

# Thyre, Harald, and Ravnunge-Tue

By Birgit Sawyer

## 1. Introduction

For centuries the two Jelling stones (*DR* 41 and 42) have been the subject of lively discussion. Various problems have been debated, but, as far as I know, nobody has hitherto asked why two Danish kings in succession were so careful to commemorate Thyre, the wife of Gorm and the mother of Harald.

Not only is Thyre *commemorated* on these two stones; in Gorm's inscription she is also referred to as **tanmarkaR but**. During the 1930s and 1940s it was vigorously debated whether this epithet referred to Thyre or Gorm. It is now generally accepted that it refers to Thyre as 'Denmark's ornament'.<sup>1</sup> Quite apart from the linguistic and stylistic arguments supporting this interpretation, one wonders how the alternative interpretation ever gained ground; if the praise had *not* concerned Thyre, why was she commemorated at all – and on two rune-stones?

## 2. Questions

The first question I will raise here is why Thyre was honoured, and nine more questions will follow, all concerning the 'Jelling-dynasty'. First of all I will present the inscriptions on *DR* 41 and 42:

*DR* 41:

King Gorm made this monument in memory of Thorvi (Thyre), his wife, Denmark's ornament

*DR* 42:

King Harald commanded this monument to be made in memory of Gorm, his father, and in memory of Thorvi (Thyre), his mother – that Harald who won the whole of Denmark for himself, and Norway, and made the Danes Christian

### 1. Why did two kings in succession commemorate Thyre?

Since it is unusual for women to be commemorated on rune-stones, we can assume that we are dealing with unusual women.<sup>2</sup> The importance of Thyre 'Danebod' is confirmed by Saxo Grammaticus, Sven Aggesen, and their Icelandic contemporaries – even if they give very different accounts of her role in Danish history.

Of the women honoured by rune-stones most seem to have belonged to the very highest strata of society; so, for example, Viborg was the mother of a prominent chieftain in Bække (*DR* 20), and there is little doubt that Asbod was the wife of a *landhirþr* (*DR* 134). Like Thyre Danebod a certain Thyre had two, perhaps even three, rune-stones raised in her memory, see below under question 3.

### 2. What did Harald mean when he claimed to have won the whole of Denmark for himself?

Did he not inherit Denmark from his father Gorm? Were there competitors inside the family, leading

to a conflict, in which Harald got the upper hand? What does ‘Denmark’ mean? Does it really mean the Danish kingdom – or does it mean the marches of the Danes, i.e. the islands and areas east of the Great Belt?

Niels Lund claims that *DR* 133 (Skivum), referring to the ‘best and first of *landmen* in Denmark’, indicates that Jutland belonged to ‘Denmark’,<sup>3</sup> a conclusion that is questionable; this is (apart from Harald’s rune-stone) the only rune-stone in Jutland (or, for that matter west of the Great Belt) that mentions ‘Denmark’! The reason seems to be that the deceased had not been active at home, i.e. in Jutland. The Karlevi-stone in Öland (*DR* 411) refers to the commemorated chieftain as ‘(no captain?) will rule more uprightly land in Denmark’, which makes sense, if it means *the marches of the Danes*.

Harald certainly meant that something *new* had been added to his kingdom. My suggestion is that *he had won new areas*, i.e. areas east of the Great Belt. It should, however, also be kept in mind that the Germans had their own meaning of ‘Denmark’, namely *their* march between Saxony and the Danes.

3. *Ravnunge-Tue erected two (three?) rune-stones in memory of Thyre. Who was this Thyre? Who was Ravnunge-Tue? Why did he commemorate her?*

### 3.1. *Who was this Thyre?*

Like Thyre Danebod a certain Thyre had two, perhaps even three, rune-stones raised in her memory, confirming her importance and high status:

*DR* 26 (Læborg, with a ‘Thor’s hammer’):

Tue, Ravn’s descendant, carved these runes after Thyre, his **trutnik**

*DR* 29 (Bække 1):

Tue, Ravn’s descendant, and Funden and Gnyble, those three made Thyre’s mound

*DR* 34 (Horne):

Tue (Ravn’s) descendant, made (‘Thyre’s’ – or ‘this’) mound

*DR* asserts that the Horne-stone, raised by the same man who honoured Thyre in Læborg and Bække, does not commemorate anyone called Thyre. The only trace left of the dead person’s name is **Þ** and a following rune that cannot be **u**, but was plausibly **a**. Since in Læborg and Bække the name Thyre is spelled with a **u** directly after **Þ**, the editors state that the name in the Horne-inscription cannot have been Thyre. They admit that on Harald’s stone (*DR* 42) the name is spelled **Þaurui** (with an **a** before **u**) but since they presuppose that the Horne-inscription is using the same formula as Bække 1 (**kaÞu ÞuruiaR haurk**), they state that the missing word cannot have been Thyre but possibly **Þansi** (‘this’). This argument, however, is weak; even if the same formula had been used, we cannot assume consistency in the spelling.

Although the name of the women commemorated in at least two of the above inscriptions (*DR* 26 and 29), and these stones belong to the same period as the Jelling stones, the editors of *DR* did not identify her with Thyre ‘Danebod’.<sup>4</sup> It is, however, most unlikely that, in a period when women were seldom commemorated on rune-stones, two contemporaries in Jutland, both named Thyre, were honoured by two (one of them possibly by three) rune-stones, a distinction that was only twice bestowed on men.<sup>5</sup> The reasons given for *not* identifying the Thyre of the inscriptions

from Læborg and Bække with king Gorm's wife require some discussion:

First, the *DR* editors' argument that 'since Thyre was one of the most common names at the time, the identification of Thyre on the Bække-Læborg-stones with Gorm's Thyre must be considered highly uncertain' (*DR* col. 52) must be questioned. As the claim that the name was common at that time largely depends on its occurrence in seven (possibly eight) inscriptions, four (or five) of which are in question here, the argument is circular. If this name was so common, there would be all the more reason for adding information to identify the Thyre in question. This is indeed the case with the other three women called Thyre, who are carefully described as wives or mother of named individuals.<sup>6</sup> In Bække (possibly also in Horne), however, Thyre is *not* identified, which indicates that her identity was well-known. The Bække stone also mentions 'Thyre's mound'; references to mounds are very rare in Viking-Age inscriptions,<sup>7</sup> and it is highly unlikely that an otherwise unknown woman would be honoured with such a prestigious memorial. In Læborg Thyre is referred to as Tue's **trutnik**, and Erik Moltke's view was that Tue, being subordinate to a lord, here commemorates his lord's lady.<sup>8</sup> This, however, is not much of an identification, since we do not know who the lord was.

Secondly, it was precisely the reference to 'Thyre's mound' that convinced Erik Moltke that we are dealing with different women; according to him Thyre Danebod never had a monument of her own but was buried together with King Gorm.<sup>9</sup> We now know, however, that this was a false assumption; Thyre was not buried together with Gorm.<sup>10</sup> The place of her grave remains unknown.

Thirdly, while, in *DR*, the Læborg-, Bække-, and

Horne-stones are dated as 'pre-Jelling', Moltke later changed his mind and accepted that they must be later than Gorm's stone and contemporary with Harald's.<sup>11</sup> The arguments in favour of their dating before Gorm's time were the wrongly placed 'h' in **rhafnukatufi** (*DR* 26), indicating an awareness of the original h in the name **hrafn**, together with the type of word-divider on the Læborg-stone, while, on the other hand, the arrangement of the band around the edge of the face of the Horne-stone led Moltke to think that it should be dated *c.* 1000. These revised datings confirmed Moltke in his refusal to identify Ravnunge-Tue's Thyre with Thyre Danebod. There is, however, no reason to suppose that rune-stones were erected immediately after the death of the people being commemorated. Harald's stone at Jelling, for example, must have been erected some time after his parents' death. What is more, there is no reason to suppose that all Ravnunge-Tue's stones were strictly contemporary. To judge by the dating criteria used by Moltke, they must have been erected over a period of years.

It is, therefore, more likely that we *are* dealing with the same Thyre – in Jelling, Læborg, Bække, and possibly Horne.

### 3.2. *Who was Ravnunge-Tue?*

Ravnunge-Tue had erected three rune-stones (perhaps even four),<sup>12</sup> and in the whole of Scandinavia it is very unusual that people sponsor more than *one* stone; in Denmark there are only five other examples.<sup>13</sup> For a person to raise *one* rune-stone was a marker of status; for the same person to raise two or more indicates *very high* status. It has been suggested that Ravnunge-Tue was the builder of Thyre Danebod's grave-mound, but this is highly unlikely; first, we do not know where this is situated, secondly it is anachro-

nistic to expect an engineer, employed by the king, to have raised rune-stones. It is very unusual for subordinates to sponsor stones commemorating their superiors, and unique that a subordinate erected three! There was no ‘*allemanrät*’, i.e. no one had the right to erect a rune-stone anywhere or freely to ‘advertise’; the sponsors of rune-stones were land-owners, who raised their stones on their own ground. Since Ravnunge-Tue erected stones in Bække, Læborg, and Horne, he was obviously a major landowner; the elaborate monument in Bække, contemporary with and probably rivalling the one in Jelling, bears witness to his family’s status.

### 3.3. *Why did Ravnunge-Tue honour Thyre?*

Here I would welcome a discussion about the meaning of the word **trutnik**; what does it mean in *DR* 134, (Ravnkilde), where Asser commemorates *his trutnik*? If it cannot be translated ‘wife’, why did both Ravnunge-Tue and Asser commemorate *their lords’* wives, and who were the lords?

### 4. *Where is Thyre Danebod buried?*

Is there another mound over her somewhere else in Jutland?

### 5. *Why did Harald Bluetooth start building the south mound at Jelling after he had been baptized? Why does it not contain a burial chamber?*

The building of this mound started *c.* 970 but was interrupted and apparently not finished until the 980s (see note 10). Why was it constructed? It is puzzling that a Christian king should want to build a pagan monument after his conversion – and after having reburied his father in the church. What was the purpose of the south mound?

### 6. *Why does Gorm’s rune-stone show younger features than Harald’s?*

*DR* 41 has younger orthographic and linguistic features than *DR* 42; while *DR* 41 consistently uses dividing marks between the words, some words in *DR* 42 are run together (**kurmfafPursin**; **aukaft**), and where *DR* 41 has monographic spelling, probably denoting a monophthong (**Pusi**; **Purui**), *DR* 42 has digraphic spelling, probably denoting a diphthong (**Pausi**; **Paurui**). These features, together with others noted below, have led to the suggestion that the inscription on Gorm’s stone is later than that on Harald’s.

### 7. *Where was Gorm’s stone originally situated?*

It was excavated by Caspar Markedaner in the churchyard of Jelling in 1586, and we do not know for how long it had been hidden in the ground.

Neither Saxo Grammaticus nor Sven Aggesen had seen Gorm’s stone; according to Saxo, Thyre survived her husband, and in Sven Aggesen’s work it is impossible to decide who survived whom.<sup>14</sup> Neither of them knew that it was Gorm who should have commemorated Thyre; they both report that *Harald wanted to honour his mother* (not both parents!) with a big stone, an enterprise that, according to Sven Aggesen, had to be interrupted because of a rebellion against Harald, while, according to Saxo, it was the direct cause of the uprising.<sup>15</sup> Tradition had obviously preserved the memory of a stone commemorating Thyre that was never erected, and of her honouring epithet. Both Sven and the author of the *Jómsvíkinga Saga* render her name ‘Denmark’s ornament’ (**Decus Datie**; **Danmarkar bót**), but while Sven explains it by saying that she had rescued the Danish kingdom from being conquered by the German emperor, the author of the *Jómsvíkinga Saga* has her rescue the Danes from a

famine.<sup>16</sup> According to Saxo, who calls her ‘the head of the Danish sovereignty’ (**Danicæ maiestatis caput**), she defended the southern border of Denmark by building a fortification (Danevirke) and the eastern border, by freeing Skåne from Swedish occupation.<sup>17</sup>

Critical historians have rejected these late stories as fantasies, but it is hardly justifiable to let Thyre completely vanish from Danish history – as Lauritz Weibull did.<sup>18</sup>

#### 8. Why did Harald not refer to his father as ‘king’?

In DR 4 (Hedeby) Asfrid commemorates king Sigtryg, her and Gnupa’s son. If Gorm had really been a Danish king, it is remarkable that his son did not acknowledge that on his prestigious rune-stone. Had Gorm’s royal power been questioned/seriously contested during his own life-time? There were many powerful chieftains in Denmark at this time, and we must reckon with conflicts for royal power ...

#### 9. To whom was Harald Bluetooth married?

DR 55 (Sønder Vissing) has been interpreted as having been sponsored by Harald’s wife Tove, ‘Mistive’s daughter’ in memory of her mother. But why did Tove honour her mother without naming her? Since the ‘framing theory’ is now impossible to uphold,<sup>19</sup> it is far more likely that *it was Tove’s mother who was married to Harald Bluetooth*.

No other source knows about a Tove, being married to Harald. What we do know is that Harald was allied to the Obodrite prince Mistive, and since it was very common in creating political alliances to ‘cross-marry’, a plausible scenario is that Mistive had married a Danish woman (which could explain his daughter’s Scandinavian name Tove), and that Harald married an Obodrite woman, namely an earlier wife/concu-

bine of Mistive. There is some evidence that Mistive lived until c. 990 and if so, Harald cannot have married his widow. This may be why Tove – as partially a foreigner – found it important to mark her status as belonging to the Jelling family.

#### 10. Who was Toke Gormsson in Hällestad (DR 295, 296, and 297)?

Can he have been the brother of Harald Bluetooth? The monument (five stones) is the most impressive in Denmark and must have been sponsored in memory of a very powerful person, probably a member of the Gorm-dynasty.

The information given in the inscription that ‘he did not flee at Uppsala’ has been interpreted as referring to the battle at ‘Fyrisvallarna’, where the Sveaking Erik was attacked by and defeated his nephew Styrbjörn and his Danish allies (which led to his surname ‘the Victorious’). The reason why this piece of information was considered important enough to be included may be that *somebody else had fled from the battle*, possibly Harald Bluetooth, who, according to tradition, abandoned his planned support for Styrbjörn. If this is true, we witness a competition between two of Gorm’s sons or between Toke Gormsson and his nephew, Harald’s son Sven Forkbeard.

#### 3. An appeal

I have previously attempted to answer the first eight questions and refrain from repeating them here.<sup>20</sup> I would instead welcome a constructive discussion, taking into account the likelihood that there were frequent competitions for power in tenth-century Denmark. It is also important to consider the character of the rune-stones as markers of status and their function as declarations of claims to property and inheritance.

I have not previously presented my suggested answers to the last two questions; they are 'speculative', but certainly also worth further discussion.

#### Notes

1. DR cols 78-80; Nielsen 1974; Moltke 1985 p. 207.
2. Among Denmark's c. 177 Viking-Age rune-stones only twelve were raised in memory of women (ten after women on their own; two after women together with men): on their own: DR 26, 29, 30, 34, 40, 41, 55, 114 (?), 134, and 188; with men: DR 42 and 143.
3. Lund 1991 p. 163.
4. DR col. 52; cf. Nielsen 1974 pp. 172-9.
5. DR 2, 4 (Sigtryg); 295, 297 (Toke).
6. DR 97, 133, 217.
7. DR 29, 34, 143, 230, 295, 296, 411.
8. Moltke 1985 pp. 228-30.
9. Moltke 1985 p. 246.
10. Krogh 1982 p. 188; 1993, pp. 257-259.
11. Moltke 1985 pp. 228-30.
12. Perhaps he is also the sponsor of Bække 2 (DR 30). It has previously been argued that the Bække 2 stone was sponsored by 'Revne and Tobbe (?)' in memory of their mother Vibrog (Vibrog?), but I wonder if the spelling **hrībna ktubi** may instead be a variant of the spelling **rhafnukatufi**, i.e. 'Ravnunge-Tue'. If this is so, he sponsored two stones in Bække, one in memory of his mother Vibrog and the other in memory of Thyre (in Læborg referred to as his **trutnik**. Cf. DR 30 (Bække 2): **hrībna ktubi**; DR 26 (Læborg): **rhafnukatufi**; DR 29 (Bække 1): **rafnuka tufi**; DR 34 (Horne): **fnukatufi** . . .
13. DR 2 & 4 (Asfrid in memory of her son Sigtryg); DR 58 & 91 (58: Toke, the smith, in memory after Troels, Gudmund's son, and 91: Toke the smith, in memory of Revle, son of Esge Bjørn's son); DR 209 & 230 (209: Ragnhild in memory of her husband Alle; 230: Ragnhild in memory of her husband Gunulv; DR 282 & 283 (282: Esbern and Tomme in memory of their brothers; 283: Esbern in memory of Tomme); DR 334 & 335 (334: Fader in memory of his brother Asser; 335: Fader in memory of Bjørn, together with whom he owned a ship).
14. Saxo IX. xi (p. 268); Aggesen, VII (pp. 116-7).
15. Saxo, X.viii (p. 276); Aggesen VII-VIII (pp. 116-21).
16. Aggesen VI (pp. 114-15); V-VII (pp. 108-17); *Jónsvikinga Saga*,

ch. 3, pp. 3-4.

17. Saxo X.vi (p. 274); X. iii (p. 272).

18. Weibull 1928.

19. Nielsen 1943; 1974; 1977.

20. Sawyer 2000; B. & P. Sawyer 2002; B. & P. Sawyer 2003.

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