

PROGRAMME 2014-2018

Runverket

The runic unit of the Swedish National Heritage Board

A national resource for a unique cultural heritage



Runic inscriptions are unique linguistic memorials that go back almost two thousand years. Interpreting the runes and putting their message into a context requires accumulated knowledge from many different fields. The same applies to the work of preserving this heritage which interests so many people. The runestones standing in our cultural landscape, unparalleled in the rest of the world, have a special position. Solid and active runic research, together with a unifying node in the form of Runverket, the runic unit of the Swedish National Heritage Board, will continue to be needed in the future. It is essential to preserve the runic evidence and amass new knowledge, and to make the inscriptions accessible to scholars and the general public.

Cover: A picture stone inscribed with runes, from När on Gotland. The left half shows the stone documented by means of RTI photography. This was done at a workshop in Visby in 2012, arranged by the National Heritage Board together with a team of researchers from Queen's University, Canada.
Photo: Magnus Mårtensson. CC BY.

Runes have been used in Sweden since the third century. In some parts of the country they were in use for more than a thousand years. In Dalarna a distinctive local variant, “Dalecarlian runes”, survived until around 1900. The inscriptions are found not just on runestones but also in buildings and on objects of metal, bone and wood. The over 4,000 runic inscriptions in Sweden make up more than half of all the known runic inscriptions in the world. Runic inscriptions are unique in many ways. Unlike many other historic documents, they are almost always original sources which are contemporary with the reality they describe. They are also the earliest extant sources about Swedish and the other Scandinavian languages and therefore provide information about language development as well as historical events. Many of the runestones, moreover, still stand in the place where they were first raised, as testimony to bygone landscapes and communications.

A long tradition of documenting runic inscriptions

For almost 400 years the Swedish National Heritage Board has had the responsibility for the runestones and runic inscriptions that are scattered over the country from Skåne in the south to Jämtland in the north. The Board is thus continuing a centuries-old tradition of interpreting and documenting runic inscriptions. This was one of the tasks guiding the work of the Board when it was established in 1630.



Johannes Bureus, who then became our first national antiquarian, started collecting and describing runic inscriptions at the end of the sixteenth century. Work was intensified in the seventeenth century, with major efforts by Johan Hadorph, Johan Peringskiöld and others. Many of the stones depicted then have since disappeared, which makes the work of these pioneers highly valuable for today’s scholars.

Portrait of Johannes Bureus (1568–1652), antiquarian, linguist and mystic. The painting, a copy of an original by Cornelius Arendtson from 1627, can be seen at the National Heritage Board in Stockholm. Photo: Bengt A. Lundberg. CC BY.



A medieval lead cross with runes was found in 2010 during excavations of the Åkroken block in Nyköping. The front is covered with variants of the "AGLA" formula, based on the initial letters in the Hebrew prayer of thanks, Attah gibbor leolam adonai "Thou art mighty forever, Lord!" The cross also has runes on the back, but most of these are hidden by an iron cross on which the lead cross is mounted. An X-ray examination at the National Heritage Board in Visby has enabled documentation of these runes too. They represent various types of obscure "magic runes" which, like the AGLA formula, are thought to have been meant to ward off evil. Photo: Magnus Mårtensson. CC BY.

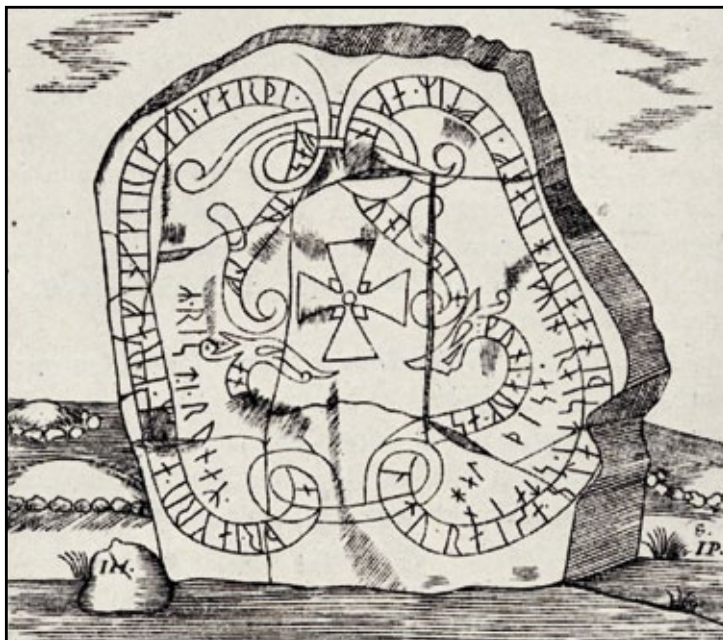
Runverket – an active research environment with both depth and breadth

The Board has a unit called Runverket. It has worked for a long time with runic inscriptions by documenting, registering and making them accessible, and issuing advice and guidelines as to how they should be preserved. Research in Runverket is performed today by an interdisciplinary group with experts in subjects such as runology and linguistics, archaeology, conservation science and cultural heritage management. The work is financed by the National Heritage Board with grants from the Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.

The name "Runverket" originally refers to a large book project, published by the National Heritage Board, which is intended to contain all of Sweden's runic inscriptions. The name later came to be used about the activity itself and the group of experts and rune conservers who work in different ways with runes at the Board. It is a well-known and established name which we are pleased to use.

The wealth of runestones to be found in Sweden has made it an imperative duty for Swedish research to pay attention to them and make the information which they can provide concerning our early language and our fathers' customs and tastes, accessible far and wide.

Hans Hildebrand, "Det nya svenska runverket", in Kongl. Vitterhets historie och Antiquitets Akademiens Månadsblad 1884.



Runestone U 170 at Bogesund north of Stockholm, as depicted by the national antiquarian Johan Peringskiöld at the end of the seventeenth century. The runes say that Gunni and Ása raised the stone and made a “vault” (a sepulchral monument in the form of a stone cist) in memory of their son Agni(?). The text also mentions that “he died on Ekerö” and that “he is buried in the churchyard”. The stone presumably comes from the mid-eleventh century and is the first evidence for the existence of common church cemeteries in Uppland. After Peringskiöld’s visit, the stone disappeared without trace.

Photo: ATA. CC BY.



In April 2013 the lower part of the runestone was found in a grave-field at Bogesund. Only a few decimetres were visible above ground, but it was evidently standing on its original site. To expose the inscription, Runverket, together with the Department of Archaeology at Stockholm University, conducted an excavation. During the Viking Age there was a bay of the sea in front of the runestone, which was evidently placed deliberately so that it could be seen from the water. It was thus not just a memorial but also served as a landmark for seafarers. Where the rest of the stone ended up is unknown, but there are statements from the nineteenth century that it was used to build the long stone jetty at Bogesund.

Photo: Magnus Källström. CC BY.

Runverket helps to develop knowledge and convey fascinating perspectives. Although there is knowledge accumulated over several centuries, new discoveries are constantly being made, both when new finds are discovered and analysed, and when known inscriptions are re-investigated and perhaps re-interpreted.

The researchers at Runverket are in great demand and cooperate closely with universities, museums and other state authorities. Runverket also has a large Nordic and international network. Several conferences and seminars have been held, and more are planned. For instance, Runverket is co-arranging the Eighth International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions in Nyköping in 2014. Foreign and Nordic scholars visit Runverket and work together with the researchers there. In recent years the media have shown a growing interest in runic studies. There are news items in the press and on television, as well as features in science programmes on television and an international documentary film production about the Viking Age. Runic inscriptions, and the stories they tell, fascinate scholars and the general public alike.

Concerted runic research with first-rate competence in different fields is essential for preserving the runestones, learning more about the inscriptions, and communicating the stories told by the runes. Runverket is a unifying node in this work.



In the village of Björkö on the island of that name in Mälaren, large fragments of runestones have turned up regularly for more than a hundred years, most recently in the autumn of 2012. It used to be thought that these were the remains of three or four different runestones, but in February 2013 Runverket, together with the Swedish History Museum, managed to piece all ten fragments together to give just one stone. It turned out that the elaborate stone had presumably been dedicated to a woman named Estrid and that it was carved by the Söderman land runemaster Östen. Photo: Gabriel Hildebrand/ Swedish History Museum (cc by-nc-nd).

Studying runic inscriptions

Reading and documentation of runic inscriptions is the foundation for continued research on the runic texts. Today traditional methods can be supplemented with modern techniques to extract as much information as possible. Thorough investigations are especially important for the new finds that are made every year in different parts of Sweden.

Fieldwork

Studies of runic inscriptions, in the field and in the lab, are fundamental for continued research on runes and runestones. Reading a runic inscription is a craft that takes many years' experience. The carving often has to be viewed in different types of lighting, and the fingers are often the best aid for deciding what was carved. Inscriptions on objects almost always have to be read by microscope. Today the traditional methods of examination can be supplemented with modern aids such as digital X-ray, 3D scanning and RTI photography.¹

It is actually only in connection with the cleaning of runestones and other objects that a comprehensive examination of the inscription can be undertaken. Both stone and other materials are subject to constant decomposition, for instance through weathering. Each new examination and documentation is therefore important, as part of the preservation of the information contained in the inscription and the text carrier. Often these examinations lead to new readings and



other discoveries, which can in turn give rise to new research questions and perspectives. It is equally as important to analyse, present and assemble the observations that have been made, so that they can also be used by others. Runverket will be working to improve the registry management to ensure the quality of this information in the future.

Documentation methods and analyses

Even in the nineteenth century, many different methods were tested to document runic inscriptions. Runestones were traced in full scale, or impressions were made in the form of simple casts using wet blotting paper. Photography was also adopted early on, and experiments were made with different types of casts in plaster and even concrete.

These runes are carved into an ashlar in Hejnum church on Gotland. The carving is four metres above ground and was discovered in January 2012 when the church was being restored. The inscription reads **haimaltr : a**, which probably means "Haimald owns". Haimald was evidently one of the stonecutters who worked on the construction of the church, and this was his way of marking that he had cut this stone.

1. RTI (Reflectance Transformation Imaging).



The Rök stone in Östergötland, depicted with the aid of 3D scanning. With this new technique one can study details in the carving grooves, and also the weathering to which the stone is exposed. Picture: Metimur.

Today there are other techniques for studying and documenting runic inscriptions, either in the field or in the National Heritage Board's laboratory in Visby. One technique is RTI, whereby objects are photographed with moving flashes so that researchers can then study the surfaces in detail, illuminated from several different angles, on a computer screen. Another new imaging technique is 3D scanning, by which a high-quality digital image of an object can be built up and then processed and analysed. 3D scanning of runic inscriptions gives detailed and colour-neutral documentation which can make it easier to read weathered and damaged inscriptions. The new technique also opens the way for new research fields, such as using the cut marks on runestones to study carving techniques and identify individual carvers.

The National Heritage Board has started a series of case studies to examine how the new techniques can best be used to document runic inscriptions in different types of material. In addition, several methodological studies are in progress to trace and analyse vestiges of original painting on runestones.

Runverket's interested and open attitude to the use of scientific techniques of examination and documentation has shown the way, and there is now a demand among other rune scholars, both nationally and internationally. The experience gained is valuable for other research fields too, such as studies of petroglyphs as well as carvings in other materials than stone.



Examining new finds

Each year there are new finds of previously unknown runic inscriptions of different kinds. Runestones mostly appear as a result of farming operations or church renovations, while loose objects with inscriptions are often discovered by archaeological excavations.

On such occasions, Runverket tries to examine the inscription as early as possible, preferably before any conservation measures. It is therefore important that the work with runes at the National Heritage Board is known and visible, so that those who make new finds know where to turn. This also requires that Runverket has efficient procedures, prepared to act quickly to examine, document and publish newly discovered inscriptions.

An inscription in the plaster of Hejnum church, carefully exposed in connection with renovation in 2012. Previously it was possible to read one or two isolated words, but now the whole text was legible: **uil--mbr : hit : han : sum : u-r hier** meaning "He who was here was called William." The name may sound very modern to our ears, but it was borrowed from German in the early Middle Ages. The spelling in the inscription shows that the name has been adapted to the pronunciation of Old Gutnic. Photo: Magnus Källström. CC BY.

Runic bone found in 2007 during excavations at Mälby in Tillinge outside Enköping, Uppland. The text reads: **andrus : ris...**, which should probably be interpreted as "Andreas carved...". Photo: Bengt A. Lundberg. CC BY.



Interpreting runic inscriptions and making them accessible

Runes have been used in Sweden for more than 1500 years, and most runic texts are written in a language that is incomprehensible to most people today. This means that it is not enough to read the runic characters. One must also be able to interpret the inscriptions and convey their content. Here Runverket has a very important duty to fulfil.

Runestone fragment found in autumn 2011 in the wall of the churchyard at Kalmar church in Uppland. The fragment is no bigger than the palm of a hand, and basically shows just a single r-rune, but it is what remains of a formerly unknown runestone.

Photo: Magnus Källström.
CC BY.



Interpreting runes

Making runic inscriptions accessible to everyone is a central task for Runverket. It is not just a matter of reading the runes, but also of interpreting the text and putting it into a linguistic and historical context. Even though there are thousands of runic inscriptions, each individual inscription is valuable and can give unique insight into language development and historical events.

Although more or less scholarly research has been done since the end of the sixteenth century, runes can still conceal many secrets. One example is the question of the exact circumstances in which this writing system originated, or who invented it and for what purpose. Another unsolved mystery is why the number of runes was reduced from 24 to 16 just before the start of the Viking Age, and how this new variant could so quickly gain a foothold all over Scandinavia. There are also many inscriptions that have not been definitively interpreted, as well as certain variants of runes that we do not yet understand.

Runic research is not just a matter of interpreting the inscriptions; it also makes a contribution to cultural history. Through these texts we learn about bygone naming practices, religious beliefs, forgotten customs, extinct words, and also how writing was used in early times. The runic texts therefore add to the picture painted by other historic and archaeological research.

Being able to interpret runic inscriptions and make them accessible to others requires a broad competence of the Runverket staff. It is also crucial that the interpretations we present have a firm scholarly foundation. Without solid research, this knowledge risks disappearing, making it difficult to understand the stories told by the inscriptions.

The publication *Sveriges runinskrifter*

Runverket is continuing the centuries-long work of interpreting and documenting runic inscriptions. Much work was done as early as the seventeenth century, with systematic journeys to different parts of Sweden, which resulted in the depiction of more than a thousand runestones. In the eighteenth century the interest in runes declined for a period, but it was revived with the national romantic movement in the nineteenth century. The descriptions of runestones that were published at that time were not always up to scholarly standards, which led the national antiquarian Hans Hildebrand in the 1880s to take the initiative for a modern edition that would include every runic inscription in Sweden. This work was entitled *Sveriges runinskrifter* (Sweden's Runic Inscriptions) and began with those from Öland, publication of which started in 1900.

The series was envisaged as comprising all known runic inscriptions in Sweden, described in words and pictures, transcribed



and interpreted. Fourteen volumes have been published to date, which together take up almost a metre on the shelf. Provinces still remaining include Dalarna, Hälsingland, Medelpad, Jämtland, Skåne, Blekinge, Halland and Bohuslän. In addition, a great many new finds have been made in the previously published provinces. The volume on Öland, for example, the first to appear, describes 60 runic inscriptions. Today there are three times as many inscriptions, which means that the majority are not in the book.

Moreover, in several of the oldest parts of *Sveriges runinskrifter* the illustrations need to be supplemented and updated.

A central task of Runverket is the responsibility for this systematic publication, continuing to issue *Sveriges runinskrifter* as well as annually publishing new finds. This is in

Gold bracteate with Proto-Norse runes, found in 2009 at Trollhättan in Västergötland. The text reads in translation: "I the 'eril' am called Maripeubaz. I wrote **alapo**". The last word is otherwise unknown and not interpreted with certainty, but it may be a noun related to the verb **alan* "feed". The name *Maripeubaz* has never been recorded before and may mean either "famous thief" or "sea thief", depending on whether the *a*-vowel was long or short. The bracteate has been dated to c. 500 AD.

Photo: Bengt A. Lundberg.
CC BY.



When the roof of Hög church was renovated in 2000–2001, it was discovered that runes were carved on some of the beams. It could be seen that it was the start of the runic alphabet and it was assumed that they might be magical runes to protect the church. When Runverket examined the runes in 2011 together with Hälsingland Museum, it turned out that no runic magic was involved. It was a way to number the roof trusses. The carver had added one rune to the sequence for

each additional beam: [f], fu, fuþ, fuþo, fuþor, fuþork. The numbering was necessary because the roof trusses were first assembled on the ground and then hoisted up in parts. The timber on the outside of the roof in Hög has been shown by dendrochronology to have been felled in the winter of 1191–92, which means that the runes were carved at the start of the 1190s. Photo: Lars Nylander, Magnus Källström. CC BY.

great demand, not just for academic research and the institutions conducting archaeological excavations, but also for cultural heritage management and – not least of all – to cater to the great interest among the general public.

Runverket's suggestion for the future is focused efforts in smaller geographical areas, which can be completed in a relatively short time and preferably also in collaboration with researchers from different universities. Conceivable tasks, for example, would be to finish the publication of the volume on Gotland's inscriptions or to produce the first modern edition of the runestones of Medelpad. Examples of other interesting research fields where there is a great need for documentation and research are the rune-inscribed burial monuments in Östergötland and Öland, the Dalecarlian runes or the runic inscriptions on portable objects from Uppland.

Assembled digital sources for broader research

The source material on runes and runic inscriptions comprises everything from manuscripts from the end of the sixteenth century to modern digital sources. A great deal is in the archives of the National Heritage Board, as well as the Royal Library in Stockholm, besides museum archives and what is in the possession of private researchers. Samnordisk runtextdatabas, a joint Nordic runic database

created at Uppsala University, assembles readings and interpretations of virtually every known runic inscription. The information is very brief, however, and for Sweden it is mainly based on publications and reports produced by Runverket.

To make things easier for researchers and the public, the National Heritage Board has digitized the published volumes of *Sveriges runinskrifter*, which are now available on our website as pdf files. There is a great need to find a better form of presentation and to digitize more material, and this is part of the future plans. This work demands resources, but it is urgently required.

Linking information about runic inscriptions from different data sources opens the way for new research and for more complex questions, where runestones, for example, can be related to factors such as settlement, boundaries and communication routes, or to other ancient remains. To survey, register, digitize documents and images, and to coordinate digital data sources can give both research and cultural heritage management access to large amounts of open, high-quality and linked research data. Besides furthering runic studies, this source material can be used in archaeology, history, linguistics, conservation science, art history and other research fields. It also gives new possibilities to make knowledge of runes and runic inscriptions more accessible to everyone.



Relief-carved runestone fragment from Köping, Öland, with traces of working. 3D image: Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt. CC BY.

Concerted responsibility preserves runic carvings and develops runic research

Runverket is a centre for research on runes and is responsible for the study and conservation of runestones and other runic inscriptions. Another important task is to steer the efforts according to research needs and the best methods for preserving the cultural heritage in the long term. This is also crucial for creating new knowledge and enabling future generations to experience runestones.

A runestone at Skånåla church in Uppland being painted by Runverket staff in summer 2010.

Photo: Magnus Källström.
CC BY.



Coordination of study and care

Each year about fifty runestones undergo special care. This often involves cleaning and other conservation measures, and the inscription is filled in with paint. It is during cleaning that the best conditions arise for studying the runic inscriptions, and it is not unusual that new discoveries are made in the runes or the ornamentation. It is therefore important that care and study are coordinated, with consideration for both conservation needs and the growth of knowledge in various fields.

Apart from the strictly runological documentation, the study can comprise technical analyses of the carving and the rock, as well as the evaluation and development of cleaning and conserving methods. The way a stone weathers can depend on many different factors, and both the external environment and the type of rock are significant.

The supportive and advisory role of Runverket is especially important now that the practical care of runestones is taking on partly new forms. There is a growing need for experts at the national level and up-to-date research experience, for supportive knowledge and dialogue. In this Runverket has a significant part to play.

Runverket as a competent fount of knowledge

Runes are an important cultural heritage which must be preserved and made accessible in a well thought-out way. Many people

associate runic script and runestones mainly with the Viking Age, although runes were used both before and after that period.

Vikings and runes also have a major international impact, functioning as a symbol of Scandinavia, particularly Sweden.

The Viking Age arouses powerful associations in many people, ideas not infrequently shaped by popular culture and ideology. Runverket makes a positive contribution to a deeper understanding of runes as cultural heritage and how this is perceived and interpreted by today's research. For Runverket to be able to maintain its role as a competent knowledge bank and meet the expectations of researchers, regional heritage management and the general public, it is essential that the runic research environment remains strong. This is maintained by letting the experts in the National Heritage Board pursue research of their own, participate in the academic discussion and gain good insight into the prevailing state of research, while also making research findings accessible and taking part in the public debate at seminars and in other contexts.

No other authority or single academic discipline has the potential or the mission to assemble the necessary competence and provide all the interdisciplinary coverage required in runic research. Runverket therefore has a unique role and much is expected of it. Runverket wants to make a contribution and to continue being the competent fount of knowledge in this field.



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