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Runes and Words:
Runic Lexicography in Context

Judith Jesch

Abstract

The paper begins by noting the lack of a comprehensive dictionary of Scandinavian runic inscriptions, as well as the absence of the runic evidence from most dictionaries of the early Scandinavian languages, and considers possible reasons for this. Runic inscriptions may need a different kind of dictionary, because they require a different kind of reading that takes extra-linguistic as well as linguistic contexts into account (a process that has been called "interdisciplinary semantics"). Using the examples of the words *bóndi* and *þegn* in Viking Age inscriptions, the paper shows how the variety of available contexts enables a richer definition of these and other words, which might facilitate a different type of dictionary, based on discursive definitions.

Keywords: Viking Age, runestones, lexicography, semantics, *bóndi*, *þegn*

Runes and lexicography

The latest version of the Scandinavian Runic Text Database (*Samnordisk runtextdatabas*, published in 2008) records 6578 inscriptions: 270 in the older futhark, 3619 from the Viking Age, 2673 labelled "medieval", and 16 judged to be post-medieval.[1] This is a substantial corpus of the Scandinavian languages through well over a millennium that is frequently ignored by dictionaries, which overwhelmingly draw their material from manuscript sources. For example, the "Einleitung" to the *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (first published 1957–60) begins by claiming that "Wir kennen die altwestnordische sprache ausschliesslich aus lite-

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[1] The numbers are slightly higher in all categories in version 3, to be published soon.

rarischen quellen" ('We know the Old West Norse language exclusively from literary sources'; de Vries 1977, vii). This attitude is shared by some historians who feel able to claim that the medieval Scandinavian laws "are the oldest surviving texts in the vernacular in all Scandinavian countries" (Nedkvitne 2005, 290).

Some dictionaries do include runic evidence, though rarely thoroughly or systematically. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* focuses on "the words used in this old classical literature", as one would expect from the title, but does list "Runic inscriptions" in the "Classification of works and authors cited in this dictionary" (Cleasby et al. 1957, xii). However, the number of examples actually cited is very small, even the entry on *rún* does not make use of any runic inscriptions. Other dictionaries of Old West Norse tend to exclude runic inscriptions. I have not found any runic material in Fritzner (1883–1972), while the *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* explicitly restricts itself to "the vocabulary of the prose writings of Old Norse, as transmitted in Norwegian and Icelandic manuscripts" (*ONP*, *Registre*, 15). Finnur Jónsson's *Lexicon Poeticum* (1931) cites runic vocabulary from the Karlevi inscription because it is included in his edition of skaldic poetry, but not I think otherwise. On the East Norse side, Söderwall's *Ordbok öfver svenska medeltids-språket* (1884–1918) and its *Supplement* (1925–73) both explicitly exclude runic inscriptions, while the ongoing *Gammel-dansk ordbog* does include runic inscriptions, but only later ones that are contemporary with its manuscript sources, i.e. from c. 1100.

Most dictionary-makers, whether dealing with living or dead languages, have an enormous body of material on which to base their definitions, and have to be selective. These examples show how this selection is done according to a particular understanding of the source language, which can be defined both geographically and chronologically. Historical dictionaries can further restrict the material through the sources they use, thus Söderwall excludes the Swedish laws, while Fritzner and *ONP* do use the Norwegian and Icelandic ones.

There is no dictionary of all runic inscriptions as such, but there are a variety of lexical aids. Most of the volumes of the national corpus editions (*DR*, *NIyR*, *SRI*) include glossaries, or word-lists. Lena Peterson's *Svenskt runordsregister* (1989 and subsequent editions) covers the inscriptions of Viking Age Sweden, while her *Nordiskt runnamnslexikon* (2007) covers the proper names in all Scandinavian Viking Age inscriptions. While the "Ord- og navneforråd" of *Danmarks runeindskrifter* is ambitious, frequently providing notes on etymology, interpretation or cognates, the other lists mostly give only minimal grammatical information and simple,

if any, definitions, in the modern national languages. Presumably there is no dictionary of runic inscriptions because dictionaries tend to be based on a particular language, and there is no "runic" language as such. A "runic" dictionary would be one that selected its evidence based on the alphabet, rather than on the language, in which its source material was written. Although this would be a departure from usual lexicographical practice, there are several reasons why such a dictionary would make sense, not least because the runic material is largely ignored by other dictionaries and still needs fully to be recorded.

However, a dictionary based on the whole runic corpus would be awkward. The corpus extends over a wide geographical area covering (albeit unevenly) a substantial portion of Europe. Even leaving aside those inscriptions in which runes are used to write a non-Germanic language, such as Latin, it is clear that the corpus is not all in one language and is therefore unlikely to be neatly encompassed in one dictionary. It could be argued that it would be better to split the runic corpus into its constituent languages and incorporate the material into the respective dictionaries. And indeed the ongoing *Dictionary of Old English* includes Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions in its source material. The majority of these inscriptions are earlier than the majority of Old English manuscripts, though there is some overlap, providing a useful parallel to the Scandinavian situation, where there is a similarly uneven, but overlapping, chronological distribution of inscriptions and manuscripts. But the corpora of both Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions and Old English manuscripts are substantially smaller than their Scandinavian equivalents, enabling them to be encompassed in one dictionary. One could conclude that, since runic inscriptions are just another way of writing languages for which we generally also have other sorts of evidence, it would be artificial to split them off on the basis of alphabet for the purposes of lexicography. Yet that is exactly what has on the whole been done for the Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian vernaculars. The relatively small number of inscriptions in the older futhark present further problems to lexicographers, as well as having no equivalent manuscript-based corpus for comparison, and it is hard to see how best to incorporate them into a dictionary.

A dictionary restricted to the Scandinavian corpus (without the older futhark inscriptions), would however have its own coherence, both geographical and linguistic, and would have several benefits. Since this corpus is relatively small, it would be possible to take all of it into account, recording every occurrence of every word, in a way that is not possible with the manuscript material that forms the basis of other dictionaries of

the early Scandinavian languages. Inscriptions in Latin would present a challenge, but they are relatively few, and since some expressions such as *Ave Maria* are arguably also in the vernacular, and since the runic spelling of Latin words provides information about Scandinavian pronunciation, there are good grounds for including these too. The runic corpus also usefully covers those parts of the Scandinavian-speaking world with no medieval manuscripts in that vernacular (e.g. Greenland, or Britain and Ireland). Over half of the Scandinavian runic corpus records the respective languages before they were written in manuscripts, and thereby provides evidence for the antecedent languages. Even those runic inscriptions that overlap chronologically and geographically with manuscript writing usually emanate from different socio-cultural circumstances and so give insights into different registers and usages. Thus, there are many good reasons to isolate the vocabulary of runic inscriptions from that recorded in the chronologically partially overlapping manuscript record, and a runic dictionary would have much to contribute to our understanding of both the diachronic and the diatopic development of the Scandinavian languages.

Because of the smallness of the corpus (relative to manuscript sources), and because of the materiality of the inscriptions, it would also be possible to make a runic dictionary in a distinctive way. Dictionary-makers distinguish between different kinds of definitions. Among others, synthetic (basically synonyms), analytical (essentially explanatory) and encyclopedic (reflecting real-world knowledge) definitions can be ranked on an increasing scale of richness of information (Geeraerts 2003, 89 f.). The runic corpus is particularly suitable for what might be called "discursive" definitions, somewhere between the analytical and the ency-clopedic. An example of such definitions from a rather different type of corpus are the entries in the ongoing *Vocabulary of English Place-Names* (Parsons et al. 1997–) which are, essentially, short word-studies. These can include discussions of etymology, attestations in other sources, linguistic development, semantic range, figurative or metaphorical usages, and relationships with other words in the same or similar semantic fields, as well as providing modern meaning equivalents. More detailed word-studies are, of course, a well-established field of research in Scandinavian philology, and have been applied to runic vocabulary items too (e.g. most recently Williams 2012). But a dictionary containing such shorter word-studies of the complete lexicon, and not just the more exciting words, would be singularly appropriate to the runic corpus. This paper will explore what it is that is so special about the runic corpus that it might justify this more expansive approach to dictionary-making, with a focus

on the processes by which we establish the meanings of words in Viking Age and medieval inscriptions in Scandinavian runes.

Many of these processes are traditional in historical philology as applied to manuscript texts. However, runic inscriptions present a different kind of textuality which requires more than purely linguistic methods to decode it. There has been some discussion about the nature of runology, whether it is a purely philological or linguistic discipline, or whether a study of the inscriptions also has to take account of physical and other contexts (e.g. Peterson 1996b, Lerche Nielsen 1997). On the whole, opinions are not totally polarised but fit into a continuum, with different scholars emphasising different aspects. More recently, younger scholars in particular have been investigating the ways in which the whole runic object "means" (Stern 2009, Bianchi 2010), showing how the decoration, design and layout of runestones in particular contribute to the meaning of the inscriptions, making them multi-modal objects. I myself have argued (Jesch 1998) that the materiality of runestones is as much a part of their meaning as their textuality. Terje Spurkland (2004, 342) has proposed the term "runacy" in recognition of the fact that writing in runes differs from manuscript literacy both in its medium and in its communicative contexts. The implication is that "runate" texts, differently written, also require different forms of reading.

Such discussions can seem to stretch the concept of "meaning" beyond that which seems appropriate in a lexicographical context, though even here there is a recognition that words cannot be understood without some reference to the world in which they are used. Christian Kay has shown (2000, 64 f.) how lexicographers often operate in a pragmatic way which acknowledges this need for real-world reference, while semantic theorists, unencumbered by the practical necessity of providing definitions, more often ignore it, and she argued for the importance of "interdisciplinary semantics", a concept that is particularly useful for runic inscriptions. But even without getting too deeply into the ways in which the visual, material, pseudo-runic or non-runic aspects of runic inscriptions can "mean", it is possible to see that these aspects help to understand what the runic texts say and, therefore, what the words in them mean. We do not easily have access to real-world knowledge from the time the inscriptions were made, but their material contexts do suggest one aspect of this real-world knowledge, or at least they present something that is real. Similarly, the linguistic and communication contexts of runic inscriptions are often rather particular, as many have shown (e.g. Spurkland 2005), and also need to be taken into account in the analysis.

This then is the starting-point: runology in a lexicographical context requires a reading of the runes in their own particular range of contexts. The contexts most relevant to an understanding of runic vocabulary are listed here and some of them will be explored further below:

- semantic contexts:
    - immediate (e.g. collocations)
    - structural (e.g. synonyms, antonyms)
    - onomastic (given names and nicknames)
- discourse contexts:
    - formulas
    - deixis
    - poetry
- physical contexts:
    - the object itself/materiality
    - decorative and structural elements
    - physical surroundings
- functional contexts:
    - communication
    - monumentality

The runic lexicon—
two case-studies from Viking Age inscriptions

The word bóndi and linguistic contexts

It is generally recognised that the "study of the lexicon … straddles the study of purely linguistic aspects of language and the more general study of culture, since the vocabularies of languages are shaped by and reflect the intellectual and material culture in which their speakers function" (Harbert 2007, 21). In the case of dead languages, the lexicon takes on even more importance as a significant source of evidence for the reconstruction of a past culture.

The meanings of individual words in dead languages are reconstructed by a variety of means. The foremost of these are traditionally (1) etymology, including more specifically (2) comparison with cognates in other languages (including descendants and relatives of the source language), and (3) context. While etymology and cognates are normally used explicitly, contexts tend to be used more implicitly and their significance is rarely clarified in the process of establishing meaning. Runic inscriptions provide

some excellent examples of how a variety of contexts can inform both the lexicographical translation of runic vocabulary and the reconstruction of a past culture.

An amusing and intriguing example is the decision of the Scandinavian Runic Text Database (not, admittedly, a dictionary) to translate the very frequent word *bóndi* by the archaic English word *husbandman*.[2] The editors of the database appear to have forced this solution on themselves by their principled decision always to translate a particular word in a particular way, a decision that makes searching easier but can be linguistically confusing. At first glance, *husbandman* could appear to be well chosen. Any native speaker of English will recognise the first element of the target word as meaning 'male spouse, married man', which is indeed one of the meanings of the source word. Some, though probably a minority of, native speakers of English will also recognise the whole word in its archaic meaning of 'farmer', perhaps by means of association with some expressions which are still current in the language, such as 'animal husbandry'. And 'farmer' is indeed one of the relevant meanings of the source word. This solution may seem neat to the linguistically aware runologist, but remains odd to the native speaker of English. The word *husbandman* is no longer current, instead we speak of either a *farmer*, or a *husband*, two very different words with very different meanings. So, while attempting cleverly to combine two meanings in one, the translation *husbandman* manages actually to convey neither, at least not in contemporary English.

The word *bóndi* is thus a simple example of the fact well known to all translators and lexicographers, though difficult to get across to under-graduates, that there is rarely a one-to-one mapping of words between a source language and a target language. It is already well known that in the medieval forms of the Scandinavian languages the word *bóndi* covered the range of meanings already mentioned, and more, and that these meanings are interrelated. All this can be known from reading the Icelandic sagas, or from studying the historical development of the Scandinavian languages (and indeed their influence on English, giving the latter its word *husband*). Any dictionary can, and will, do what Peterson's *Svenskt runordsregister* has done and list the three basic meanings of 'farmer', 'husband' and 'head of a household' (though we can note that the third of these is not implied in the translation 'husbandman'). The three meanings are united by the

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[2] For the sake of consistency, and because they occur in a variety of sources of different provenance, the words under discussion will be presented in their normalised Old West Norse form (as in, e.g., *ONP*).

	A 'husband'		AB 'husband' and/or 'householder/farmer'			B 'householder/farmer'			C uncertain		
	A1 + fem. + gen. + family	**A2** + fem. + gen.	**AB1** + fem.	**AB2** + fem. + gen. + farm	**AB3** + fem. + farm	**B1** + farm	**B2** + masc. + gen.	**B3** + Ø	**C1** + gen.	**C2** + Ø	
Öl	2	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	3	1	**7**
Ög	5	6	1	–	1	–	3	1	3	2	**22**
Sö	15	1	1	1	–	1	3	–	2	3	**27**
Sm	1	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	1	–	**3**
Vg	3	3	–	–	–	–	1	1	–	2	**10**
U	71	28	5	–	–	3	1	4	7	7	**126**
Vs	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	**1**
Nä	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	**3**
Gs	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	**2**
DR	3	2	–	–	–	–	–	3	–	–	**8**
Total	**102**	**42**	**8**	**1**	**1**	**5**	**8**	**9**	**18**	**15**	**209**
Combined Totals	**144**		**10**			**22**			**33**		**209**

Table 1. The meanings of *bóndi* in Viking Age inscriptions. The categories are explained fully in the text.

concept of 'mastery' or 'authority'. So what, if anything, can a study of runic inscriptions contribute to our understanding of the word *bóndi*? In particular, can a contextual interpretation of the occurrences of this word help to distinguish its different meanings and assign them to individual inscriptions? This is something that is eschewed by both the Scandinavian Runic Text Database and Peterson, but is done in the glossary to *DR*.

It is fortunate that the word *bóndi* occurs sufficiently frequently for it to be possible to discern patterns in the evidence, encapsulated in table 1 (see also Sawyer 2000, 106–10, 184).[3] In the Viking Age Scandinavian runic corpus, there are 144 inscriptions in which a person designated as a *bóndi* is said (e.g. through the use of a genitive or other possessive form) to be in a relationship with a person with a feminine name and the word is therefore most likely to have the primary meaning 'husband, spouse' (category A). Of these 144 inscriptions, 102 also make reference to other family members, suggesting the focus is on the married couple as the basis of the family, rather than on them as a couple *per se*.[4] There are ten inscriptions in which there is a feminine personal name somewhere in the inscription, but it does not collocate directly with the word *bóndi*, leaving it an open question as to whether the *bóndi* is the woman's husband or not (category AB) — in these the meaning is indeterminate. In two cases there is also reference to a farm, strengthening the possibility of the 'farmer' or 'householder' meaning while not excluding 'husband'. There are then 22 inscriptions without any feminine name in which it is therefore presumed that the meaning is either (or both) 'farmer' or 'householder' (category B). Eight of these do in fact indicate a personal relationship through a genitival form, but the person with whom the *bóndi* is in a relationship has a masculine name. These eight inscriptions (category B2) are the most secure evidence for a meaning which excludes that of 'husband', although whether that meaning is 'farmer' or 'householder' or something else is still not clear. Finally, there are 33 inscriptions which are too fragmentary to enable the meaning of the word to be established (category C). However, eighteen of these instances are in a genitival collocation which could, as we have just seen, include a relationship with a male member of the household, but which is nevertheless overwhelmingly more likely to suggest the meaning 'husband', as in category A. In quite a few cases, a

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[3] Sawyer's numbers are slightly higher than mine, probably because I have been more cautious in interpreting fragmentary inscriptions.

[4] While it is not always possible entirely to exclude the meaning 'master (of a female servant)' for the inscriptions in category A, these numbers do suggest that the word appears predominantly in a family context.

Table 2. The distribution of *góðr* in collocation with the different meanings of *bóndi* in Viking Age inscriptions

	'husband'	'farmer/householder'	Ambiguous/uncertain/both	**Total**
Ög	3	3	2	**8**
Sö	2	2	4	**8**
Vg	–	2	–	**2**
U	1	6	1	**8**
Vs	–	–	1	**1**
DR	–	3	–	**3**
Total	**6**	**16**	**8**	**30**

female name is present in the inscription, and it is only the fragmentary nature of it that means we cannot directly see the collocation. From this it can be concluded that, in the usage of memorial inscriptions, a substantial majority of the instances of the word *bóndi* carry the primary meaning of 'husband, male spouse'. Even if we chose to assign categories AB and C entirely to the meaning 'farmer/householder', the preponderance of the 'husband' meaning would still be in a ratio of at least 2:1. If we ignore the uncertain or ambiguous categories and count only the certain categories of A and B, then the ratio of 'husband' to 'farmer' is closer to 6:1. The real ratio will of course be somewhere in between 2:1 and 6:1, though probability suggests it would be closer to the latter.

Some of the people who are designated as a *bóndi* are further given the epithet *góðr* 'good'. Were these people good husbands or good farmers? In spite of the frequency of the meaning 'husband' overall, the figures suggest that when the adjective is used, it is most often used with the less common meaning (table 2; cf. also Sawyer 2000, 107, 178–83), i.e. to praise someone for satisfactorily fulfilling his role as a farmer, or as the head of a farming household, rather than for his qualities as a husband. There are 30 inscriptions in which the commemorated man is called a *góðr bóndi*—in only six of these is this phrase used of a woman's husband, eight are ambiguous (because fragmentary) and sixteen have no evident marital associations and are therefore most likely to refer to the deceased's agricultural or household role. Thus, even though the instances in which

Table 3. Occurrences of *verr* 'husband' in Viking Age inscriptions

	'husband'	+ *þegn*	+ verse
Ög	1	–	–
Sö	2	1	1
Vg	2	2	1
U	2	–	1
G	1	–	–
DR	7	2	–
N	1	–	–
Total	**16**	**5**	**3**

bóndi does not mean 'husband' are in a significant minority overall, and are therefore less likely to occur, when they do occur they are proportionally much more likely to collocate with the adjective *góðr*. This does not necessarily imply that there was a shortage of good husbands in Viking Age Scandinavia. But it does suggest that the evaluation of someone's career, or role in life, especially using the adjective *góðr*, was generally considered to be a more appropriate topic for a public memorial inscription than an evaluation of his marriage.

The different semantic components of *bóndi* are by no means mutually exclusive. In Viking Age Scandinavia, as in other pre-industrial communities, most people lived on what we would call a farm, most farmers were married, and most married men were considered to be the head of their farming household. The three roles go together and the meanings are therefore at some level impossible to separate. The two types of linguistic context, or collocation, analysed here provide different levels of confidence in understanding the different meanings. When *bóndi* collocates with a feminine name and a possessive, this can be regarded as positive evidence for the meaning 'male spouse, husband' (though it does not preclude other meanings). However, when such a collocation is absent, there is only negative, and therefore less conclusive, evidence for the meaning 'farmer' or 'head of a household'.

Before leaving husbands, farmers and householders, it is worth briefly

considering what alternatives there were for these words. Closely related to *bóndi* is *búmaðr*, which can be translated with *ONP* as 'farmer, man who makes his living by farming, householder', though it may also have connotations of the wealthy and generous host (*DR*, *Text*, col. 344). It occurs in one inscription (DR 291), in which the commemorated person is described as both *beztr búmanna* and the *bóndi* of the woman commissioning the monument, neatly illustrating the distinction.

There is also another word meaning 'husband' available to rune carvers, and that is *verr* (table 3). This word occurs in only fifteen or sixteen inscriptions (G 252 is uncertain), so only just over 10 % of the number of occurrences of *bóndi* with the same meaning. The examples suggest that its lower frequency may be explained by the venerability of the term. Seven of the occurrences are in Denmark, including some early inscriptions such as Glavendrup (DR 209) and Tryggevælde (DR 230), suggesting that it is a more archaic term, even when used in later inscriptions. Archaic words are often used in special contexts and, in three of the inscriptions, the word *verr* occurs in a part of the inscription that is formulated as verse (Sö 137, Vg 59, U 226). A number of the inscriptions have other markers of high, or at least special, status, including five where the commemorated is said to have been a *þegn*, a word discussed further below. All of this contributes to a sense that *verr* is not the normal, everyday word for 'husband' in the Viking Age but signals a special register. Furthermore, there is no evidence in these inscriptions that *verr* has any connotations relevant to farming or households, rather it does appear just to mean 'husband'.

The word þegn *and non-linguistic contexts*

The purpose of the detailed analysis of *bóndi* has been to show how linguistic contexts can illuminate the shades of meaning of just one, albeit quite significant, word. Yet, the contexts of runic inscriptions are not only linguistic, but encompass other aspects of these monuments. This can be illustrated by the word *þegn*, which has been extensively discussed, with different scholars coming to radically different conclusions.[5] The most successful discussions are those that aim to pinpoint the uses and meanings of particular words in particular contexts, avoiding the temptation of the very broad brush, particularly with words like this which are clearly sensitive to social changes and prone to regular semantic shifts. I have

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[5] References to older scholarship can be found in Jesch 1993; 1994; 2001, 225–29; see also Sawyer 2000, 103–07, Syrett 2000 and Goetting 2006 and further references there.

argued (Jesch 2001, 225–29; 2011, 41–44) that, in the late Viking Age at least, the word *þegn* refers to the upper echelons of the established landowning classes, rather than to agents of an expanding monarchy, or older, retired warriors, as has been suggested by others, and that the word means more than just 'free man' (as assumed by Källström 2012, 53). I have also argued for keeping the discussion of *þegn* separate from that of *drengr*: the clear difference between them in the Danish inscriptions at least has been illustrated in Søren Sindbæk's application of network analysis to the material (2008, 46–49). But I have not previously analysed the shades of meaning of *þegn* as thoroughly as I have with *drengr*, and think there may still be more to be wrung from it, using the perspective of "interdisciplinary semantics" (Kay 2000, 64 f.). This method implies that a variety of both linguistic and non-linguistic contexts can illuminate the shades of meaning of this word in Viking Age runic inscriptions. Whereas in the case of *bóndi*, the contexts were mainly linguistic, in this case non-linguistic contexts are also relevant.

As everyone knows, and as has been most extensively demonstrated by Rune Palm (1992), the distribution of Viking Age runestone inscriptions is not even, neither in time nor in space. But even within this uneven overall pattern, the distribution of inscriptions commemorating one or more *þegn*s is unusual, with concentrations in Denmark, Västergötland and Södermanland. Certainly, distribution patterns may be random and not necessarily directly related to social or economic circumstances, as was pointed out by Gunhild Øeby Nielsen in her study of some Danish inscriptions (2005, 118–20). Despite this, the 47 monuments commemorating *þegn*s share a number of characteristics which do seem to define them as a group. These shared characteristics, both linguistic and physical, all link to concepts of land, ancestry and status. A close analysis reveals the following characteristics of *þegn*-monuments (see also table 4):

- Interest in family and genealogy:
  - naming of family members other than the commissioner(s) and the commemorated (DR 277, DR 291, DR AUD1995;279, Vg 115, Vg 158)
  - related stones nearby (Vg 102 and Vg 103, Sm 36 and Sm 37, Sö 34 and Sö 35, Sö 45 and Sö 367)
  - mention of women (DR 98, DR 99, DR 106, DR 143, DR 209, DR 277, DR 291, DR 293, Vg 59, Vg 115, Vg 150, Sö 367; possibly also Ög 200)
- Complexity of monuments:
  - *kuml*, normally referring (Nielsen 1953) to a monument consisting of at least one runestone plus at least one uninscribed stone or

Table 4. Characteristics of Viking Age monuments on which the commemorated is said to have been a *þegn*. Some inscriptions have more than one feature, others have none.

	Number of inscriptions	Family and ancestry			Complex monuments			Power	
		Other family members named	Related stones nearby	Mention of women	*kuml*	*steinar*	Mound/cemetery/ bridge/ship-setting	*þróttar*	superlatives
Ög	**1**	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	–
Sö	**8**	–	2	1	–	1	1	7	–
Sm	**2**	–	1	–	2	–	1	–	2
Vg	**18**	2	1	3	3	–	2	–	–
DR	**18**	3	–	8	5	1	2	–	2
Totals	**47**	**5**	**4**	**12**	**11**	**2**	**6**	**7**	**4**

other monumental construction (DR 143, DR 209, DR 277, DR 293, DR 294, Vg 101, Vg 103, Vg 115, Sm 35, Sm 36, Sm 37, Ög 200)
- *steinar,* multiple stones (DR 143, Sö 34)
- context of mound/cemetery/bridge/causeway/ship-setting (DR 143, DR 209, Vg 115, Vg 157, Sm 35, Sö 367)
• Statements of power:
- *þróttar þegn* (Sö 90, Sö 112, Sö 151, Sö 158, Sö 170, Sö 367, Sö Fv1948;295)
- superlatives (DR 277, DR AUD1995;279, Sm 35, Sm 37)

It seems reasonable to postulate that these features arise from the same or similar social impulses. The frequent reference to women, and the naming of family members other than the commissioner and the commemorated, indicate a concern with ancestry and family. The complexity of the monuments, with multiple stones or other forms of commemoration such as ship-settings or burial mounds, suggests a settled and wealthy community, tied closely to the land. The use of superlatives also tends to correlate with social status, as does probably the phrase *þróttar þegn* (or Runic Swed. *þrōttaʀ þiagn*), restricted to seven inscriptions from Söder-

Table 5. Characteristics of Viking Age monuments on which the commemorated is called *Þegn*. Some inscriptions have more than one feature, others have none.

	Number of inscriptions	Family and ancestry			Complex monuments			Power	
		Other family members named	Related stones nearby	Mention of women	*kuml*	*steinar*	Mound/cemetery/ bridge/ship-setting	*þróttar*	superlatives
Sö	**2**	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	–
Sm	**1**	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
U	**6**	–	2	2	–	1	5	–	–
Totals	**9**	**1**	**2**	**2**	–	**1**	**6**	–	–

manland, which will be discussed further below. None of these features is particularly significant on its own, but taken together, they build up a picture of the kind of person most likely to be described as a *þegn*. This suggests that *þegn*s belong to the long-established landowning classes who liked to emphasise their standing in the community by displaying their family history on runestones, and by placing a variety of costly and complex monuments in their local landscape. These people were the key to local power in the late Viking Age.

These patterns can also be seen in those runestones which commemorate not a *þegn*, but someone called *Þegn*. Unlike the *þegn*-group, these inscriptions can include commissioners called *Þegn*, as well as the commemorated, and there is a small number of compound names in *þegn* (Peterson 2007, 224 f., Källström 2012, 53), but for consistency of comparison, only those in which the commemorated are called *Þegn* are discussed here. These inscriptions form a small group with a concentration in Uppland, in contrast to the *þegn*-group. The extent to which Viking Age names were meaningful to their bearers or to those who gave them is debatable, even though many names must have been linguistically transparent. But it is at least interesting to observe that inscriptions commemorating someone named *Þegn* have some of the same features as those using the common noun (table 5). Thus, U 999 refers in the inscription to 'stones' in the plural, and was surrounded by *bautasteinar*, mounds and other runestones, including some mentioning the same people. U Fv1978;226 may

be related to U 353: both mention a bridge or causeway, as do U 363 and U 456. Women are implicated in U 34 and U 363. Sö 349 is located in a cemetery with mounds and stone setting. So although the total number of inscriptions commemorating a man called *Þegn* is small, their features are similar to those in which this word is used as a common noun. The least typical inscription, Sm 71, is significant in understanding this group. Here a man commemorates five generations of his paternal ancestors, the most distant one being called *Þegn*. The interest and pride in genealogy is clearly marked in the inscription, even though there is no evidence for any of the other features.

Returning to the *þegn*-group, the inscriptions from Södermanland share many of the features that are characteristic of the group as a whole, but they differ in one respect, a difference which is important enough to suggest they form a sub-group of their own. Seven out of the eight inscriptions from Södermanland commemorate not just *þegn*s but *þegn*s who are qualified by the word *þróttar*, the gen. sg. of a masc. noun *þróttr* apparently meaning 'strength, power'. This is a fascinating collocation which still requires full explication, and also poses the question of whether the *þegn*s of Södermanland were like other *þegn*s, or were they somehow different?

Most of the *þróttar þegn*-inscriptions have distinctive features in addition to the ones already noted. Six of the seven make use of unusual rune forms, both coded and same-stave runes, as discussed by Bianchi (2010, 118–51). Several of them also have unusual decoration: three (Sö 112, Sö 170 and Sö 367) have a mask, and one (Sö 158) has a ship design. These features also have to be drawn into the equation when attempting to understand what a *þróttar þegn* was, even if unusual runes, masks and ship-designs are particularly associated with inscriptions from Södermanland and may therefore not have any special significance for these particular inscriptions. Here, it is necessary to return to linguistic contexts.

There are several noteworthy linguistic features. As already noted, *þróttar* is a noun in the genitive singular, giving a phrase that is translated by the Scandinavian Runic Text Database as *thegn of strength*. In the other 40 inscriptions, the word *þegn* is always qualified by an adjective. In fact, the word never appears without being qualified in some way (table 6). What the table shows is that the Södermanland inscriptions are quite distinct from the others, which most frequently use the adjective *góðr*, but also its derivatives, such as *beztr* and *algóðr*. Even the other adjectives used, *fyrstr*, *nýtr* and *heiðverðr*, all belong to the same general sphere of meaning in which one person is evaluated (always positively) in relation

Table 6. Qualifiers of the noun *þegn* when used of the commemorated

	góðr	*algóðr*	*beztr*	*fyrstr*	*nýtr*	*heiðverðr*	*þróttar*	
Ög	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	**1**
Sö	1	–	–	–	–	–	7	**8**
Sm	1	–	1	–	–	–	–	**2**
Vg	18	–	–	–	–	–	–	**18**
DR	14	1	1	1	–	1	–	**18**
Totals	**34**	**1**	**2**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**7**	**47**

to others. But *þróttar* does not fit this pattern, not being an adjective, nor belonging to this semantic field. Indeed it is not quite clear what it means in this context. Does it mean that the *þegn*s concerned possessed strength, and if so was that personal physical strength or military strength in the form of a retinue? Or did they have some other form of power, which was neither physical nor military? In any case, the phrase appears to be a statement of fact rather than an evaluation.

At this point it is necessary to take a closer look at the word *þróttr*, and also to introduce other Viking Age discourses that form a further possible context for runic inscriptions. *Þróttr* occurs in both poetry and prose in Old Norse, and its meaning of 'strength', along with a particular connotation of 'endurance', in some cases even superhuman endurance, are evident from the examples provided in the dictionaries. In the *Vǫlsunga saga* account of the cutting out of Hǫgni's heart, his personal physical endurance of this is described using the word *þróttr* (Finch 1965, 71). Within the same story cycle, a more abstract meaning occurs in stanza 15 of the eddic poem *Hamðismál* (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 271). Here the ability (*þróttr*) of the sons of Guðrún to carry out their revenge diminishes by one third when they first kill their half-brother Erpr, leading to their own death.

Dictionaries (e.g. Finnur Jónsson 1931) claim that *Þróttr* is one of the names of the god Óðinn, though there does not appear to be direct evidence for this in any texts; it does not, for instance, appear in the names of Óðinn listed by Snorri in his *Edda* (Faulkes 1982, 21 f.). Rather, this seems to be a scholarly extrapolation from the way the word is used in kennings. *Þróttr* appears as both base-word and determinant in a range of kennings for warrior, battle, sword, shield, raven and poetry, all of which taken together do indeed suggest an Odinic referent. Thus, *Þróttr* is used as the

base-word in a complex warrior-kenning in stanza 17 of Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Erfidrápa*, his memorial poem on St Óláfr, composed after the king's death in 1030 (*SPSMA*, 1: 684 f.). It is used as the determinant in stanza 16 of Óttarr svarti's *Hǫfuðlausn*, a poem datable to the 1020s and also about Óláfr, in which battle is *Þróttar þing* 'the assembly of Þróttr' (*SPSMA*, 1: 761 f.). If *Þróttar þing* means 'battle' in poetry that is not much later than the Sörmlandic inscriptions, could *Þróttar þegn* also be a kenning meaning 'warrior', perhaps 'warrior devoted to Óðinn'? Certainly, in one of the inscriptions, Sö 170, three men commemorate their father who was 'with the Greeks' and died somewhere that is unfortunately not decipherable but may have been out in the east — he may have been a warrior of some kind.

The fact that three of the seven *þróttar þegn*-inscriptions have crosses on them (Sö 112, Sö 151, Sö Fv1948;295) does not necessarily vitiate this Odinic interpretation, for both Óláfr and his skalds Óttarr and Sigvatr were Christian, but did not turn up their noses at pagan imagery in the special context of poetry. Moreover, one could argue that some kennings and kenning-types were so well established that their pagan connotations were not especially salient. One of the stones (Sö 112) has both a mask and a cross, and two others (Sö 170 and Sö 367) are decorated with a mask, while Sö 158 is decorated with a ship. The iconography is thus mixed, like the poetic imagery. The most recent discussion of such runic masks, by Else Roesdahl and David Wilson (2006), concludes that the most likely function of the masks is apotropaic, or protective, and they note that many such stones, as indeed the one at Släbro (Sö 367), were originally placed at river-crossings. The crosses on these monuments could have had the same function. At the same time, it cannot be denied that masks are associated with Óðinn in mythological texts (cf. his names *Grímr* and *Grímnir*), and such associations cannot be ruled out.

A possible objection to the interpretation of *þróttar þegn* as a warrior-kenning, with or without Odinic associations, is that such metaphorical language is generally foreign to the rather straightforward memorial discourses of runestone inscriptions. With the notable exception of the Karlevi stone, exclusively poetic language is uncommon, even in the inscriptions which are in verse. But it is not totally absent — the stones from Djulefors (Sö 65) and Gripsholm (Sö 179), and several others, use poetic diction as well as the rather straightforward alliterative statements that characterise other "poetry" on runestones. Djulefors says of its hero that he *arði barði* 'ploughed with his prow', an agricultural image of sailing that does not appear otherwise in Old Norse until the twelfth century. Gripsholm has the common poetic trope of 'feeding the eagle', meaning providing

the eagle with carrion on the battlefield. Both of these inscriptions are also from Södermanland, where the bulk of runic poetry comes from. Although poetic language is not the norm in runic memorial inscriptions, it is therefore not possible to rule out its use in the seven *þróttar þegn*-inscriptions, even though these are not in verse. In Södermanland, poetic diction is another of the optional extras that were favoured for the very special monuments in this region, along with masks, crosses, ships, coded runes, same-stave runes, and metrical or alliterative statements.

To return to the question posed above: are the *þróttar þegn*s therefore the same as normal *þegn*s? The interpretation just proposed might suggest an answer of "no" — after all a far-travelling warrior is quite different from a settled landowner, even if the same person might at different times in his life be both. But the whole point of poetic language, especially kennings, is that it enables the mind to keep two different meanings in play at the same time (Stockwell 2002, 106 f.). A ship does not plough, yet its action in the water is like that of a plough in the soil. The food of eagles is not what we normally think of as food. A *þróttar þegn* is both a *þegn* and not a *þegn*, he is praised for being a warrior, or like a warrior, but in reality he is perhaps just an influential landowner. So the *þróttar þegn*s were just like other *þegn*s, as shown by the feature analysis carried out above, but with an added dimension, that mysterious and poetical quality of *þróttr*, whether or not that quality is explicitly associated with Óðinn.

Conclusion

These examples have demonstrated some of the uses of "interdisciplinary semantics" in understanding the runic lexicon, a method which requires a reading of the runes in their own particular range of contexts, and a recognition that these contexts go beyond the purely linguistic. The discussion has touched on most of the contexts outlined in the introduction above, though with a focus on the semantic and the physical. The evidence of some of the alternative discourses of the time, such as poetry, has also been adduced. Because the runic corpus is relatively small, this kind of analysis can feasibly be extended to the whole lexicon. In many cases this kind of analysis is also relevant to form-words as well as content words — an example of this can be found in Lena Peterson's article (1996a) on the prepositions *aft/æft*, *at* and *æftir*. Her analysis is primarily linguistic, but considers a range of factors including stylistic and semantic, and takes its point of departure in a distribution analysis.

"Interdisciplinary semantics" is particularly important because of the

nature of the runic corpus. These inscriptions are original, largely un-
mediated and contemporary documents for the period in which they
were produced. Compared to other early documents, inscriptions in the
runic corpus are relatively easily datable to a time of composition and
locatable in space and, since few if any involve transmission by copying,
they are less likely to be a linguistic palimpsest and more likely to be
accurately representative of the language of that time and place. When
it comes to reconstructing the culture, as well as the language, of the
past, the vocabulary of runic inscriptions therefore provides evidence
that not only predates the manuscript record, but is also more precise in
many ways, even if it is less extensive. While manuscript texts also have
contexts that illuminate them in various ways, such as the illustrations,
marginalia, glosses, and other kinds of paratexts, these are often of more
interest for what they say about the reception of the text than about its
inception. However, the contexts of all runic inscriptions, but the Viking
Age memorial stones in particular, locate them in the real world of their
time, and they give us a unique gateway to that world, if only we are
adept at reading them correctly.

In this way, the most useful dictionary of runic inscriptions would have
discursive definitions, somewhere between the analytic and the encyclo-
pedic. Not all words would need as extensive discussion as *bóndi* and *þegn*,
but these examples have demonstrated a range of the linguistic and non-
linguistic contexts that need to be taken into account in writing definitions
of words in runic inscriptions. All entries in a runic dictionary would there-
fore need to include reference to the relevant semantic, discourse, physical
and functional contexts, which will vary with the word being defined.

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