

## Reviews

*Michael P. Barnes*

*The Runic Inscriptions of the Isle of Man*

Runrön 22

(Uppsala: Institutionen för nordiska språk, and  
London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2019)

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THE RUNIC inscriptions of the Isle of Man are partly notable for their sheer number: more than thirty memorial stones on a small island make up a concentrated cluster unparalleled in the Viking-Age colonies of the west. And as such they offer precious insight into the language, culture and concerns of a remarkable community that blended Scandinavian and Irish elements and was (on the Scandinavian side) newly Christian. Texts are not particularly lengthy – ‘Söndulfr the black put up this cross in memory of Arinbjörg his wife’ is typical – but they occasionally include colourful and intriguing details, such as the denunciation of one Hrossketill as someone who ‘betrayed the trust of a man to whom he was bound by oath’ or the aphorism that ‘it is better to leave a good foster-son than a bad son’.

This book is a scholarly edition of these inscriptions, completing a set of four publications detailing the various medieval Scandinavian runic remains of Britain and Ireland. Michael Barnes has been involved in all four, while R. I. Page was a co-author on two of the others. Page had a significant hand in this work too, having left substantial papers towards it upon his death in 2012: the first chapter of the work explains how Barnes took these on, with the help of a team of other eminent runologists, to check, recheck and develop the material, such that in the end it turned into a collaborative work, though ultimately shaped by Barnes.

The core of the edition is a description and analysis of the runic inscriptions found on thirty-seven stones (including several fragments, and two short Anglo-Saxon inscriptions of somewhat earlier date than the Scandinavian

group and included for completeness). This presentation is painstaking: the texts in their present state are carefully described and comparisons made with older accounts and illustrations; descriptions are accompanied by excellent drawings and photographs, most of them contributed by Jonas Nordby; interpretations are weighed in the balance, linguistic forms analysed and matters arising fully discussed. Readers familiar with the previous editions will find the same cautious attention to detail here. Whilst a specialist may possibly wish to quibble over the occasional judgment, it is hardly possible to fault the care that has gone into the work, and the book will clearly become the starting-point for all future linguistic and runological study of the corpus.

The first section of the book comprises seven short chapters in which conclusions are summarised, to which more general readers, and scholars from neighbouring disciplines, are likely to be particularly drawn. Linguistic and runological links with the Scandinavian homelands, direct – or indirect via stopping-points around Britain and Ireland – may be principally with Norway, as the predominant short-twig runic variety and the characteristic arrangement of the inscriptions up the narrow edges of standing slabs would also suggest. However, while there are many features that could be Norwegian there are few, if any, that are diagnostically so, and various others which are suggestive of connections with Denmark or Sweden. As Barnes explains, the waters are muddied here partly because of difficulties in distinguishing hard and fast lines between East and West Scandinavian usage at this period, and partly because a colonial mixture is not unlikely in this strategically important Irish Sea hub; the various indications, however, seem insufficient to pin down elements of that mixture with any precision.

More secure is the identification of an admixture of Irish elements. Around a quarter (p. 36) or a third (p. 79) of the personal names on the stones are Irish in origin, like Dubgall (masc.) or Máel-Muire (fem.), and it is argued that a number of aberrant features in the grammar of the Old Norse may display ‘incipient breakdown in the inflexional system after a period of intensive language contact’ (p. 83). There is also, of course, the regular use of *kross*, a borrowing into Old Norse from Latin via Old Irish, to denote the monuments. Moreover, it is suggested that the tradition itself may owe its original impetus to the ‘intermingling of Celtic and Scandinavian culture’, in which the local practice of raising stone crosses met the incomers’ habit of cutting runic memorials (pp. 33–4). It should be observed, however, that there is a chronological difficulty with this explanation.

Dating the inscriptions closely is problematic though there is a general consensus that, with the exception of two later outliers, they belong within the tenth and eleventh centuries. Art historians date the main sequence c. 925–

1020, a range justified and explained by David M. Wilson, who contributes a chapter on 'The form and decoration of the stones'. Barnes, however, finds a number of runic features which suggest dates late in, or later than, this range, and it would seem that the runologist might be more comfortable were the sequence moved on by several decades. Faced with the conflict, Barnes reflects on some of the methodological weaknesses in runological dating, and reluctantly chooses to bow to the art historian (pp. 61–3). This leaves the intriguing implication that various runic features, including dotting as a diacritic device, may be innovative when found on Man. Barnes accepts that they may ultimately have something to do with Anglo-Saxon practice, but is loath to accept the further suggestion – favoured by some – that the whole Viking-Age memorial tradition might owe a significant debt to the comparably worded English memorials of the eighth and ninth centuries. Yet an acceptance that the Manx Scandinavian rune-stones start as early as c. 925 rather undercuts the earlier theory that the Norsemen brought the memorial habit with them, since the Manx series would appear to start earlier than equivalent local traditions in Scandinavia (cf. p. 57).

It is a great strength of the discussion on dating that the runological problem is thoroughly aired and examined from various directions. Wilson's chapter does not note the conflict of evidence and does not consider how or whether the art historian might be able to accommodate alternative resolutions to it. It would be a welcome contribution to the problem if he or another art historian were to take this line in a subsequent study.

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