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# Travels to Identity

Viking Rune Carvers of Today

BY BODIL PETERSSON

## Abstract

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This text deals with the phenomenon of today's rune carvers in the Nordic area. By using symbols of antiquity in their craftsmanship, the rune carvers revive an act that is historically significant and bears aspects of identity in the past as well as today. Why do people carve and erect rune stones today? When and where is it done? What are the explicit or implicit purposes? The text tries to answer these questions by elucidating the role of a past society in today's world. It is obvious that the rune carving is mainly done in the Nordic area, but the ideas emanating from the Viking Age are also spread all over the world, as the rune stones are also erected in other countries, for example in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Canada. The identity project is mainly about creating an individual lifestyle. It is concluded that the past plays an important role in connecting people and supporting small-scale perspectives, crafts and sustainable development in harmony with the past. The act of carving and erecting rune stones today is a form of travel to identity.

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## Lots of rune stones

Look, a rune stone! A few years ago, I had spontaneously taken for granted that a rune stone is a monument from the Viking Age or the Middle Ages, carved for purposes I do not have full knowledge of, but from what I have read and heard I suppose they have to do with kinship, traditions and territories. But it is no longer that simple. At times, unexpected rune stones appear, some of them painted in magnificent colours. Ancient rune stones do not have any original colours left. Therefore, the colourful rune stones may either be newly painted old ones or completely new products.

Who are today's rune carvers? How do they regard themselves and their craft? In

what contexts are they active? How do the individual rune carvers formulate the self-chosen mission to be a rune carver in the early 21st century? What has made the time ripe for rune carvers right now? And who is in need of rune stones and monuments with runic inscriptions in our time? This text tries to ascertain what the act of carving runes and erecting rune stones today might imply. The carving and raising of rune stones is supposed to be an identity project and is elucidated in this text by its relations to the past, but also to the future and to the memory of contemporary individuals and phenomena.

## Stone carving

For a long time, people have been aware that messages set in stone last, if not forever, at least for a relatively long time. Nothing in history seems to have changed these conditions. In spite of acid fallout that can make the stone weather, stone still appears to be the best choice of material for a message to reach beyond one's own time. Probably this is the charm of stone carving. Memories set in stone support immortality. Stone carving becomes a way to extend one's own and other individuals' existence in this world. The storage media of our time are not to be compared with stone. Today's documentation is in many cases demagnetized within few years and thereby becomes inaccessible for future generations unless regular updates of information and technology are made.



Fig. 1. The Jelling rune stones from the Viking Age. Photo: © Jes Wienberg 2008.

In Scandinavia over 3000 runic inscriptions in stone were made during the late Viking Age, geographically spread from Scania in the south to Lofoten in the north (Sawyer 2000). There are also older rune stones dated to the earlier parts of the Iron Age. They are fewer in number and have somewhat different runic inscriptions made with an older runic alphabet. One example of these older rune stones is the Björketorp stone in Blekinge, dated to the 7th–8th century AD. These older stones are mainly associated with burials. The runic inscriptions suggest magic and protection, probably against grave looting and destruction of monuments (Jansson 1963, pp. 24 f.). Viking Age rune stones in Scandinavia were erected during a period from the mid 10th century to the early 12th century (Fig. 1).

Since the rune carvers in many cases put their names on the rune stones, we are sure that they were mostly male. At a time when the act of writing was not common knowledge, the rune carvers were probably sought after because they were able to write and thereby to convey messages to posterity. Runologists have been able to discern individual rune carvers by name. Examples of rune carvers in the central Swedish area are Varin, Alrik, Åsmund, Livsten, Balle, Visäte, Fot and Öpir. However, in no more than 13 percent of the cases do the stones bear signatures, and this is only common in the central Swedish region of Uppland. One interpretation is that the professionalization of the rune carvers accelerated towards the end of the Viking era (Zachrisson 1998, p. 126; Sawyer 2000, p. 27).

Rune stones are seen as commissioned work, performed by experienced stonemasons. Both men and women were customers, according to the information given by the inscriptions. A typical example of an inscription is: "Guve erected this stone for Olav, his son, a very good man. He was killed in Estonia. Håvard carved the stone" (Frugårdsstenen

in Västergötland, Sweden, translation taken from Erikson & Strid 1991, p. 84, with the author's own translation into English). An individual has died in a foreign country, and his memory is cut in stone at home. The most established interpretation is that the stones were erected by relatives in memory of a deceased individual or group of people who had done something significant. Another interpretation is that the stones marked important boundaries or territories associated with references made in the runic inscriptions. A more controversial interpretation of rune stones as inheritance documents has been presented by Birgit Sawyer (2000).

The locations of the runestones are often similar. They were erected close to roads, waterways and meeting-places so that as many people as possible would be able to see their content. Larger rune carvings can also be found on flat rocks or stone slabs. Not all rune carvings in stone are thus separate erected stones. Many stones are placed at or near a grave field; presumably, they have been part of a larger monument (Stålbom 1994, p. 46; Peterson 1995, p. 89; Sawyer 2000, p. 26).

The area of Mälardalen in Sweden has an outstanding tradition of rune carving. The rune stones in the area have often come to stand as a model when the Swedes think of rune stones, with advanced image loops and texts. In Denmark, it is instead the large rune stone in Jelling that has become the prototype. It is a splendid stone with sophisticated motifs in relief, combined with a historically interesting text on how Harald Gormsson united the kingdom and made the Danes Christian. The large Jelling rune stone is in many ways different from other rune stones in Denmark. It is often great and glorious rune stones with well-known texts and beautiful design that are mainly shown today. In Norway, the northernmost of the rediscovered Viking Age rune stones in Scandinavia, the Gimsøy stone in Lofoten, is dated to the latter part of the 10th

century. The Gimsøy rune stone is currently not in its original place but has been moved into the Tromsø Museum (Lars Erik Narmo, pers. com.; Nilsen 2003, p. 295). In Sweden the northernmost Viking Age rune stone is situated at Frösön in Jämtland. It commemorates a deceased person who had done something memorable. In comparison to the large rune stone in Jelling the runes tell the story of the transition from paganism to Christianity in the area.

Around the year 1200 a rune stone was carved and erected at Norra Åsum in Scania, a stone that has been interpreted as historicizing by runologists of today. Sven B. F. Jansson writes the following about the Norra Åsum stone: "From a cultural point of view it is of interest that Absalon's and Åsbjörn Mule's memorial has been given the shape of a rune stone. The erection of a stone of this kind as late as around the year 1200, i.e. almost two centuries after the raising of rune stones had come to an end in Scania, is, to say the least, surprising. It could be explained in relation to the archbishop's love of antiquity and its monuments. For Absalon the rune stone in the church of Norra Åsum can be seen as a fitting and meaningful monument" (Jansson 1963, p. 171, my translation).

Rune stones are highly valued by historians as well as by linguistic researchers and archaeologists. They are perceived as a phenomenon that combines the property of being an artefact with that of being an early written source. In its way of combining text and image the rune stone becomes a multifaceted document of an epoch (Andrén 2000).

The rune stones did not entirely cease to be produced after the Viking Age and the Middle Ages. Johannes Bureus, the first national antiquary of Sweden, contributed to the awakening of the early interest in runic inscriptions in the early 17th century. The runic inscriptions of the 17th century were made mainly on tombstones. Rune stones that were erected



in the period 1600–1900 are mainly linked to the burgeoning antiquarian interest and the influence of national romanticism. In the late 20th and early 21st century, interest in the past and a desire to recreate past life increased (cf. Petersson 2003). As a result there are more active rune carvers today and in our time we see a veritable renaissance for the erection of rune stones.

## Back to the present

Here I will present a couple of rune carvers of today and what they have created, what their rune stones tell us and what their relation is to ancient times, the present and the future.

The ever-increasing interest in history and the practice of cultural tourism create a demand for events that may help people to understand, learn about and perceive the Viking Age with their senses. Such opportunities are given at Viking markets and festivals throughout the summer period within the Nordic area, and also in other parts of Europe. Trading and handicrafts are practised at these markets. Rune carving holds a special position at these occasions. The rune carvers are sometimes invited to participate to make a rune stone commemorating the event.

At the Foteviken Viking Reserve in Scania a rune stone carved by Erik the Red Sandquist was erected in 1997. The inscription read: “Göran, Stellan and Björn erected the stone where many men died. Pugna Forensis lives again. Erik the Red carved” (Fig. 2). The text refers to a historical event, the battle of Foteviken, that took place nearby in the year 1134 AD. *Pugna forensis* is Latin and means “the battle of the marketplace”. (This historical event is mentioned by the medieval Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus in his book *Gesta Danorum*. See Skovgaard-Petersen 1970, p. 50 ff.) The first three names refer to Göran Holm, commissioner of Vellinge Municipality,

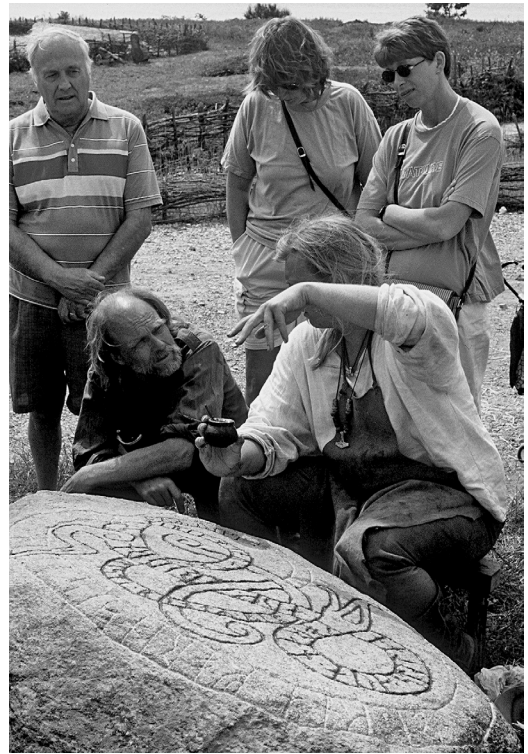


Fig. 2. Rune stone in Foteviken Viking Reserve carved and erected in 1997 by Erik the Red Sandquist. Photo: © Jes Wienberg 1997.

Stellan Karlsson, representative of the Falssterbonäset Museum Association, and Björn M. Jakobsen, head of the Foteviken Museum that manages the Foteviken Viking Reserve (see Foteviken Museum website). The text fits well with the strategy to commemorate events and people or groups who have done memorable things. The present is connected with the past to create a memorable event – but when did it actually happen?

Recently carved rune stones stand in many countries today, not only in the Nordic countries. The majority of newly carved rune stones are to be found in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, but also in Iceland and Greenland, in Poland and Canada. The vast majority of the stones are carved for special occasions, often by rather inexperienced people. However, a couple of professional rune carv-

ers have become established in Scandinavia in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These professional stonemasons have been contracted on several occasions.

I do not present a complete overview of all stone masons carving runes in Sweden, Denmark and Norway today. I have instead identified a couple of rune carvers who are involved in the Viking communities that exist within the Nordic region and Europe today. They operate in a context relating to today's Viking community and re-enactment movement. (Historical re-enactment is the attempt to recreate historical events or a specific historical period. Around the world there are re-enactment groups that recreate phenomena such as the American Civil War or historical periods like the Viking Age. For a presentation of historical re-creation and its distribution, see the English Wikipedia website, under the term "Historical reenactment".) Some of the rune carvers' stones are erected by societies characterized by commitment to the Viking Age, its customs and traditions. Other stones have come into use in a museum context, and thus, these stones and carvers have been authorized by the expertise. They have been accepted as part of an adult education activity, and as elements of today's Viking contexts as markets, festivals and other activities. To get a deeper insight into the activities of today's rune carvers, I have conducted an interview with Erik the Red Sandquist.

## Erik the Red Sandquist

Erik the Red Sandquist is a rune carver practising in Denmark. He has hitherto (2009) made about 57 stones since he started in 1995. The rune stones have been erected in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Greenland, England, Holland, Germany and Poland. All of his stones are documented at the National Museum in Copenhagen. This was

done at the request of the museum, because they do not want the newly made rune stones to be confused with the original ones in the future.

Sandquist is member of a re-enactment group *Brimir*, focusing on craft (Brimir website). He is interested in craft and is self-taught as a stone carver. He has been working together with the archaeologist Ole Thirup Kastholm Hansen. They wrote an article together about which tools the rune carvers might have used. The article is a follow-up of a previous text, written by the Danish runologist Erik Moltke, who in 1980 held that the "pikhammer" was the proper tool for rune carvers in the Viking Age (Nielsen & Moltke 1980). From a practitioner's perspective with experience of using various tools to make rune stones, Sandquist and Kastholm Hansen consider it most likely that rune carvers in the Viking Age instead used the chisel and hammer (Kastholm Hansen & Sandquist 2004).

Besides his activities as a rune carver, Sandquist is also a silversmith. He has been working as a silversmith for 16 years and is currently (2009) running a store in central Copenhagen, from where he sells his own production of Viking-inspired jewellery. Sandquist has no craft traditions in his own family. He is self-taught both as a silversmith and as a rune carver. He is fond of making runic inscriptions on his jewellery. His interest in runes started with these inscriptions and has then led on to the making of rune stones.

The time it takes to make a runestone varies. The time to produce a stone depends very much on how the work is performed. Sandquist says that it takes about a week to make an ordinary runestone if it does not have a very special appearance. The rune stone he has made for the site museum of *Royal Jelling* took about two summer periods or three hundred hours to make during the years 2004–2005 (Fig. 3).

Sandquist usually carves his rune stones at

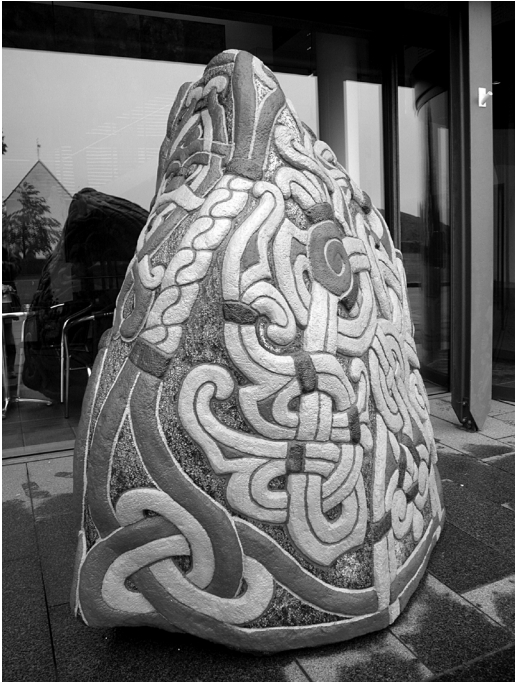


Fig. 3. Rune stone made by Erik the Red Sandquist for Royal Jelling in 2004–2005. Photo: © Christer Hamp.

the place where they are to be erected. This may be the case in relation to museums, where a part of the concept is to convey the process of carving runes. On these occasions Erik the Red performs in Viking costume, so that the rune carving becomes an overall experience for the visitors.

Sandquist's brother-in-law has a stonemason's workshop. There Erik the Red has made some privately ordered rune stones, where the production itself is not important for education purposes. Should the stone stand or lie when it is being cut? Ideally, the stone stands during the work for a proper assessment of the stone, but then it is rather difficult to do the carving. It is easier to draw the stone when it is standing, and put it down afterwards, cut it, and then erect the stone again. This is of course easiest to do with smaller stones inside a stonemason's workshop. Chisels and hammers are the tools used by Erik Sandquist.

They are not known archaeologically as tools used by rune carvers, but he says they are the most logical tools.

The texts on Sandquist's rune stones are written in Old Norse, since it was old runic inscriptions that sparked his interest in runes. He has used various phrases taken from the Viking era in the context of jewellery, and similarly, he tries to be as linguistically correct as possible in relation to the original stones. The language researcher Michael Lerche Nielsen at the University of Copenhagen helps him to examine and assess the texts of the carvings.

Through time, he has increasingly painted his rune stones. This is a consequence of research done on the colouring of the stones, which has shown that runestones often were painted. It is also interesting to know how the people of the Viking Age painted their stones and what binding agents they used in the paint.

Sandquist says that a thousand years ago people were probably much more interested in things being created by humanity, at a time when much of the surroundings were conceived of as "natural". In our time, many people conceive of the Viking era as a "natural" time. Phenomena thus related to the Viking Age are conceived of as "natural" instead of culturally created. Sandquist often meets this paradox within the world of re-enactment. He does not romanticize the image of the rune carver. He sees the act of rune carving as entirely modern, related to the remnants of Viking culture and craft tradition, but entirely created in our time.

Who are the customers asking for rune stones? It tends to be museums and Viking villages, but also individuals who wish to erect stones in memory of someone or as gravestones. The first rune stone carved by Sandquist was made in memory of a man from the district of Christiania in Copenhagen, Thorkild Weiss, who in his lifetime was very interested in the archaeological find of



the sun chariot from Trundholm. Another example is when Sandquist carved a rune stone for a Viking group on Funen in Denmark. They wanted a memorial stone to a deceased group member. Sandquist thought it was inspiring to carve a “real” stone with the purpose of remembering a person, similar to how the Viking tradition of erecting rune stones is interpreted.

A female leader of a re-enactment group focusing on fighting was given a runestone made by Sandquist when she resigned. This particular stone depicts a woman with a sword. The sword in combination with a female is anachronistic, but Sandquist feels that it is all right. She is the warrior, so why not? Erik Sandquist says that he has become more pragmatic over time, the role of authenticity is not crucial in this respect. It can never be as in the Viking Age anyway, since the rune carving of today is a completely contemporary phenomenon.

Sandquist is convinced that it is reasonable to be commercially oriented to some extent, but he does not want to be associated with Nazism or extreme nationalism. He tries to avoid doing work for people with this orientation. Sometimes it is difficult to be sure of people’s intentions.

The Society of Creative Anachronism, SCA, arranges an annual market in the USA, where Sandquist goes to sell his Viking jewellery. The SCA mixes different periods, with no orthodoxy regarding authenticity. Brimir, the re-enactment group to which Sandquist himself belongs, is one of the oldest existing groups in the Nordic countries and Denmark.

Sandquist frequently visits an event relating to the re-creation of the Battle of Hastings in 1066. A market is arranged every five or six years when October the 14th falls on a Saturday, the day when the battle actually took place. In these years the event is huge, but there are also annual events on a smaller

scale. Sandquist thinks that the first part of the 11th century is the most interesting and inspiring period as regards art and ornamentation. This period is particularly appropriate for his jewellery production. Tattoos, of the same kind Erik Sandquist himself has, like many people interested in the Viking Age, are sometimes questioned. The eyewitness Ibn Fadlan describes a phenomenon interpreted as tattoos in the Viking Age. This eyewitness reference is an argument supporting the theory that tattoos may have occurred during the Viking Age.

This interest in the Viking Age has followed Erik Sandquist since he was a child. His aunt had a book from the 1960s with drawings and a text relating to the world-tree in Nordic myth, the ash Yggdrasil. As a child, he was given the book *Röde Orm*, with a story of a Viking. Erik Sandquist got his name because of his father’s interest in history.

Within the re-enactment movement the ideal is to make things yourself. Sandquist still emphasizes that during the Viking era the craftsmanship became more and more specialized.

Sandquist thinks it is important to choose a focus for your craftsmanship and not make too many different things. He himself has focused on silver forging and stone masonry. His interest in design feeds his engagement. Re-enactment provides contacts for commissions of various kinds. Assignments as a rune carver come about mainly when he meets people. The museums make their orders by contacting Erik Sandquist.

In recent years there has been competition from other countries such as Poland, where products relating to the Viking Age can be made at a much lower price than in the Nordic countries. Craftsmanship also means knowing every step well, and being willing to produce things locally rather than far away. Here, Erik Sandquist says, there must be a balance between the desire for authenticity

and the desire for commercial success.

Sandquist says that one cannot “bring” traditions that have been gone for many centuries. What is done today is a try to create something in our time that in some ways relates to our knowledge of the Viking Age. There is a strong sense of community within the re-enactment world. The season for Viking markets is from May to October, with markets all around the Nordic area and elsewhere in Europe. People and groups involved in the Viking Age have a possibility to meet and exchange experiences concerning the period.

The rune carver Erik the Red Sandquist is part of a personal identity. He is known as rune carver among people in his surroundings. It is a way of life and a possibility to meet people of like mind. (The data in the section on Erik the Red Sandquist is the result of an interview conducted in Copenhagen on 9 January 2008. See also Royal Jelling website.)

## Kalle the Runecarver

The island of Adelsö, close to the site of the Viking town of Birka on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren, is where Kalle the Runecarver works. He began his career as rune carver in the early 1990s. His first rune stone was made in 1993 and bears the inscription: “New runes empower old faith”. He once advertised in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* and appeared in an article in the industry-affiliated Swedish newspaper *Dagens Industri* and quite soon got in touch with the first customers who wanted to order a rune stone. These early customers were both companies and individuals who wanted to create monuments associated with themselves (Kalle Runrystare website).

Kalle the Runecarver uses modern Swedish on his rune stones. He does not use Old Norse as Erik the Red does. Kalle’s rune stones are of different kinds. He manufactures tradi-

tional rune stones that are erected in a Viking context, for example in conjunction with Viking markets and festivals. One example is the rune stone from 1997 near Rumsquilla and the Viking farm of Kulthult in the province of Småland: “Gert erected stone to his own memory of the place he owns for himself. Kalle carved.” Another example is a rune stone carved at the Stallarholmen Viking Festival in the years 2003–2006 with the inscription: “Stallarholmen Vikings erected the stone as a link between the past and the future”.

Kalle the Runecarver also makes personal memorial stones associated with birthdays. One such example is the rune stone of Håttunaholm from 1996, when a man celebrated his 50th birthday: “Håkan of Håttuna 50 years, many things he did. Friends erected the stone. Kalle carved”. He has also created tombstones which have been made to look like rune stones. In addition to family names with dates as on ordinary family gravestones, there is a text loop with runes decorating the stone.

In addition to individuals, companies and associations have also ordered rune stones from Kalle the Runecarver. The shipping company Viking Line ordered a stone in 1993 with the text “Great ships still go eastwards. Viking Line erected. Kalle carved.” Viking Line is a shipping company operating in the Baltic Sea with passenger and car ferries on the route Stockholm–Åland–Helsinki/Tallinn.

The former Swedish security company Securitas ordered a stone in 1994 with the text: “Honesty, alertness, helpfulness. Kalle carved.” As in the case of the Viking Line rune stone, there is a connection to the business, although in this case it is not so explicitly related to the Viking era.

A housing cooperative named “The Rune-stone” ordered a stone in the year 2002 with the text: “People of many cultures in the housing cooperative the Runestone erected this stone in memory of forty good years.



Fig. 4. Rune stone erected in northern Newfoundland in the year 2000 celebrating Leif Erikson's discovery of North America a thousand years ago. Photo: © Kalle Dahlberg, © Kalle Dahlberg/BUS 2009.

May continued comfort prevail and peace on earth. Kalle carved."

A carving where the text shows what the customer wants runes to say was made in 1995 in a hunting cabin. The carving says: "Nature holds beauty, life and death. It may be cruel, but also gives us bread. The wise hunter preserving nature's balance and hunt prey with humble sense. Leif had it done. Kalle carved."

Another interesting phenomenon in the history of Kalle the Runecarver is the stone that was carried across the Atlantic and erected in northern Newfoundland in the year 2000

as part of a celebration of when the Vikings with Leif Eriksson discovered North America for 1000 years ago. The text reads: "VTTA and Barbara Geng raised stone to commemorate the exploration of North America by Leif Eriksson in the year thousand. Kalle carved" (VTTA stands for Viking Trail Tourist Association) (Fig. 4).

Kalle also made a stone for himself, in 1997, and he named it the Old Gods' Rune-stone: "Old gods rejoice when people tempt ancient faith to wisely show the way forward again". Kalle deliberately makes use of alliteration as a poetic trick. (Data on the rune stones are from Kalle the Runecarver's website.)

Kalle the Runecarver has for some years also made use of digital technology in his attempt to recreate a past artistic tradition. He argues that the rune stones the visitors can see at sites in the Nordic countries are misleading, since they have no painting from the Viking Age preserved. It is not permitted to paint the stones in bright colours today, so Kalle has done this work digitally instead. On his website, it is possible to see and learn about some of the specific rune stones in the mid-Swedish province of Uppland. He has coloured the rune stones digitally to highlight their beauty and the significance of their ornamentation (Kalle the Runecarver website).

## Other rune carvers of today

Janne Jonsson Eldskägg is another rune carver who has made a number of rune stones in different places. He has carved a copy of the north Norwegian Gimsøy stone at Lofotr Viking Museum and he has also made a picture stone with runes on the same site (Lars Erik Narmo pers. com.) (Fig. 5).

Harald Juul is a Danish rune carver who has made rune stones in Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Iceland. He has a website with information on his activities. It says there that





Fig. 5. Copy of the Gimsøy rune stone made by Janne Jonsson Eldskägg. Photo: © Lars Erik Narmo 2007.

Juul's rune stones have been carved in connection with Viking markets related to Viking villages or farms such as Foteviken, Borre and Storholmen. In addition to carving rune stones, Juul also does carvings in wood (Harald Juul website) (Fig. 6).

In Danderyd north of Stockholm Fredrik Eriksson Runecarver does his work with a clear focus on motorcycle culture. On his website he presents his general interest in the Viking Age, and he also presents his production of rune stones. The texts on Eriksson's stones read: "HDCS [Harley Davidson Club Sweden] erected this stone as a gift to Ljungbyhed", "The good fellowship continues into the sunset on the iron horse for another twenty years", "On this spot on this day not much happened", "Cubic knocked technology", "The living dead, the sailors of the



Fig. 6. Rune stone made by Harald Juul in Borre National Park. Photo: © Terje Gansum 2005.

seas”, “Kristin and Morten two thousand and three”, “Oda, thanks for a good job” (Fredrik Eriksson Runecarver website). The stones are wedding stones, tombstones, motorbike stones and amusement stones. Eriksson’s rune stones are part of an explicit playfulness where the past meets the present. The stones don’t seem to be made and erected in contexts related to the Viking movement. Instead, motorcycle interest is clearly expressed. Without having carried out an interview, I am sure the context is different from that of the other rune stones.

### Three kinds of new rune stones

In an attempt to discern a pattern in the production of today’s rune carvers, there are at least three categories of contemporary rune stones. They differ primarily in the ways they relate to the Viking models.

The first kind of rune stone is explicitly contemporary in terms of text and character. This kind of rune stone has texts that are in today’s language, but translated into runes, and the texts often commemorate contemporary phenomena. Kalle the Runecarver is the primary representative of this way of making rune stones. Also Fredrik Eriksson’s rune stones can be characterized in this way.

The second kind of rune stone is also completely new, but with text in Old Norse. The rune carver makes a linguistic adaptation of the monument to make it as similar to its Viking predecessors as possible. In some cases the ornaments are also adapted according to regional Viking Age traditions. The design is taken into account and is adapted to how the rune stones appeared in the region during the Viking era. Erik the Red Sandquist is the main rune carver with this focus.

The third kind of rune stone are the exact copy of an existing rune stone. Formally the stone is made as a true copy of an ancient

stone. However, the act of producing it is strongly related to the present, as in the case of the Gimsøy rune stone. The copy serves as an “antiquarian’s tool”, an argument for the role of the past in our time. Copies of ancient objects are today often used as part of creating identity. The copy of the Gimsøy rune stone, produced by Janne Eldskägg, may be erected on the spot where the original rune stone once stood – if the antiquarian authorities give their permission (Lars Erik Narmo pers. com.). Discussions on originals and copies are becoming increasingly interesting, as national and regional museums have often acquired the original objects, while a local demand for the original objects comes when the interest in historical events is aroused (see Nilsen 2003, pp. 191 f.).

A categorization of the rune stones shows that today’s rune carvers work with different individually related purposes. Besides the rune carver’s own ambition and opinion, the user’s view of the rune stones is also important. What does the club, the museum or the individual want with their monument? These newly made monuments and works of art thus have an inherent ambiguity, which may also help us understand that rune stones were ambiguous phenomena in the past as well.

### The commitment

In our time, many different rune carvers are active. Some have an interest in history, others are more oriented towards the present, and this fact is visible in their production. The rune carvers are often aware of each other’s existence, but there is no organized cooperation. This kind of craftsmanship seems to be highly individual and artistic. Rune stones are apparently not something that can be done in a group. It is interesting to consider the parallel phenomenon in the later part of the Viking era: how were the rune carvers linked to dif-



ferent groups in society? Who made the rune stones and for whom? Networks and personal relationships are probably crucial here, then as now.

The geographic spread of the rune stones of our time is different from past times. The modern rune carving tradition follows the widespread interest in the Viking era. A large number of Viking groups and re-enactment groups perform life in the Viking way, sometimes with the help of staging in the form of reconstructed Viking environments (Peterson 2003, pp. 316 ff.). It is in these settings that the rune stones of today often appear.

The rune stones are erected in public as well as in private contexts, relating to historical events where a rune stone manifests the memory of the past, or relating to private memorials or tombstones that have been raised to commemorate an individual, sometimes in the cemetery, sometimes in a place that the individual has appreciated a lot.

The rune carving is of course a significant document, but it is not always the final outcome in the form of a beautiful rune stone that counts. The communicative act of carving a rune stone in front of an interested audience is sometimes equally important, especially if the rune carving is performed in collaboration with a museum (Erik Sandquist pers. com.). But the stones have a purely practical purpose afterwards: to manifest various expressions of antiquity in the present. Maybe the rune carvers themselves have had a reason to carve. Just as often, as in the case of Kalle the Runecarver, customers have seen a reason to erect rune stones to commemorate themselves or an activity associated with runes or with the Viking Age.

Runes have also been carved for purposes other than those I have discussed here, namely to create pure forgeries. The famous Kensington rune stone is an example of a conflict that may arise relating to the issue of authenticity (e.g. Kastholm Hansen 2003). However, the

contemporary phenomenon I describe here is not a question of forgery. Instead, it is about restoration and bears a transparency to show that the stones have been created in our time and not in the Viking Age.

## Authenticity and identity

The question arises how these newly made rune stones relate to the authentic stones from the Viking Age and the Late Iron Age. Is there confusion, or is there a distinct difference between contemporary and authentic rune stones? Is this an important distinction? Why? Who believes what? How is this relating to the issue of using the past in the creation of identity? (For a discussion of the role of authenticity, see Holtorf 2005, pp. 112 ff.)

There is really nothing non-authentic about making monuments in the form of rune stones today. Most monuments erected today are a paraphrase of a historic monument or a style recreated from any period of time in the past. Rune stones are no exception. They are monuments in their own right, not just copies of artefacts, not even those which actually are copies made to be only that. They have a greater role to fulfil.

The Gimsøy rune stone in northern Norway is an example of this. It is a newly carved rune stone that becomes part of a discussion on identity. A regional museum has taken care of the original monument, which has been replaced by a copy so that the area can recover a lost monument. The decision to re-erect monuments or to bring artefacts back to local museums is often justified in terms of local or regional identity.

I have not heard any critical comments from antiquarians about the rune carvers that are active today. But there is a concern among the antiquarian authorities that some stones may be confused with the genuine stones if no proper documentation is made. In the

case of Erik the Red Sandquist, the National Museum of Copenhagen asked him for documentation for the future to be sure which stones are newly made. Perhaps such documentation is especially important in those cases where the rune carver mimics the Old Norse language. This could increase the likelihood of confusion, at least compared with Kalle the Runecarver's use of modern Swedish on his runestones. A parallel phenomenon in order to avoid confusion is the fact that many new copies of ancient jewellery and ancient artefacts bear stamps indicating that they are replicas.

It is obvious that modern rune stones occur in areas with close historical connections to the Viking Age, areas that have been identified in our time as important sites of commerce, religious practice and of burial in the Viking Age. As mentioned above, however, there are also new rune stones where they are least expected, such as in Germany, Holland, Poland and Canada. Generally, it seems as if they want to connect to an existing tradition. The phenomenon appears especially in places where cultural heritage linked to the Viking era is actively mediated, for example, in the context of museums, full-scale reconstructions and Viking markets or festivals.

I have not yet found any female rune carvers. Even if the Viking Age is a male epoch in many respects, women also tend to take part in activities that the Viking Age of today has to offer. One such example is a group of women sailing a Viking ship in Norway (Pettersson 2003, pp. 316 ff.). However, different crafts may attract either men or women. Perhaps stone masonry is perceived of as traditionally masculine and that might be the reason that it has not attracted any female practitioners so far.

## Past activity as present identity

The reason for modern rune carvers to revive an old craft seems to be based on the desire to link ancient times with our own time. I do not regard the construction of identity as nationalistic in this case. Instead it seems to be a lifestyle project that seeks to highlight an individual way of life. It is also a way to care for the traces of the Viking Age, to nurture, protect, preserve and pass on the tradition (cf. Holtorf 2007, p. 91). In the case of Kalle the Runecarver the engagement also appears to be out of a concern for the island of Adelsö where he lives. Here a passion for the preservation of ancient monuments and sites is manifested, not unexpected in this context. Adelsö is a listed World Heritage site and as such officially highlighted as particularly worthy of preservation (Kalle the Runecarver website).

In a world of increasing global perspectives, in Scandinavia and Europe we can see programmes every day on television from other countries where people live in other technological circumstances than we do in the western world. Through involvement in a Viking lifestyle the opportunity is given to contextualize the past and make it possible to identify with present-day life. The Viking Age relates to a Nordic context, the technology is based on raw materials that are available in this part of the world, and the "ethnic" dress is adapted to the climate in the northern hemisphere.

It is not easy for the majority of a population today to legitimize a need for "origin", but the Viking Age seems to fill this role for parts of the population in the Nordic countries, not merely from a nationalistic point of view. Although the Viking era has been used and abused for national purposes, the Viking movement represents something more and different. It has simply adapted to the present time by actively responding to issues such as sustainable development and ethnification.

When minorities have clear role models for identification, the majority seem to locate features in what they see as their past and they are thus “ethnified” by a kind of *invented tradition* (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1992).

In a discussion on quality of life a sense of context is often seen as essential to well-being. Viking identity probably gives a sense of a larger context, that people today in some sense associate with the past. Kinship is not always important in these extended time perspectives; instead lifestyle, technical knowledge and general reference frameworks relating to the environment, technology, craftsmanship, materials, traditions or customs play a role. In conversation with Erik the Red Sandquist, he mentioned the paradox that phenomena which the current Vikings conceive of as natural were probably greatly appreciated as cultural constructs by the Vikings, as a way for them to actually distance themselves from all the surrounding nature.

Viking Age seems to provide explicit gender roles. In this respect, the rune carving can be placed on the male end of the scale, as textile manufacture is generally placed on the female part of the same scale. One of the attractions of some of the crafts and activities linked to the Viking era is most likely that they provide explicit gender roles. The participant need not hesitate about his or her importance in the actual case, he or she need not be questioned for his/her involvement or ways of practising the craft. There is documentation in both text and pictures that can show the present-day story of the past. It is not necessarily a question of authenticity, instead it provides confirmation of identity.

It is often conceived of as sound and healthy to be involved in sports. However, there is a palpable scepticism about people who get deeply involved in their commitment to the past. Although we live in a time when regional and local, sometimes global perspectives seem to have replaced the national ones,

the involvement in the past is for the most part thought of as suspect. In many cases the involvement in the Viking Age is linked to national romantic motifs, in history even nationalist or explicitly Nazi tendencies. As an example we may take the use of Viking jewellery, including Thor’s hammers, which for a period in recent times came to be associated with neo-Nazis (Staecker 1996; Vitt oljud website). It is a fact that neo-Nazis have used Viking Age attributes. But it is also a fact that it is not these ideals that appear in the meeting with people who have the Viking Age as lifestyle. Instead, there is usually a vehement rejection of racism and Nazism (Sveriges Asatrosamfund website; Foteviken website).

## A variable past

The interest in the past follows its time. Something as “outdated” as commitment to the past is extremely variable. A consequence is that we regularly need to reconsider our view of why people engage in the past. In many contexts during the early 1900s the Viking era was used in the cult of the greatness of the Germanic past. These trends have occasionally flared up, but right now they are of no great interest in the historical reconstruction activities. Instead another trend has become evident, namely lifestyle projects linked to issues of sustainability in ecological terms. The focus has shifted from national to local. The national perspective is not politically appropriate at the moment, and so the local perspective has been allowed to take over. It is possible to discern a desire for a low-tech society that proves the possibilities of survival in relation to a different technical level from the high technology of today, more or less incomprehensible to ordinary people. Interest in and commitment to crafts becomes a symbol of the sound knowledge in a period of compulsive modernity, knowledge that would

enable us to survive the crash that doomsday prophets promise for our civilization.

It is obvious that the practising of a past lifestyle is something that, like the exercise of sports, puts the lifestyle and crafts together to create identity. It is also about establishing a sustainable lifestyle and trying to integrate your ideas of a good and interesting life with the lives we actually live here and now. I do not want to use the highly negative word escapism but instead put forward this kind of handicraft “time travel” as an identity project.

For a long time we have been living in a future-oriented modern society, where it has been considered self-evident that we should find the ideals for the future in scientific and technological achievements. As a counterweight to this kind of progress there are people who find their ideals in the past. In present times, when nationalism as ideology is reduced, and an obviously global vision and sustainability perspectives have taken over the agenda, there is room for “new” ideals taken from the past. Small-scale perspectives, craftsmanship and closeness between people are idealized. (Idealization of the past has occurred regularly during the 19th and 20th centuries. A period like the Middle Ages, for example, has had an influence on architecture, arts and crafts. See Bull 2005 for a short presentation.)

The threat of nationalist-minded people with a passion for antiquity thereby disappears, and the changing antiquity that appears in modern times has demonstrated that history never stays the same.

The conclusion is that the ideals taken from antiquity have changed shape in recent years. Past times is an identity project with visions and perspectives that aim at connecting people, and at supporting small-scale perspectives, crafts and sustainable development in harmony with the past. The act of carving and erecting rune stones today is a kind of time travel to identity.

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