

Memorials in speech and writing

By Judith Jesch

1. Remembering the dead

Rune stones are very clear evidence of the commemoration of the dead in the Viking Age. The several thousand surviving runic monuments from that period may of course have had functions other than the memorial one. They may have served to document inheritance, to rewrite history, to glorify the living rather than the dead, to support the activities of a nascent Christian church, or to demonstrate political power and allegiances.¹ However, I would argue that all of these functions of such monuments, while possible, are secondary or additional. The name of the deceased is the one almost invariable feature of rune stone inscriptions, indicating that their primary function was to preserve the memory of the dead into the future.²

This orientation towards the future is indicated first of all by the use of writing, a practice which lends permanence to an utterance. Secondly, the use of hard rock (most commonly granite) as a writing surface also suggests a desire for permanence. And thirdly, a small number of the inscriptions on rune stones make specific reference to the longevity of their message, thereby bringing out the reason for the choice of writing on a hard surface that is implicit in all rune stone inscriptions. Thus, the Nöbbele stone from Småland (Sm 16) notes that *því mun gó[ðs manns u]m getit verða, meðan steinn lifir ok stafir rúna* ‘so the good

man will be commemorated while the stone and the rune-staves live’.³ Both this and the Danish Randbøl stone (DR 40: *Þeir stafar munu Þorgunni mjök lengi lifa* ‘Very long will these staves live for Þorgunnr’)⁴ use the verb *lifa* ‘to live’ of the rune stone, or of the runes carved in the stone, which paradoxically survive while the commemorated person does not. A more complex paradox using the same idea is explored in the Sälna stone from Uppland (U 323): *Ei mun liggja, með aldr lifir, brú harðslegin, breið ept góð[an]. Sveinar gerðu at sinn fǫður. Má eigi brautarkuml betra verða*. ‘Ever will it lie, while mankind lives on, the firm-founded bridge, broad in memory of the good [one]. The lads made in memory of their father. No path-side monument will be better’.⁵ While individuals die, humankind as a whole persists, and the stone bridge referred to in, and assisted by, the inscription will ensure that memories of a dead individual continue through the generations of mortal individuals, as long as they continue to be born.

In everyday life, remembering the dead is primarily an oral activity. Our dead friends and relatives live on in our thoughts, we say. And speaking about them seems to bring them back to life, or at least it projects us back into the time when they were alive. Thus we can feel that we are transcending death by speaking about the dead, and it was no doubt the same in the Viking Age. This might be called informal commemo-

moration, a normal habit of all humans. But there is also evidence that people in the Viking Age practised a more formal and public sort of oral commemoration of the dead, or at least of certain kinds of dead people. The main evidence for this comes in the many hundreds of stanzas of skaldic verse, mainly in the *dróttkvætt* metre, that survive from the Viking Age. Skaldic verse was originally an oral genre, practised in a society with only very limited literacy, and it survives today only because it was written down much later than the time in which it was composed and performed. It is now accessible mostly in Icelandic manuscripts of the thirteenth century or later, yet much of it purports to be a product of the Viking Age, originally composed and performed in an oral context.⁶

There are of course problems with this skaldic evidence. Firstly, it is difficult to reconstruct how such oral texts were transmitted, and how they survived the transition to literacy to be preserved for posterity, although it is significant that it was in the highly literate society of medieval Iceland, obsessed with the past, that the stanzas were committed to writing. Secondly, the Viking Age skaldic verse that was of interest to the medieval Icelanders was primarily that composed by Icelandic poets for Norwegian kings, and a few others, and how far the phenomenon extended to other parts of Scandinavia is difficult to say. Thirdly, not all surviving skaldic verse is commemorative verse for someone who was dead at the time of composition, indeed, much skaldic verse was intended as praise of a living ruler before whom it was first declaimed. Finally, the surviving skaldic verse is very restricted in its application – only certain people seem to have been commemorated in this way, normally those of high social rank. Nevertheless, I think that some of the bias in the corpus is due to the selec-

tive interests of the Icelandic writers from the twelfth century onwards, and it is very likely that the skaldic commemorative verse that has survived is only part of a much larger body of orally-performed verse, designed to preserve the memory of the dead, which has not survived. The formal oral commemoration of the dead in poetry was therefore much more widespread in Viking Age Scandinavia than is suggested by the poetry that has survived in Icelandic manuscripts. In this paper, I will attempt to demonstrate that this oral commemoration functioned in much the same way as the commemorative rune stones.

2. *Skaldic and runic memorials*

The example of the Karlevi stone from Öland (Öl 1)⁷ enables us to make a link between the skaldic verse preserved in medieval Icelandic manuscripts and the Viking Age origins of this kind of verse. The unique skaldic stanza on this stone is commemorative, but it differs from much other skaldic verse in that the man being commemorated is now unknown and was not a king (though he probably was of quite high rank), and was moreover from eastern Scandinavia. Yet it is not an accident that the Karlevi stone is unique among rune stones in preserving a *dróttkvætt* stanza. Just as carving runes in granite had the function of preserving an utterance for posterity, so the tight metres of *dróttkvætt* were also designed to preserve an utterance, albeit an oral one, for the future. Skaldic verse and runic inscriptions were parallel expressions of the same desire to preserve the memory of the deceased for posterity. As the guarantee of this preservation was either the use of writing on stone or the use of a strict and well-defined poetic structure, it was not normally necessary to use both granite and *dróttkvætt*.

There are of course other rune stones, for the most part in central Sweden, the inscriptions of which include texts that might be called poetic. However, none of these is directly comparable to Karlevi and to skaldic verse, as none of them is in a strict skaldic metre. Most of the texts are short, and insofar as they can be said to be metrical, they are mainly in the common and simple eddic metre known as *fornyrðislag*. In this case, the longevity of the message is guaranteed by the runes carved in stone rather than by the metre, which is too loose for any kind of guarantee. It is significant that scholars have had difficulty in many cases in deciding which inscriptions are metrical, or have concluded that the poetic tinge to these inscriptions is sometimes accidental rather than intended, being no more than the kind of heightened language appropriate to commemoration of the dead.⁸ Even those verses which are admitted to the corpus of metrical inscriptions can rarely be described as poetry in any aesthetic sense: their primary concern is still with the commemorative message. Thus, these runic verses (unlike Karlevi) are not in the same category as a formal commemorative poem: they were composed to be written, rather than to be recited. While they certainly show the influence of oral poetic forms, they show little or no evidence of having been performed in an oral communicative situation prior to being recorded in runes.

While both runic and skaldic forms of commemoration were available to Viking Age Scandinavians, the surviving evidence of their distribution suggests that the choice of which one of these to use was both geographically and socially determined. Skaldic verse is concentrated in western Scandinavia and the colonies of the west, and is almost exclusively about men of high rank, mostly kings and the highest level of chie-

ftain. Women are mostly notable by their absence. In contrast, runic inscriptions are overwhelmingly from eastern Scandinavia, and, while they seem to have been commissioned for persons of both high status and somewhat lower status, numerically those of lower status are in the majority. The two commemorative genres thus seem to be complementary, with little overlap between them. Yet, if they spring from the same underlying cultural practice, it may well be that they have characteristics in common, and that one can shed light on the other. Thus it should be possible to consider the commemorative aspects of runic inscriptions in the light of the commemorative aspects of skaldic verse, in other words, to ask whether an understanding of skaldic commemorative verse can shed any light on runic memorials.⁹

3. Patrons, practitioners and the communicative situation

One characteristic shared by both runic and skaldic commemoration is that they are produced by a professional practitioner at the behest of a patron. Normally, a relative or friend of the deceased commissions a poet or a rune carver to make a poem or a rune stone in exchange for some kind of payment.

This practice of commissioning the monument, or causing the monument to be made, is made explicit in most rune stone inscriptions. Thus the name of the commissioner is an obligatory part of the inscription, just as the name of the deceased is, and normally comes first in the commemorative formula.¹⁰ The frequent use of the auxiliary verb *láta* 'cause to' with the verb of making (e.g. *gera*) or erecting (e.g. *reisa*) the stone indicates that the commissioner did not physically make the monument him- or herself.¹¹ Similarly, the frequent (though not invariable) naming

of the rune carver or other craftsman also alludes to this situation.¹² Very occasionally, the commissioner and the rune carver seem to be the same person, so that payment did not come into it. However, given the size of most runic monuments, it is difficult to believe that more than a very small number of them were quarried, made and erected by just one person, and therefore we can assume that some kind of craftsman was normally involved even when the inscription does not make this explicit.

In a skaldic commemorative poem, neither the poet nor the person who pays the poet is normally named in the text. However their part in the process is just as important, as will be discussed in more detail below. The text itself, the poem, if it names anyone, normally names only the deceased person being commemorated. And while there may be more than one person being commemorated or more than one patron, there is never more than one poet, for any one poem. There may of course have been other poets who composed other poems about the same person being commemorated, or for the same patron, but they are not relevant to the text of the individual poem.

The communicative situation in which these acts of commemoration took place helps to explain why it is normal to name the patron (and sometimes the practitioner) in runic memorials but not in skaldic verse. The communicative situation of a rune stone is simple. Once it has been erected, it stands there and its inscription can be read by anyone passing by who has the requisite skills. Those responsible for erecting rune stones were well aware that this could include people in the distant future as well as in their own time.¹³ This after all is the power of writing. In this situation, the only way to transmit the name of either the patron or practitioner is to include it in the in-

scription and, as noted above, the former is almost invariably and the latter quite frequently included.

The oral communicative situation of the skaldic commemoration is much more complex. It will involve at a minimum the poet himself and his patron, and an audience. The poet will declaim his poem to the patron and the audience. In this communicative situation, everyone in the audience knows the name and significance of both the poet and the patron, which is why they do not need to be named in the text. However, the tradition that ensured the preservation of these commemorative poems beyond the immediate communicative situation almost invariably also preserved the name of the poet, and sometimes of the patron, in association with the poem. Thus, the poem was transmitted to future audiences, by tradition-bearers, who remembered not only the poem, but also the people associated with it. Even after the passing of a couple of centuries, when the poems were written down in Iceland, it was still considered important to transmit the name of the poet and his patron: without them, the poem had no real significance. Although the process is different, the end result is analogous to the runic inscriptions, whose primary function is similarly to transmit certain names to future audiences.

4. Cultural resonances

Both runic and skaldic commemoration are products of the cultural situation of their time. Rune stones can make use of the art and iconography of the dominant mythological system of their time, whether that was Christian or pagan. We can even sense some of the tensions and accommodations between the two systems in the incorporation of certain pre-Christian elements into Christian contexts (e.g. the legend of

Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer on the Ramsundsberget stone: Sö 101).¹⁴ While a small number of rune stones famously include scenes from Norse mythology, it is often difficult or impossible to see any connection between the iconography and the memorial text.¹⁵ The use of Christian iconography, while more common, is similarly allusive: many rune stones, particularly in Sweden, incorporate a cross into their design, without any explicit reference to Christianity in the text.¹⁶

Similarly, skaldic verse is famous for its use of kennings, poetical circumlocutions which can often be understood only by those with the requisite mythological knowledge. Despite their strongly mythological diction and, in some cases, content, skaldic commemorative poems are not primary mythological texts.¹⁷ It is not their function to transmit mythological knowledge, rather they assume a knowledge of mythology that is shared between poet and audience, and merely allude to that shared knowledge in the course of fulfilling their primary social function. Even kennings which are not strictly speaking mythological require the audience to share in a particular body of knowledge to decipher them. Yet this shared knowledge often has little or no relevance to the substance of the text, like the iconography of the rune stones. Also, we can see in skaldic verse the same kind of accommodation between old and new mythologies as on the rune stones, for instance when Christian kings are referred to by kennings based on heathen gods, or when the poets develop new kennings for Christian concepts.¹⁸

Thus, both types of commemoration allude to shared knowledge, much of it the basic cultural knowledge which is called 'mythology', and assume that knowledge in their audience.

5. The 'skald'

Given these general similarities between runic and skaldic commemoration, it is also worth considering whether the use of the ON word *skald* (later *skáld*) 'poet' in a number of runic inscriptions establishes further links between the two genres. The word occurs in at least five runic inscriptions, yet none of these includes any poetry. In three instances from Uppland (U 29 Hillersjö, U 532 Roslag-Bro kyrka, U 951 Säby), *skald* is the by-name of the rune-carver (U29 and U 532 the same rune-carver), in the other two from Västergötland (Vg 4 Stora Ek, see fig. 1), and Rogaland in Norway (N 239 Stangeland), it is the by-name of the commissioner of the monument.¹⁹ Of course it is perfectly possible that these people were in fact poets, even if the inscriptions in which they are named neither quote nor give any hint of what kind of poetry they composed if they were.²⁰ However, the preconception, shared by all the editors of these inscriptions, that the word *skald* necessarily implies that these people were poets in the modern, aesthetic sense, may be wrong. It is noteworthy, not only that three of the runic instances of the word refer to the rune-carver, but also that two of the inscriptions (Vg 4 and U 29) are to do with property and inheritance. Thus, the word seems to relate more to the social function of the inscription than to some otherwise unspecified connection with poets and poetry.

I suggest therefore that these runic 'skalds' had a documentary role, similar to that of skaldic poets, of 'fixing' facts and events for the future.²¹ The role of the 'skald' in the Viking Age was thus conceived of not as a poetical one, in the sense of a creator of aesthetic texts, but rather as the job of recording essential information to preserve it accurately for the future.²²



Fig. 1. The Stora Ek stone (Vg 4). Photo: JJ.

This recording could be done in either poetry or runic writing which, as noted in section 2, above, can both serve this function. In the 13th century, Snorri Sturluson still glossed the word *skáld* as *fræðamaðr*, ‘learned, knowledgeable person’, someone who has such essential information rather than someone who is a ‘poet’ in the modern sense.²³

6. Perspectives on Danish inscriptions

It is time to consider whether this comparison with skaldic verse is of any use for understanding the Danish runic inscriptions that are the subject of this volume. In general, it is far easier to make comparisons between the later Swedish runic memorials and skaldic verse, partly because the bulk of both of them is from the eleventh century, but also because the Swedish stones are more likely to have the additional features which facilitate this comparison, such as decoration, rune-carver’s signatures, or verse. As we have just seen, the word *skald* occurs in four (or five) Swedish inscriptions and one Norwegian one, but cannot be found on any Danish rune stone. Moreover there is very little in the skaldic corpus which can be associated with the commemoration of Danes.²⁴ It is certainly legitimate to ask, and not at all certain, whether the study of skaldic poetry can shed any light specifically on Danish inscriptions, particularly the early ones.

One aspect of reading runic inscriptions that may however be clarified by a comparison with skaldic verse is the arrangement of the lines in some of the longer inscriptions. The best examples here are the two related stones of Glavendrup and Tryggevælde (DR 209, 230).²⁵ In their article on ‘Indskriftordning’, Jacobsen and Moltke (1941-1942 cols. 820-825) give a fairly exhaustive analysis of the different ways in

which text could be arranged on Danish rune stones. Both of these lengthy inscriptions have complex arrangements, which are not entirely logical in their ordering. Nevertheless, the arrangement is not entirely random, either, and significant sections of text are on the whole kept together.

The comparison between runic inscriptions and skaldic verse has been made before. But usually such comparison is visual, in that the interlacing of the clauses in a skaldic stanza is compared to the visual interlacing of the decorated rune stones of the Viking Age (as in von See 1980 p. 56-57). This is fundamentally to misunderstand the nature of skaldic verse, which was an aural, and not a visual, experience, unlike today when poetry is normally experienced on the page. Thus, the similarity between a skaldic stanza and runic inscriptions like Tryggevælde and Glavendrup cannot be visual, but it may be cognitive. Although one is oral and the other is written, in both cases the message consists of a number of sense units, which at first experience appear to be jumbled up, and not in a logical order. But the sense units do relate to each other, and a patient unravelling of the text will reveal their relationship to each other and ultimately the overall message. In other words, the text has to be grasped as a whole, before its various parts can be understood in relation to each other, whether it is written or oral.

This process is illustrated in the well-known anecdote from ch. 18 of *Gísla saga*, in which the hero Gísli reveals in a skaldic stanza that he has killed his sister’s husband.²⁶ She memorises the stanza on hearing it, but has to go away to work out exactly what is being said before she realises the truth of the matter. The first-time reader of a runic memorial like Glavendrup is in the same position as Þórdís. The stone is grasped as a



Fig. 2. The Glavendrup stone (DR 209). Photo: JJ.

whole object, covered with text on all sides. Certain significant aspects of the text stand out at first glance, such as the enormous and central runes with the name of

Ragnhildr, the commissioner of the monument (fig. 2). But the various parts of the inscription have to be puzzled out more slowly, and reassembled in their correct order, for the final message to be revealed.²⁷

Skaldic verse can also shed light on those Danish rune stones that form part of a larger monument. Thus the Glavendrup monument consists of a rune stone within a ship-setting in which Ragnhildr's husband was buried. Skaldic verse can also be associated with a ship-burial, though the example is a verse from *Landnámabók* which is probably not from the Viking Age. Jakob Benediktsson has argued (1975 p. 16-17) that it was composed in the 12th century, to go with the anecdote in which it is preserved, yet it illustrates the Viking Age commemorative urge to transcend the death of the individual:²⁸

Einn byggvik stöð steina,
 stafnrúm Atals hrafni,
 esat of þegn á þiljum
 þrøng, býk á mar ranga.
 Rúm es þøðvitrum betra,
 brimdýri knák stýra,
 lifa mun þat með lofðum
 lengr, en illt of gengi.

Alone I inhabit the place of stones [= mound], the stem-space of Atall's raven [= ship], I dwell on the steed of the frames [= ship]; it is not crowded for the man on the deck-planks. Space is better for the battle-wise one than bad companionship; I am able to steer the surf-animal [ship]; that will live for long among men.

The anecdote concerns a certain Ásmundr who, it is said, was buried in a mound in a ship-burial, with

his slave beside him. One day, someone passing the mound heard this stanza being spoken inside. The slave was then removed from the mound, presumably to relieve Ásmundr of his 'bad companionship'.

The anecdote is a typical Icelandic ghost-story, and hardly direct evidence for Viking Age burial or other practices. But at the very least it builds on the same tradition of ship-burial with a mound that we find at Glavendrup, and makes a neat link between such visible memorials and the verbal ones of skaldic verse. The ghost too wants his little speech to 'live for long among men', like the inscriptions discussed in section 1, above, particularly the knowledge of how well he could steer a ship. It is almost as if Ali of Glavendrup, or Gunnulfr of Tryggevælde, is speaking from beyond the grave.²⁹ But unlike Ásmundr, they had no need to do so, for their wife had ensured that runic monuments would speak of them to the living.

7. Conclusion

The evidence presented above shows that there were, in Viking Age Scandinavia, two forms of commemoration of the dead, the oral commemoration of skaldic verse, couched in complex metre and language to ensure its preservation, and the written commemoration of the runic inscriptions, for the most part in simple language, its preservation ensured by being carved in stone. Both runic inscriptions and skaldic verse are different manifestations of the same cultural practice of remembering the dead, and have the same ultimate aim, to transcend death by ensuring that the name and the achievements of the dead are recorded for the present and for the future. Recognition of the similarities between the two forms of commemoration deepens our understanding of the functioning of both.

Notes

1. Sawyer 2000 p. 16-20, 47, 146-152, 158-166.
2. Palm 1992 p. 134.
3. Kinander 1935-1961 p. 64-67. English translations of runic inscriptions are taken from *Samnordisk runtextdatabas*, as are the normalised forms of the inscriptions. The latter are given in Old West Norse form, for the sake of consistency, and to facilitate the comparison with skaldic verse.
4. Jacobsen & Moltke 1941-1942 cols. 63-65.
5. Wessén & Jansson 1940-1958 II p. 42-49.
6. Gade 2000 p. 70-84; Jesch 2001 p. 9-12, 15-33.
7. Söderberg & Brate 1900-1906 p. 14-37.
8. Hübler 1996.
9. Since not all runic inscriptions, nor all skaldic verse, are commemorative in function, the comments below are intended to apply only to memorial stones, not to all runic inscriptions, and to poems about the dead (*erfíkvæði*), not to all skaldic poetry.
10. Palm 1992 p. 135-138.
11. Although an auxiliary verb is not always used, when it is used it is almost invariably *láta*, see Palm 1992 p. 217.
12. Palm 1992 p. 162-166. There is also always the possibility of more than one commemorated, commissioner, or craftsman.
13. For examples of inscriptions which draw attention to the permanence of the monument, see Jesch 1998 p. 472.
14. Brate & Wessén 1924-1936 p. 71-73.
15. Jansson 1987 p. 144-152, Moltke 1985 p. 245-266.
16. See also Moltke 1985 p. 266-268.
17. The early 'shield poems and mythological narrative poems' (Gade 2000 p. 73) are partial exceptions here, though I would argue that even they allude to myths as part of their panegyric function, rather than having the transmission of myth as their main function.
18. Gade 2000 p. 73-75.
19. Wessén & Jansson 1940-1958 I p. 34-41, II p. 409-412, IV p. 67-69; Jungner & Svärdström 1940-71 p. 6-10; Olsen 1954 p. 200-208. There is also a possible instance in U 916 (Wessén & Jansson 1940-58 III p. 657). See Källström 1999 for a detailed study of the carver of U 29 and U 532.
20. While Olsen (1954 p. 206) has identified one instance of poetic word order in N 239, this is hardly sufficient to confirm its commissioner as a poet.
21. On this role for skaldic poets, see further Jesch 2006.

22. See Magnus Källström's conclusions (1999 p. 134) about the role of Torbjörn skald.
23. Faulkes 1998 p. 3.
24. Jesch 2000.
25. Jacobsen & Moltke 1941-1942 cols. 248-253, 281-284.
26. Björn K. Þórolfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943 p. 58-59.
27. See the description of the inscription in Lerche Nielsen 1997 p. 40-41.
28. Jakob Benediktsson 1968 p. 102-4.
29. Compare also U 654 Varpsund, which praises Gunnleifr, who *kunni vel knerri stýra* 'could steer a ship well' (Wessén & Jansson 1940-58 III p. 112-116).

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