

A RUNE STONE WALK IN SIGTUNA



U 385. At Olofsgatan and the ruin of St Olof's Church

A rune stone walk in Sigtuna

A total of 15 rune stones are part of the walk, 12 in the medieval town centre and 3 at the Garnsviken strait east of the town centre. Beside each rune stone there is an information board where the runic inscription is translated into English. A few more rune stones are included in the permanent exhibition at the Sigtuna Museum. Here you can also see some of more than a hundred runic inscriptions made on artefacts and especially on animal bones, usually ribs from cattle, found during archaeological excavations in Sigtuna.

To the right of the museum entrance you will find an information board about rune stones and runic inscriptions, which may be an appropriate starting point for the walk. Another information board is at the end of the walkway along the lake shore at Til east of the town centre. On this board you can read about a Viking Age road, a ferry connection across the Garnsviken strait, and three rune stones erected along that road.

How it all began

The practice of erecting rune-inscribed memorial stones occurred in the 960s in Denmark and eventually spread northwards to Norway and Sweden. Runes had certainly been used long before, but to a limited extent, as magical inscriptions on objects or on rune stones like the famous Rökstenen in the province of Östergötland. For these inscriptions an older runic alphabet with 24 characters was used. In the 10th century it was succeeded by a runic alphabet with 16 characters.

Rune stones in Sweden

From the late 900s to the early 1100s thousands of rune stones were erected in Sweden from the province of Småland in the south to the province of Jämtland in the north. Overall, we know about 2,600 rune stones, nearly 2,000 of them are still out there in the landscape. By comparison, only 267 rune stones are known from Denmark (including the Swedish provinces of Skåne, Halland and Blekinge) and 133 rune stones from Norway. There are also scattered rune stones in countries visited by Scandinavians during the Viking Age. About half of all Swedish rune stones are from the province of Uppland. One of the reasons for this is that the tradition lasted for a much longer time here than in other parts of Scandinavia, more than a hundred years. Especially in the region between Stockholm and Uppsala a considerable number of rune stones have been found.

Christian memorial stones

Rune stones are not gravestones in the usual sense, but memorial stones meant to preserve the memory of both the deceased and the erectors for all future. They were therefore placed on selected spots in the landscape where they were clearly visible. Most of them are explicitly Christian monuments, whether they bear crosses or not. Rune stones are the oldest surviving original documents in the Swedish language.

Men and women alike

Over 90 percent of the stones are erected in memory of one or more men who died in distant countries, or died at home. Every eighth stone was erected by a single woman, every tenth by a woman together with several men, often the widow and sons of the deceased, but sometimes

also sisters and brothers. One-tenth of the stones tell of overseas voyages. Among these are a large group of stones about Ingvar den Vittfarne (the Far-Travelled) who was the leader of an unsuccessful Viking expedition to the Caspian Sea in the years 1036 to 1041. These rune stones are referring to warriors who went out with Ingvar and never came back.

Many rune stones in the province of Uppland give credit to those who built bridges. To build a bridge was a status-enhancing act as well as a Christian good deed akin to giving alms to the poor or to make a pilgrimage. In most cases, these bridges were not bridges in a modern sense of the word, but simple embankments and wooden causeways set up to facilitate the passage of marshes and small streams. Women are mentioned on 55 percent of these stones against 39 percent on rune stones in general, suggesting that building bridges was a pious act women were eager to do.

How to date a rune stone?

Researchers have shown that rune stones can be divided into different chronological groups based on ornamentation development. Briefly, the ornamentation is quite simple on the older stones while younger stones have more complex and elegant designs. In contrast, the older stones have richer and more varied texts than the younger ones, whose texts are short and more standardized.

The runic inscription is usually arranged inside a band which often has the shape of a serpent, a dragon or a quadruped beast. Fragments of paint on some rune stones show that rune stones were originally painted in bright colours. Many rune stones are signed. Among the best-known of the rune stone masters are Åsmund, Visäte, Balle, Öpir and Fot.

Rune stones from Sigtuna

More than thirty rune stones are known from Sigtuna. Many of these rune stones are very fragmentarily preserved and have not been found in their original context. Among these, some are exposed in the medieval town centre. Others are exhibited or kept at the Sigtuna Museum. A majority of the Sigtuna stones are dated to the second half of the 11th century. Fot and Torbjörn are two famous rune stone carvers who were

active in Sigtuna during this period. Some rune stones, from the late 11th century and the early 12th century, are made of relatively thin slabs of reddish sandstone. These stones have not been rune stones in a traditional sense, but a kind of gravestones erected in the churchyards of the earliest churches.

Other runic inscriptions from Sigtuna

In addition to the rune stones, there are more than a hundred runic inscriptions made on artefacts especially on bones, usually ribs from cattle. These inscriptions, found during archaeological excavations in Sigtuna, are dated to the 11th -13th centuries. The inscriptions are very diverse in both content and skills to handle the knife. The content is both "every-day" and magic and clearly different from the rather formalized texts that you can find on the rune stones. Longer inscriptions include magic spells as well as Christian prayers.

Some inscriptions are very short and may consist of only a personal name as Harold, Fastlög or "Liku owns the knife" as it is written on a knife handle. Relatively common are so-called futhark-bones, with the runic alphabet inscribed. If these inscriptions are made for an educational purpose or for a magical reason is difficult to say. Other inscriptions seem more like graffiti or illegible writing exercises.



A tribute to the King

Runic inscription on a rib from a cow. The text praises the King with superlatives.

"The King is most lavish with food. He gave most. He is gracious."

The inscription has been dated to c. 1100. The generous king referred to is probably Inge "the Elder" Stenkilsson, who reigned during the period 1080-1110. As *primus inter pares* it was necessary for the king to prove his supremacy by being lavish with food and gifts. Without gifts no friends, without friends no kingdom.

Who were the people mentioned?

A large number of both men and women are mentioned on rune stones and other runic inscriptions from Sigtuna. None of these people are known from other sources. However, we can assume that they were not just anybody, but relatively wealthy farmers, who in addition to their main estate in the countryside also owned a town yard in Sigtuna.

Medieval and later runes

Throughout the Middle Ages, runes were used as a popular writing in addition to the official Latin writing system. On the island of Gotland, the runes were in use until the mid-1600s and in the province of Dalarna (Dalecarlia) until the end of the 1800s.



A runic syllabary

Small disc made of oak with runic inscriptions on all sides, about 10 cm wide and 2,5 cm thick. It dates from c.1010-30. On the broad sides and edges a total of 110 runes are carved. The runes on one of the broad sides are a runic syllabary. The principle behind such a syllabary is the combination of all vowel and consonant characters in every possible way. The syllable links are here structured entirely in the order of the runic alphabet: **fu fo fa fi ... tu to ta ti ...** and so on. The syllabary demonstrates the transfer of a medieval method for teaching Latin writing to the teaching of runes. On the other side of the disc is an inscription encouraging the novice to “**be the bravest of men and learn runes**”.



Copper box, approximately 10 cm in diameter, with a runic inscription on the edge. Boxes of this kind served as containers for collapsible scales, which merchants used to weigh payment in gold and silver.

"Djäv acquired these scales from a Semsk man (from Samland or Zemgale=Estonia) And Vämund carved these runes. May the bird tear the pale thief apart. I noted on the corpse cuckoo ("asgöken"), how he swelled. "

The inscription is an incantation against thieves: A person who steals the scales shall be torn apart by "asgökar", i.e. ravens, in the same way as when they feast on the fallen on the battlefield.



Runic-inscribed tuning key from around the year 1100, made of elk antler carved with runes on all four sides. The runic inscription can be read in part (two sides) and probably says.

"Listen to (he) who made this! Erri made this harp with skilful hands" or "May Erri play this harp with skilful hands".

The inscription on the third side consists of uninterpreted secret runes of a type known as twig runes and on the fourth side are a few more runes that can also be a cipher of some kind.

How to walk?

An appropriate starting point for the walk is the information board just outside the entrance to the Sigtuna Museum at Stora gatan. Then follow the trail - with or without the three rune stones at the Garnsviken strait - as indicated on the map. If the museum is open you can choose to see the rune stones and runic inscriptions exhibited in the museum before or after the walk.

U 382-384, 386, 388, 395-406... A large number of rune stone fragments are exhibited or in storage in the museum. These fragments are found in various places in the town, usually in or around the church ruins. Most of these fragments consist of thin slabs of reddish sandstone that was easy to break and use as a building material both in churches and other buildings in the towns. One of these stones was found in front of the high altar in St Peter's (Per's) Church. The inscription tells of a man named Sven who brought his wife to Sigtuna to be buried in a Christian churchyard.

U 389 Stora gatan. At the entrance to the Sigtuna Museum.
»Gillög and Kuse(?) had this stone erected in memory of Arne's son». Gillaug is a well-known female name. The second name is probably to be interpreted as Kusi, known as a by-name with the meaning 'the big frightening one'. The rune stone was found in a cellar wall near the ruin of St Laurentius'(Lars') Church. It is not known where it was originally erected.

U 394 Inside the ruin of St Peter's (Per's) Church
»Torbjörn erected this stone in memory of Esbjörn, his brother. They are sons of Dyrver at... ». The names Þorbjörn and Æsbjörn are common in the runic inscriptions while Dyrver only is known from this inscription. The inscription is probably carved by Torbjörn who has also carved the stone U 379 by St Mary's Church, the boulder U 391 at Prästgatan and a fragment of a rune stone in the ruin of St Olof's Church. The stone has been in the ruin of St Peter's Church at least since the 17th century. Unfortunately a part of it is missing and therefore the end of the inscription is unknown.

U 392 Runstigen. On a huge boulder in a private garden on the east side of the alley.

»*Sven had these runes cut in memory of...was the name of the second, Assur the third, Germund the fourth...was their mother*». The inscription is badly damaged and the names of two of the four (or five) deceased men and their mother cannot be read anymore. All the names are common in the runic inscriptions of this period. The carving faced the road which during the Viking Age led northwards from the town to the central parts of Uppland.

U 393 Runstigen. On the east side of the alley.

»*Ofeg had this stone erected in memory of his two sisters, Tora and Rodvi*». OfægR means 'destined for a long life' and is quite common in the runic inscriptions. Rodvi is a Gotlandic name and this is the only example in the runic inscriptions of mainland Sweden. Tora is a shortened form of names like Torhild, Thorgunn. This is the only rune stone erected in memory of two sisters by their brother. The rune stone stands probably on its original site by the road, which during the Viking Age led northwards from the town to the central parts of Uppland.

U 391 Prästgatan. On a boulder in a private garden on the north side of the street, behind the arborvitae hedge. (Please do not enter the garden).

»*The guild brethren of the Frisians had these runes cut in memory of Albod, Slode's partner. Holy Christ help his soul. Torbjörn carved*». During the 11th century, maybe earlier, merchants who sailed distant seas established guilds for mutual protection and aid. The guild brethren were bound by oath to help each other through difficulties and share benefits and profits. Slodi is originally a by-name with the meaning 'the lazy one'. Torbjörn has also carved the boulder U 391 at Prästgatan and a fragment of a rune stone in the ruin of St Olof's Church. His inscriptions are clumsy and he never seems to have mastered the art of carving ornaments. Torbjörn was active in Sigtuna and vicinity around the mid-1000s.

U 390 At the ruin of St Laurentius' (Lars') Church.

»*Sven had the stone erected in memory of ...his father and Frödis in memory*

of Ulf, her husband. God help his soul». The names Sven and Ulv are common in the runic inscriptions but Frödis has only one other known bearer from the Viking Age and that is the daughter of Erik the Red who lived in Vinland for some time. The fragments of this stone have been found in two different places in Sigtuna. As important parts of the runes are damaged, the name of the father, in whose memory the stone was erected, is not readable any more.

Nf 1956 At Prästgatan and the ruin of St Laurentius' (Lars') Church.

»Anund had the stone erected in memory of himself in his lifetime». The name Anund was very common during the Viking Period. It was not unusual for a man to erect a rune stone in his own memory. The famous chieftain Jarlabanke in Täby erected at least five stones in memory of himself during his lifetime. The rune stone, broken into six fragments, was found in 1956 in the north wall of the ruin of St Lars' Church.

U 385 At Olofsgatan and the ruin of St Olof's Church. Walled up high in the west gable of the church ruin.

»...this stone in memory of Grimulv, his mate...». The name Grimulv is found in four other Swedish runic inscriptions. The word, *matunautr*, 'mate', was used about merchants who shared their daily life during a journey. Torbjörn has also carved a rune stone at St Mary's Church, U 379, the boulder U 391 at Prästgatan and probably the damaged rune stone, U 394 in the ruin of St Peter's Church.

Nf 90 In front of the west gable of St Mary's Church. In the north wall of the Gerner chapel.

»...in memory of Orm...». The name Orm (= snake) was not uncommon during the Viking Age.

U 380 On the lawn in front of the entrance to St Mary's Church.

»Åsbjörn and Kus/Gus...». Åsbiörn was a common name during the Viking Age. The other name Kuss/Guss is probably a by-name, meaning 'the bent one'.

U 381 In front of the west gable of St Mary's Church. In the east wall of the Gerner chapel.

»God help the spirit...» The prayer to God to help the spirit of the dead is common in the runic inscriptions, as almost all rune stones were erected by Christian people.

U 379 On the terrace south of St Mary's Church.

»The guild brethren of the Frisians had this stone set up in memory of Torkel their guild brother. God help his soul. Torbjörn carved». The Frisian guild is also mentioned on the boulder U 391 at Prästgatan also carved by Torbjörn. The names Þorbjörn and Þorkell were common during the Viking Age and are still in use in Scandinavia.

Return to the Sigtuna Museum and the rune stones and runic inscriptions exhibited in the museum's permanent exhibition, or proceed to the Garnsviken strait and the three rune stones standing there. In the latter case, follow Stora gatan (the main street) eastwards or the walkway along the lake shore until you reach Vibyvägen (the road to Viby village) on your left. Continue on the road a couple of hundred metres until you reach a signpost on the right side of the road indicating the path that leads down to the rune stone U 412. After seeing the rune stone return to the walkway along the lake shore. Continue towards Til and Björkbacka beach and the information board there. Follow the map to the rune stones U 411 and U 410. Alternatively, when you come from the town centre go directly to the information board and see U 412 on the way back. Return to Sigtuna on foot, by bus or otherwise.

U 412 On a boulder on the west side of the Garnsviken strait.

»Sibbe had the runes cut in memory of Orökja, his father, and Tyrve/Tyre in memory of her husband». The names Sibbi and Orökja are common in the runic inscriptions while Tyrve/Tyre was common in Denmark but rare in the Swedish inscriptions. When the runes were carved the waterfront reached almost to the boulder and the road from the town of Sigtuna passed it to a landing-stage for ferries across Garnsviken. On the opposite shore the remains of a landing-stage can be seen and from there the road continued eastwards passing the rune stones U 411 and U 410

towards Märsta where it connected to the main road southwards to Stockholm. The inscription is carved by Fot, who was active around the mid-1000s.

- U 411** On the height south of Fiskare Lundbergs gata and east of Fiskare Glans gata.
»Ill-dore(?) had this stone erected in memory of Sigger, his father. May God help his spirit». The name Illdori is not found in any other runic inscription. Ill- means 'evil' and Dori, is short for the male name Halldor. The stone stands on its original site where it served as a landmark for the ferries from the opposite shore.

- U 410** On the south side of the grove.
»Styrbjörn had this stone erected in memory of Sigsten, his father, brother of Holmsten». All three names in the inscription were common during the Viking Age. Holmsten is one of the most common male names. The stone stands on its original site at the edge of a grave field. A road passed by it towards Märsta where it connected to the main road southwards to Stockholm. Two hundred metres west of the stone the road passed the rune stone U 411 and continued towards the shore of the Garnsviken strait. Remains of a landing-stage for the ferries to the opposite shore can still be seen some fifty meters from the current waterfront.



Magic inscriptions against diseases. To ward off diseases in the Early Middle Ages, aside from limited medicinal measures, magic played an important role.

“You, boil of wound fever, prince of trolls, flee now, you are discovered. Three-fold woe be to you, Ulv. Be ninefold in agony, Ulv. You shrink back in fear of the formula-reader, who does not shudder at the rampaging of the demon. You sink down dead, if he could not cure the owner of the amulet.”

More reading about rune stones and runic inscriptions:

Helmer Gustavson (2007-2010). Flera artiklar om föremål med runinskrifter i Situne Dei – Årsskrift för Sigtunaforskning.

Sven B. F. Jansson (1963 och senare uppl.). Sveriges runinskrifter.

Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt (2008). Runristare i stad och land. Huggspårsanalyser av runstenar i och kring Sigtuna. Situne Dei.

Magnus Källström (2010). Lönnrunorna i Långgränd. En runinskrift och en ordlek från medeltidens Sigtuna. Situne Dei.

Thorgunn Snædal (1984). Igul och Björn läto resa stenen Runstenar och runinskrifter i Sigtuna kommun. Sigtuna Museers skriftserie 2.

Sten Tesch & Jacques Vincent (2005) (2. Utg.). Vyer från medeltidens Sigtuna. Sigtuna Museums skriftserie 10.

Upplands runinskrifter: Granskade och tolkade av **E. Wessén och S. B. F. Jansson**. Sveriges runinskrifter. Band 7. Stockholm 1945.

Marit Åhlén & Jacques Vincent (2002). Thorger och Disa lär sig rista runor. Riksantikvarieämbetets barn- och ungdomsböcker 1.

Home pages: www.raa.se and www.sigtunamuseum.se

(The Situne Dei articles can be downloaded from the Sigtuna Museum home page).



Riksantikvarieämbetet

Sigtuna Museum



Text: Thorgunn Snædal (National Board of Antiquities) and Sten Tesch (Arkistoria)(English translation reviewed by Karin Atterlöf Perslow).

Layout: Jacques Vincent (Sigtuna Museum). The information project "Runes in Sigtuna" has been funded by the National Board of Antiquities and implemented in cooperation with the Sigtuna Museum (2010).

** Numbering refers to Upplands runinskrifter.*