In *Futhark*, vol. 3, I set out new interpretations of five almost identical runic inscriptions—each of which consisted of three bind-runes (Nordby 2013a). I showed how the writers had proceeded, carving first *raþ* and then, with the runes turned upside-down, adding the bow and branches of *þat*, usually to the verticals of the same three runes. I thus interpreted the text of the five inscriptions as Old Norse *ráð þat!* ‘read/interpret this!’

In the following I discuss a runic inscription on a piece of ivory preserved in Berlin, which I believe contains yet another *ráð þat* text. This was an interpretation I first proposed in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition “Credo—Christianisierung Europas im Mittelalter” (Nordby 2013b). Here I would like to expand on both the reading and interpretation.

The runic inscription concerned was published by Lis Jacobsen and Erik Moltke in *Danmarks runeindskrifter* (DR 415, cf. *DR, Text*, cols. 485 f.; *Atlas*, figs. 1027–28). That it was included in this edition seems to have been partly a matter of chance, partly by reason of the assumed provenance of a runic inscription on another piece of ivory (DR 414)—the two authors provide no evidence linking the Berlin piece specifically to

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1 The five inscriptions treated in Nordby 2013a are UNOR2000;32B, VgFv1992;172, A200, B323 and B235. For information on inscriptions and objects, see the article concerned. It should be noted that in fig. 2 (p. 85), the two illustrations in the centre have inadvertently been swapped round.


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Denmark. According to Poul Nørlund (1935, 192), Jacobsen and Moltke had examined the inscription in Deutsches Museum at some point before 1935, but they do not appear to have come to any conclusion about the sense of its main part before Frederik Orluf presented his interpretation in 1936, an interpretation that eventually found its way into Danmarks runeindskrifter. Some years later Carl J. S. Marstrander discussed the text and its provenance (1945, 307–09). Few people seem subsequently to have considered the inscription, and fewer still to have taken a look at it.

In September 2011 I had the opportunity of examining the piece of ivory in Bode Museum. It is 11.3 cm high and c. 9 cm wide. On one surface there is a relief carving showing Mary sitting with Jesus (“the Virgin and Child enthroned”). The piece probably originally formed the central section of a small, portable altar, assumed to be of Byzantine origin from around the year 1000 (Nørlund 1935, 192). The object came to Deutsches Museum from a private collection in Cologne in 1865, and now belongs to Bode Museum (museum number J. 577). The runic inscription is found on an edge 3–7 mm wide at the base of the piece’s left side as seen when viewing the relief carving. The runic surface appears to have been formed by paring down the existing edge. The same phenomenon is found on the opposite side. It is possible these modifications were made with the object of inserting the piece into some kind of frame, perhaps the cover of a book (Nørlund 1935, 192).

The inscription is for the most part easy to read and consists in total of eighteen runic graphs, all of which appear to have been cut with a knife. Each of the first fifteen runes is followed by a round dot, which may have been made by inserting the point of the implement and rotating it. The edges of the writing surface are worn in places, and that may be why the stave of r. 2 þ now only just extends above and below the bow. The branches of r. 12 ø are placed close to top and base of the vertical, little of which appears to have been lost. The reading of the three final runes is discussed below.

The first fifteen runes carry no obvious linguistic sense as they stand (cf. fig. 1). Frederik Orluf (1936) suggested the inscription might be cryptic, the carver replacing each character in the text he intended by the one immediately preceding it in the futhark. This is a variant of a well-known cryptographic system often referred to as the Caesar cipher because two of its variants are attributed to Julius Caesar and Augustus respectively (Kahn 1996, 84). Variants of the Caesar cipher are also found on the Rök stone (Ög 136) and the Kareby baptismal font from Bohuslän (Bo NIYR5;221B; Bæksted 1949, 50). Converting the assumed cryptic
runes on the ivory piece into their plain counterparts, Orluf arrived at the following text: *boalinsystirmin*. Orluf interpreted the sequence as the otherwise undocumented female name (Old Danish) *Bōalinn*, followed by *systir mín* ‘my sister’. His interpretation of this part of the inscription has been generally accepted.

*Danmarks runeindskrifter* does not suggest any clear provenance for the inscription, although Danish, Swedish and Norwegian elements are all mentioned (*DR, Text*, cols. 1033 and 486). Marstrander (1945, 307–09) considered the language most likely to be Old Icelandic and thought that the female name was in all probability *Pálín*. In support of his contention he pointed to the wooden spade from Indriðastaðir (Borgarfjarðarsýsla; Bæksted 1942, 208 f.; Þórgunnur Snædal 2003, 40). The runes *boa* found on the spade have been interpreted as the male name *Páll* (*l* and *t* have been swapped around in the first part of the inscription). Marstrander’s reasoning is appealing. The word-order *systir mín*, with the possessive following the noun, is exactly what we would expect in a West Norse inscription. The occurrence of *b* rather than *p* in the initial consonant of *Pálín* may be due to the common use of the *b*-rune for /p/, but it could also derive from the circumstance that the *p*-rune was not part of the sixteen-character futhark and thus could not be employed in this particular cryptic system. The dots in the cryptic section of the inscription can be seen as providing graphic emphasis, an indication to the reader that these runes are written in a special way. It is also conceivable that the placing of a dot after each rune is intended purely and simply to show the reader that the following rune in the futhark is to be read in place of the one actually carved.

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2 Angular brackets are here used to signify the intended runes.
The inscription’s last three runes have up to now been read rāke and interpreted as the male name Rakki (Orluf 1936, 237; DR, Text, cols 486 and 697). I was also of the view that this was the best understanding of the text until I considered its complicated bind-runes in the light of the interpretations I proposed in *Futhark*, vol. 3. And I would still maintain that rāke is a possible reading. The next-to-last rune has a weak incision running down to the right from near the centre of the vertical, but this was probably cut in error (if it is not the result of damage). However, the rising right-hand branch of this rune is longer than we would expect for the upside-down branch of a in þat. Against this, though, is the fact that the right bow of r. 18 þ is larger than the one on the left, a feature that makes it less likely this rune was intended as the graph-type þ, and more likely that the bows were carved separately and from opposite directions. Between the first and second rune of this group, at the base of the writing surface, is a small diagonal incision which might be the t-branch in þat, but the branch must then in part be worn away; this reading can certainly not be regarded as assured. However, taken together the features just described make it plausible that the three runes are to be read as the five other ráð þat inscriptions discussed in *Futhark*, vol. 3 (Nordby 2013a).

5 10 15

\[ t \cdot b \cdot i \cdot m \cdot n \cdot h \cdot a \cdot l \cdot a \cdot s \cdot n \cdot o \cdot b \cdot n \cdot h \cdot r (t) a a p p \]
\[ b o a l i n s y s t i r m i n r a p p a (t) \]

Pálín, systir mín, ráð þat! “Pálín, my sister, interpret that!”
or
Pálín, systir mín. Ráð þat! “Pálín, my sister. Interpret that!”

The whole inscription can be read either as a single sentence in which Pálín is urged by her sibling to interpret the runes, or as a statement: ‘Pálín, my sister,’ followed by an appeal to anyone reading the text to interpret it. In either case the inscription may refer indirectly to the fact that the piece of ivory was given to Pálín by her brother or sister. Whatever the truth of the matter, the inscription must have been added after the piece had gained its secondary function, sitting in the cover of a book or other type of frame.

Bibliography


*Futhark* 5 (2014)
Bo NIYR5:221B = inscription on the baptismal font in Kareby church, Bohuslän. Published by Magnus Olsen in *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer* (Oslo, 1960), 5: 221.

DR + number = inscription published in *Danmarks runeindskrifter*, i.e. DR.

*DR* = *Danmarks runeindskrifter*, by Lis Jacobsen and Erik Moltke. 3 vols.: *Text; Atlas; Registre*. København, 1941–42.


US195 = inscription on a rib found in Sigtuna, Uppland. Published in Källström 2014.