather with a high stone cross, presumably with the intention to transform the pagan burial place of ancestors into a Christian site. In a wider social context, it is reasonable to interpret the action as dual communication. While signalling to the local population the upkeep of practice and ritual around the mound and the stone, the aristocracy could at the same time announce to their peers their novel faith by introducing the new symbol of the cross within the old routines.

Jelling 2 and the missing cross

The grand layout of the Jelling complex itself may be inspired from Frankish and German rulers' demonstration of authority through monumental architecture,[36] and the immediate idea behind the big beast on face B may have been specific works by German goldsmiths.[37] In the main, however, the decoration on Jelling 2 shows inspiration from illuminated manuscripts from the ninth and tenth centuries. This is far from surprising

36. Pedersen 2012: 76–78.
37. Wamers 2000: 135–142.

in the light of Harald's own conversion, which came as a result of political pressure and missioning from the German Empire.

Two broadsides of Jelling 2 are dominated by skilful decorations. The main motives on the two faces are framed with connecting bands – an indication that the intention is to view the two pictures in connection with each other. Following the inscription that runs over the three sides of the stone and dominate Face A, we then on Face B see the figure of a lion-like beast: scary, with open mouth, fighting a zoomorphic snake-like creation, and on the subsequent Face C is a character with a halo, as a type familiar on icons of holy persons and arranged in the traditional Christ-on-the-cross position with arms stretched out. Naturally, the figure is assumed to be a depiction of Christ, and if so the oldest in Scandinavia.

Figure 4: Drawing of face B and C of Jelling 2 by Ida Schouw Andreasen, Benni Schouw Andreasen, Municipality of Vejle.
CC 2. The colours are speculative.

The reading of the two illustrations makes most sense if we follow the progression from the scary beast, which can represent the old beliefs, to the image of the victorious Christ; the triumphant king with raised head and open eyes. As such it is a characteristically early depiction of Christ, far from the suffering Christ with lowered head and closed eyes which become usual later in the medieval crucifix tradition. The fact that the figure is depicted over the runes that read 'and made the Danes Christian' strengthens the interpretation that this is a portrayal of Christ.

Following the assumption that there is a close connection between the runic text and the ornamentation, it may be more than a coincidence that the scary beast is placed over the name 'Norway' on Face B. When the runic text declares that Harald has won all of Denmark and Norway but has Christened Denmark only, it is fair to assume that Norway is left pagan and, consequently, that the illustration above the name 'Norway' attempts to illustrate exactly the fact that Norway is still left in pagan horror.

Remarkable, however, is the missing cross on Face C. Substituting the cross are intertwined vines around the figure's body and arms. This may illustrate Christ in the tree of life (in the Garden of Eden, Genesis 2:9), but also that there may be an allusion to Óðinn's sacrifice by hanging himself in the branches of Yggdrasill to attain knowledge about the world beyond our own.[38] Yet another possibility is that we see Christ but that he is hanging, not on a cross but in a tree, and not necessarily the biblical tree of life.

One of the motives discernible on the ornamental tapestries from the ninth-century ship-burial at Oseberg, Norway, is several people hanging from the branches of a tree.[39] The German

38. *Hávamál*, verses 138–141; Kure 2007: 69–70.

39. The branches end in heads of animals, possibly horses, and could be meant to illustrate *Yggdrasill*, which means '*Óðinn's* horse', where *Yggr* ('horror') is another name for *Óðinn*. The name *Yggdrasill* may then be a

bishop Thietmar of Merseburg[40] writes around AD 1015 about the christening of the Danes, but he also talks about the heathen practice at Lejre, Zealand, where every nine years they sacrifice ninety-nine humans along with an equal number of horses, dogs, and cocks. A similar practice is described by Adam of Bremen[41] at Old Uppsala in Sweden, adding the detail that the killed male humans and animals were strung up in trees. Archaeological excavations at Hov on Frösö have documented tenth-century human and animal bones around a large tree which had been cut down and had a church placed over it, with the altar placed on top of the stub of the tree. It has been suggested that the site can be associated with the ritual depicted by Thietmar and Adam.[42]

Figure 5: Section of the Oseberg tapestry. Reconstruction by Stig Saxegaard of Storm Studios as commissioned by the Museum of Cultural History. Reproduced with kind permission as first published in Vedeler 2019.

The practice above is described by Christian scholars with an agenda to portray the heathens in a negative light and who did not themselves observe the rituals first-hand. Further, the

kenning for 'gallow' (Heggstad 1975: 509).

40. Thietmar of Merseburg, Book I: chapter 17.

41. Adam of Bremen, Book IV: chapter 27.

42. Sandberg 2016: 20.

archaeological evidence is too scarce to claim a widespread practice, and we do not know if the ritual was familiar to people who saw the stone at Jelling. There is still a chance that the audience to the artist behind the Christ-like figure on Jelling 2 may have been more familiar with the branches of a tree as a place for sacrifice rather than a cross, and consequently, it can be claimed that even the Jelling depiction of Christ is a compromise between a traditional pagan and a new Christian iconography.

Frösö and the Swedish rune cross

Both the Kuli and the Frösö stones are not free-standing high crosses but rather cross-stones where a cross is carved on the broad face of the slab, and as such they are probably less of a Christian statement and possible provocation than a free-standing cross will have been.

Found in 58% of the Swedish runestones,[43] the cross forms a visual, non-verbal expression to communicate a Christian concept. The frequency in Sweden of eleventh-century runestones with crosses forms a striking contrast to the resistance to Christianity among the Uppland royals and the fact that Sweden was not formally converted before the end of the eleventh century. It has been suggested[44] that the many runestones with a Christian content are raised at a time of religious and political tension by an aristocracy that – as a result of active English and German missioning – had converted and wished to express their new belief visually, while the Uppland royalty were fearful of losing their status as cultic leaders of the old faith.

43. Lager 2002: 73–75.
44. Brink 1990: 47.

The layout of the Frösö stone follows a well-established design from central Sweden. Typically, the cross is placed in the centre of the upper part of the monument where it forms a separate visual entity without any connection to the inscription or the rest of the ornamentation.[45] While the inspiration behind the crosses may be British,[46] the runestone crosses are unmistakably Swedish in shape and ornamentation, and the original designs are integrated into a unique context and a Scandinavian visual language.

The cross on the Kuli stone

A single cross is the only decoration on the Kuli stone. The simple cross that ornates the broad face of the stone, without the complexity of sacrifice, is the type of Christian symbol that people from further south on the west coast of Norway will have been accustomed to seeing by the time the Kuli stone was erected. Many will have seen crosses during Viking expeditions to the British Isles, where crosses of various shapes and sizes furnished the landscape and buildings, and especially the Irish and Pictish Christians had perfected the carving of elaborate free-standing stone high crosses as well as cross-stones with elaborate ornamentations. Also, in the tenth century, stone crosses became a familiar sight along the Vestland region in Norway itself, and although much simpler than the insular crosses, an inspiration from the Irish and British practice

45. Another usual design, featuring on the runestone from Lilla Ramsjö, Heby, which is now prominently placed outside the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh, has the cross in the centre of the stone, framed by the serpent and the runic inscription and is more integrated into the overall design on the stone.
46. Lager 2002: 193–195.

appears evident behind the Norwegian crosses and cross-stones.[47] Remarkably, many of the largest crosses are from the same quarry at Hyllestad, Sogn, and it has been suggested they should be associated with the tenth-century royal missioning attempts.[48]

The monument on Kuli is likely to have had a function as a domain marker for the current extent of the Christian faith. Kuli forms part of the portal of Trondheimsleia, the coastal entrance to Trøndelag, which in the second half of the tenth century was a region notoriously opposed to the advancement of Christianity along Vestlandet. Up till 995, it was ruled by Hákon, Earl of Lade, who aggressively burned churches and was praised by his court poets as a defender of the old beliefs, probably with the same fear as the rulers in Uppsala of losing his status as cultic leader. As *de facto* ruler of Norway, Hákon had first been under Danish overlordship but around AD 975 he broke his alliances with King Haraldr and blocked Danish attempts at regaining control of the Norwegian west coast. It is likely that Hákon's insistent opposition to Christian expansion was linked to his attempts to stem Danish political influence. The sons of Eiríkr Haraldsson (Bloodaxe) had ruled over Norway under Danish overlordship. These were Christians, brought up in Denmark and England, they had actively tried to destroy temples and symbols of the old faith, and most certainly will have had Danish support not only to win Norway politically but also to promote the Christian faith.

It makes sense on linguistic grounds[49] but also politically to date the Kuli stone to the very beginning of the millennium. The stone can in such a scenario be regarded as a demarcation for the west-Norwegian Christian domain, illustrated by the

47. Crouwers 2019.
48. Birkeli 1973; Crouwers 2019.
49. Schulte 2018: 154–155.

fact that the monument is the most northerly of the stone crosses and the cross-stones, and – prominently placed at the entrance to Trøndelag – it proudly announces to travellers that this is Christian land and that it has been so for twelve winters. If it is correct that the event that the inscription refers to took place under the early years of Óláfr Tryggvason's reign,[50] the runes would have been carved around the year 1007.

Conclusion

Harald's stone at Jelling, the Kuli stone, and the Frösö stone are from an early and intensely transitional phase of the conversion. This article has hopefully demonstrated how the personal and social upheaval involved in this transformation found artistic expressions. However, none of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld's personal religious torment is discernible in the three stone monuments. Instead, we notice the assured self-confidence of the aristocracy to whom Hallfreðr was a servant, a class that embraced the new religion in the knowledge it would sanction and secure their social position, but only if they could cleverly convince their people to take to the new faith without upsetting the social order. In this perspective there was a measured motive behind the compromise to promote the new faith in a recognisable framework, and the cultural luggage that came with the new faith was adapted to an indigenous familiar setting in order to minimise cultural provocation. And still, despite the possible tactical considerations, one can without difficulty admire the cultural confidence, even pride, behind the three monuments that first announce the new religion in Scandinavia.

50. Kruse 2021a: 26–28

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