



Rök Runestone Riddles Revisited*

By Per Holmberg

Artikeln utgår från de två metodologiska principer som ställs upp av Holmberg, Gräslund, Sundqvist och Williams (2020) för tolkningen av Rökstensens inskrift: Vid varje punkt ska det alternativ föredras som (1) kan sägas bidra till en ständigt pågående interaktion om vad som är relevant vid den plats där stenen är rest, och (2) kan få stöd i andra fornnordiska texter. Studien syftar till en kritisk utvärdering av hur dessa principer tillämpats i tolkningen av inskriftens första par av gåtor, och till en mer konsistent analys. Slutsatsen är att monumentets kontext verkar vara det kritiska årsskiftet vid höstdagjämningen, och en hypotes för fortsatt forskning föreslås vara att också inskriftens följande gåtor handlar om denna specifika punkt i tiden, och om oron vid övergången från det gamla året till det nya.

1. Introduction

For one and a half centuries, the quest for the meaning of the Rök runestone (Ög 136) has been one of the greatest challenges in the research of Viking Age runic inscriptions. The difficulties present on many levels of the inscription multiply the interpretative possibilities. Although its more than 700 characters are clearly legible, except for one damaged line, and its ciphers seem to have been satisfactorily solved, many problems remain. On the level of orthography, the reader has to handle the phonological ambiguity of the runes of the younger futhark as well as the lack of space between words. On the level of lexicogrammar, the inscription requires assumptions about words and expressions that are not attested to in other sources. On the level of semantics, the content is

* This study is a part of the project Rök Runestone Revisited funded by the Swedish Research Council (2016-02493). I am especially grateful to Professor Klaus Düwel, Associate Professor Alessandro Palumbo, Phil.M Ida Västerdal, an anonymous reviewer and the seminar for the History of Religions at Stockholm University for comments that greatly improved the manuscript.

expressed in a consciously secretive way. On the level of context, there is no sure knowledge about the function of early Viking Age runic monuments which would otherwise have offered a touchstone for the evaluation of linguistic alternatives.

Every scholar who takes on the challenge of understanding a text with a seemingly open-ended number of alternative meanings must adhere to a methodology. Otherwise, the interpretative work will culminate in guesses that cannot be substantiated by arguments. Of course, general considerations of this kind have guided all interpretations of the Rök runestone inscription in one way or another. They have, however, seldom been made explicit. One exception is Holmberg, Gräslund, Sundqvist & Williams (2020, in the following Holmberg et al. 2020), who state the methodological guidelines used for the analysis that can be summarised as two complementary principles. The first is based on an understanding of the general semiotics of the erected stone and its manifestation of presence and eternity. All parts of the inscription should be understood, it is suggested, as contributions to a forever ongoing meaning making (“interpersonally”) with a focus on actions undertaken in the vicinity of the monument (“ideationally”) (ibid.: 5–7). The second principle is the priority of substantive alternatives that can be given intertextual support by other Old Norse sources (ibid.: 7, cf. 3–5).

The first aim of this study is to critically evaluate how these two methodological principles, spatiotemporal relevance and Old Norse intertextuality, are applied by Holmberg et al. (2020). The second aim is to present a re-analysis that more consistently follows these methodological guidelines. The current discussion will focus on the interpretation of the major passage on the front side which continues on the first narrow side. All scholars agree that the passage is about two spoils of war and a champion, and traditionally the champion has been identified as Theodoric the Great (first by Vigfússon in Vigfússon and York Powell 1879: 452), or a namesake (cf. von Friesen 1920; Malone 1934). Holmberg et al. (2020), however, understand the passage as a pair of riddles which concerns the rhythm of moonlight and sunlight and assumes a context where this rhythm has been perceived as threatened (2020: 15–18). One of their conclusions is that the inscription might refer to the climate disaster after AD 536, while the main line of previous research has proposed a reference to the death of Theodoric the Great AD 526.

As a background I outline previous scholarly discussions of the passage (section 2). Next, the interpretation suggested by Holmberg et al. (2020) is examined one riddle at a time (sections 3.1 and 3.2). This leads to some conclusions about the general understanding of the monument as well as other specific passages of the inscription (section 4).

2. Previous research on the passage

The interpretation by Holmberg et al. places itself as the latest in a long line of very divergent attempts to understand the Rök runestone inscription, e.g. Sophus Bugge (1878 and 1910), Henrik Schück (1908), Otto von Friesen (1920), Hugo Pipping (1932), Otto Höfler (1952), Elias Wessén (1958), Lis Jacobsen (1961), Aage Kabell (1964), Nils Åge Nielsen (1969), Lars Lönnroth (1977), Ottar Grønvik (2003), and Joseph Harris (2010). The question of how the passage about the two spoils of war and the champion should be analysed turns out to be crucial for the understanding of the whole inscription. This part of the inscription follows immediately after the initial dedication to the dead son Vāmōðr (in lines 1–2), and its 264 short twig runes are distributed in nine lines (lines 3–11, see below). The first six vertical lines of runes (lines 3–8) express the two enigmatic questions, separated by a dot (in line 5). The following three lines, two horizontal lines on the front side (lines 9 and 10) and one final vertical line on the connecting narrow side (line 11), make up a stanza of the Old Norse verse form *fornyrðislag* that is obviously meant to develop the theme in some way.

The passage is presented below line by line with the segmentation, normalization and translation of Holmberg et al. (2020: 14).¹ If compared to Wessén's normalization and translation of the inscription (1958), which is the most cited, three differences appear: the introduction of the first riddle (**sakumukmini** in line 3), where the authors accept a suggestion by Rolf Nordenstreng (1912); the end of the second riddle (**auktumirǫnubsakar** in lines 7–8), where they follow Höfler's lexicogrammatical interpretation (1952: 38–41); and finally, the beginning of the *fornyrðislag* stanza (**raipiaurik** in line 9), where they draw on the new linguistic possibilities pointed out by Bo Ralph (2007: 150–153). In

1. Some details of the translation have been adjusted in order to fit the line breaks.

the following, these choices will be contextualised in a discussion of previous interpretations of the passage.

(3) **sakumkminiþathuariarualraubaruarintuar**

Sagum Ygg minni þat, hværiar valrauðar vārin tvār

Let us say for YggR this as a memory, which spoils of war were two

(4) **þarsuaþtualfsinumuarinumnartualraubu**

þār, svād tvalf sinnum vārin numnar at valrauðu,

there, which twelve times were taken as spoils of war,

(5) **baþarsamṇaṇumisumṇanum'þatsakumṇa**

bāðar sāmān ā ymissum mānnum? Þat sagum ānna-

both from one to another? This let us say as se-

(6) **rthuarfurniualtumṇanurþifiaru**

rt, hvā'r fur nīu aldum ān urði fiaru

cond, who nine generations ago lost the life

(7) **mirhraiþkutumauktu**

meðr hraiðgutum, auk dō-

with the Hraiðgutar; but de-

(8) **mirṇnubsakar**

mir ānn umb sakar?

cides still the matter?

(9) **raiþiaurikrḥinþurmupistilir**

Raið iau, rinkr hinn þurmōði, stillir

Ride the horse did the bold champion, chief

(10) **flutnastrantuhraiþmararsitir nukarurṇ**

flutna, strāndu Hraiðmarar. Sitir nū garur ā

of men, over the shores of the Hraiðsea. He sits now armed on

(11) **kutasinumskialtiubfatlaþrskatimarika**

guta sīnum, skialdi umb fatlaðr, skati māringa.

his horse, his shield strapped, foremost of the famous.

The scholarly attempts to understand the identity of the two spoils of war (lines 3–5) and the person referred to both as dead and alive (lines 5–11) can be seen as a struggle to apply either a principle of intertextuality or a principle of spatiotemporal relevance, even if this has not been made explicit in the discussion.

For the early scholars it was quite natural to assume that the spatiotemporal relevance of the whole inscription consisted of the commemoration of Vāmōðr's life and death. Thus, it seemed unlikely that specific intertextual evidence could support this interpretation. The question about two spoils was suggested to refer to some of Vāmōðr's feats of war, and the second to his death (cf. Bugge 1878, esp. pp. 90–92). Consequently, the Hraiðgutar (line 7) were considered to be the people living in the province of Östergötland (Stephens 1866: 134; Bugge 1878: 36), and the Hraiðsea (line 10) was identified with some Scandinavian sea (ibid.: 43). One of many hard nuts to crack for this hypothesis is that the person asked about in the second question seems to be referred to as a living rider at the end of the passage. A bold solution was that the rider was the dead Vāmōðr mounted in his tomb for the ride to Valhalla (Bugge 1878: 87, cf. Stephens 1866: 134).

From the very start of the scholarly investigation, a critical rune sequence was **raipiaurikr** (in line 9), which presents several challenges. The first four runes **raip** were identified as the past tense *rēð* of *ráða* 'reign' (Bugge 1878: 40), even if the more straightforward reading *raið* 'rode' was also considered (and later preferred in Bugge 1888: 60–61). The four last runes **rikr** were understood as *rinkr* 'champion', which could fit as a reference to Vāmōðr. This leaves the three runes **iau** in the middle unexplained. One proposal was that the champion was an *aurinkr*, a 'lord of the island', which requires an *ad hoc* explanation of the **i**-rune (Stephens 1866: 232; cf. a similar interpretation in Noreen 1886: 26). Another suggestion was to make the champion a *þjóðrikr*, a 'king of a people' (Bugge 1878: 40–41).

However, the latter alternative turned out to be attractive after it was claimed that *þjóðrikr* was in fact a reference to Theodoric the Great (454–526 CE), the Ostrogoth king of Italy after the fall of the West Roman Empire (first Vigfússon and York Powell 1879: 452; then Bugge 1888). This new hypothesis demanded intertextual support for the idea that Varrinn, Vāmōðr's father and the Rök runestone carver according to the dedication, may well have known some narrative about Theodoric. Based

on parallels with the rich set of medieval legends about Theodoric in Northern Europe (one of them the Eddic poem *Guðrúnarkviða III*, cf. stanza 2–5), researchers could now present new answers to the two questions in the first passage. The spoils of war were typically explained to be Theodoric's sword and shield or other precious belongings that are mentioned in the legend material, and the person who died nine ages ago was supposed to be Theodoric himself. The Hraifgutar were now equated with the Ostragoths, and the Hraifðsea localised as some part of the Mediterranean (e.g. Bugge 1910: 14–59; Pipping 1932: 12–25; Lönnroth 1977: 23–30). A similar alternative was to read the passage as an allusion to more than one hero legend, and thus the compulsion to identify the two spoils of war in the legends about Theodoric was dispensed with (Schück 1908: 16–23; Wessén 1958: 24). Nevertheless, it remained difficult to explain why the rider, now identified as Theodoric not as Vāmōðr, seems to be alive in the present tense ending of the passage. One way of solving this problem was to assume that the carver was referring to an equestrian statue of Theodoric that was erected in Aachen at this time (first Bugge 1888: 25 and then e.g. Schück 1908: 11–15; Bugge 1910: 57–59; Pipping 1932: 109–110; Harris 2010: 93).

For some twentieth century scholars (e.g. von Friesen 1920, Höfler 1952, Nielsen 1969), it seemed an acute deficiency that the main strand of Theodoric interpretations could not establish more than a very weak spatiotemporal relevance of the monument. Even if it was assumed that Varinn wanted to claim kinship (Schück 1908) or just to show off his knowledge of hero narratives (Wessén 1958, Lönnroth 1977), it was far from clear why the Theodoric legend became a part of a runic monument at this specific point in time and space. On the other hand, assumptions about a stronger spatiotemporal connection became necessarily speculative. In order to reduce the spatial and temporal distance between Theodoric and the monument, it was suggested that *Bioðrikr* instead refers to a later Gothic king who would have fought a battle in the vicinity of Rök and would now be avenged (von Friesen 1920, 46–48), and assumptions were also made about a local Theodoric-Odin cult (Höfler 1952: e.g. 81–82; Nielsen 1969: 31–32).

The scholarly discussion about the rune sequence **auktumirǫnubsa-kar** (lines 7–8) shows how the attempts to establish a closer connection between Theodoric and Rök in time and space were controversial. The rune sequence follows in the inscription after the mention of someone who was

dead nine ages ago ‘with the Hraiðgutar’. Already before the introduction of the Theodoric interpretation, two alternative verbs were acknowledged after the initial conjunction *auk* ‘and’: either the verb may be found in the next two runes **tu**, *dó* past tense ‘died’, or the next five **tumir**, *dþmir* present tense ‘decides’ (cf. Bugge 1878: 38–39). The dilemma is that the shift to present tense *dþmir* ‘decides’ is hard to explain if the reader had been told about Theodoric’s (or Vāmōðr’s) death in the previous clause, but, on the other hand, that the choice to read *dó* ‘died’ seems to open an impassable route. The resulting problems can be illustrated by Wessén’s attempt to read the whole sequence as *auk dó meðr hann umb sakar* which he translates as ‘and he died with them [i.e. the Hraiðgutar] because of his crime’ (1958: 15). There is, however, no pronoun in the inscription that corresponds to ‘them’ in Wessén’s translation. The supposed preposition *meðr* ‘with’ stands completely alone, without any related nominal phrase. Wessén rejected the alternative *dþmir* ‘decides’ in a previous discussion with Höfler who suggested *auk dþmir ænn umb sakar*, ‘and still makes verdicts (about the battle)’ (Höfler 1952: 38–41). Wessén reluctantly admitted that there are no linguistic arguments against Höfler’s grammatical proposal (1953: 159), but strongly opposed Höfler’s conclusion that Theodoric was conceived as a living divine being in the context of Germanic leadership cults (cf. also Wessén 1964; 1966; 1976). Several scholars later followed Höfler grammatically, but instead of embracing the idea of the divine king, they accepted the temporal paradox the grammar entails for their interpretations (i.e. Lönnroth 1977: 25 f., Widmark 1992: 35). As mentioned above, Holmberg et al. (2020: 23) also concur with Höfler’s grammatical interpretation, and I will return to how the shift in tense is treated in their interpretation.

The only objection to Theodoric interpretations during the twentieth century was formulated by Kabell, who recognised the possibility of interpreting the three runes **iau** in **raipiaurikr** as a morpheme *jau* from **jaur* ‘horse’ (1964: 8). He suggested that the right wording was *raið jáurikr* ‘ride did the horse-rich’, instead of *raið* (or *rēð*) *þiódrikr* ‘ride (or rule) did Theodoric’. The linguistic difficulties of reaching the name Theodoric from the actual runes are too many, Kabell argued, and such an inscription would deviate from what one expects from an inscription on a runestone monument:

Es meldet sich die Frage: was hat der eine oder der andere Jahrhunderte früher verstorbene ausländischer Fürst Theoderich auf dem Grabmal der

Vámóð zu tun? Eigentlich nichts, darf man wohl sagen, und man darf nicht davor zurückschrecken, es auszusprechen, dass der Name *PíórikR* auf dem Stein einfach nicht vorkommt. (ibid.)

A half century later Ralph developed the same line of reasoning and argued for the segmentation *raiðjau rinkr* ‘ride the horse did the champion’ with *jau* as a dative form of **jaur* ‘horse’ (2007: 150–151). As will be discussed below in greater detail, Holmberg et al. (2020: 15–18) accept Ralph’s lexicogrammatical interpretation, as well as his idea that the stanza does not allude to a human champion, but to the sun (cf. Holmberg 2016). They also follow a previous suggestion (ibid.: 89–90) that the presence of the Hraiðgutar (line 7) is motivated by the idea that this people lives where the sun rises in the east. Accordingly, ‘the shores of the Hraiðsea’ (line 10) is interpreted as a metaphor for the eastern horizon. A consequence is that it becomes unproblematic that the rider, now conceived of as the sun or the sun-rider, is alive at the end of the passage. The difficulty instead lies in explaining what is meant by claiming that the sun was without life nine ages ago with the Hraiðgutar.

As shown by this overview, it has been hard for previous research on the passage to apply both a methodological principle of intertextuality and a principle of spatiotemporal relevance. Proponents of the idea that the passage is primarily a narrative fragment about Theodoric (e.g. Schiück 1908, Pipping 1932, Wessén 1958, Jacobsen 1961, Lönnroth 1977) have prioritised intertextual arguments and downplayed the need for a spatially and temporally situated understanding of the monument. Proponents of a ritual approach have on the contrary attached great importance to a specific spatiotemporal situation where Theodoric is assumed to have been either the cursed enemy (von Friesen 1920) or the invoked divinity (Höfler 1952, Nielsen 1969), although neither alternative can be given intertextual support.

This tension has also had repercussions for the understanding of the initial rune sequence of the passage: **sakumukmini** (line 3). There has largely been consensus about the linguistic interpretation that **sakum** stands for a first-person plural form *sagum* of the verb *segia* ‘say’. However, in the following runes, the ‘narrativists’ have tended to read *mōgmīnni* ‘folk memory’, i.e. a memory of the people (e.g. Schiück 1908: 4; Wessén 1958: 32–36), while the ‘ritualists’ have instead seen a specific addressee: *ungmǣnni* ‘the young man’ (von Friesen 1920: 34–35; Höfler 1952: 35).

The choice affects the whole interpretation since the phrase is repeated six times in different lexicogrammatical variants throughout the inscription (the first time in lines 5–6). Holmberg et al. (2020), on the one hand, accept the idea that each phrase is concerned with a *minni* ‘a memory’. On the other hand, they reject a narrative understanding of *minni* as a reminder of a legendary past. Instead they define memories in this context as “ritual acts of social and religious significance relating to the past, present, and future, that together contribute to the maintenance and renewal of the world” (2020: 12). They also argue that the inscription reveals a specific addressee for these ritual memorial acts, Odin the god of enigmatic knowledge, also called Yggr ‘the terrible’. Thus, they read **sa-kumukmini** as *Sagum Ygg minni* ‘Let us say a memory for Yggr’ (ibid.; cf. Nordenstreng 1912).

3. Revisiting the first two Rök runestone riddles

We now return to the two enigmatic questions of the passage – which concern the two spoils of war (lines 3–5) and the person referred to as both dead and alive (lines 5–11) – in order to investigate the answers given by Holmberg et al. (2020). The proposed answer to the first question is that “it is light that is taken from the sun by the moon until it becomes full, and light that is then plundered again by the sun, until the moon wanes completely” (ibid.: 16). The answer given to the second question is the sun. In both cases the authors rely heavily on the analysis of Ralph (2007).

3.1 *The first riddle: rethinking the phases of the moon*

The opening scene of the passage has traditionally been understood as twelve persons who in a sequence loot each other on two spoils of war (*valraubar*). Actually, it is the changes of ownership that are counted as twelve, which would require either a thirteenth person or a repossession of the goods to someone in the line. The key phrase (*ā ymissum mānnum* ‘from one to another’) can also, as Ralph (2007: 143) points out, describe a scene where only two warriors plunder each other twelve times. Thus, it is possible for Ralph to identify the warriors as the sun and the moon locked in a monthly recurring conflict about light, a metaphor for the

twelve lunar cycles of the year (Ralph 2007: 143; Holmberg 2016: 87–89; Holmberg et al. 2020: 16). It should be noted that neither Ralph nor Holmberg et al., who accept the proposal, write explicitly how the answer is to be phrased. They agree that the object of conflict is the moonlight. However, it is not quite clear how the moonlight is conceived of as two things, which is a requirement for a valid answer (*valrauþar ... tvār* ‘two spoils of war’).

The answer given to the first riddle does not violate the principle of spatiotemporal relevance. The rhythm of light is clearly visible from the position of the erected stone, unlike the previously suggested exchanges of Theodoric’s sword and helmet etc. Further, Holmberg et al. elaborate the reason why it may have been important to establish an eternal reminder of this rhythm of light, a suggestion that is treated below as it relates to the second riddle.

Regarding the principle of Old Norse intertextuality, the first riddle of the inscription constitutes an exception in the interpretation of Holmberg et al. (2020). For each of the eight following riddles, the authors quote support from the Eddic poems *Vafþrúðnismál* and/or *Völuspá*, but not for the initial one. Indeed, they admit that there is no evidence for an ongoing conflict between the moon and the sun in other preserved sources of Old Norse mythology (ibid.: 16–17). Instead, they refer to one of the around ninety riddles in the Anglo-Saxon medieval Exeter Book (riddle 27, see Williamson 1977: 85). This argument is borrowed from Ralph (2007: 142–143), who cites the riddle with the following translation:

I saw a creature amazingly carrying booty between horns, a bright air-vessel skilfully adorned, [carrying] booty home from the war-expedition: she wished to build a cottage in the city, to set it up cunningly, if she could do it so. When a remarkable creature came over the wall’s roof – he is known to all earth’s inhabitants – he recaptured the booty and drove the fugitive home unwillingly; she went travelling west from the feud there; she hastened away. Dust rose to the heavens, dew fell on the earth, night went forth. Afterwards no man knew the creature’s journey. (Exeter riddle 27, translation from Donoghue 2004: 120–121)

There is undoubtedly a similarity between the riddle of the Rök inscription and the Exeter riddle that lies in the fact that both use a metaphor of war-booty for the moonlight (if Ralph and Holmberg et al. are on the

right track with their interpretations). However, the Exeter riddle is about *two creatures* who once exchanged one war-booty, while the Rök riddle is about an unknown number of persons who twelve times exchange *two war-booties*. The Exeter riddle seems to thematise the diurnal shift between night and day, in which both the moon and the sun take part. The theme of the Rök riddle seems to be the lunar cycle, in which the sun does not play the same active role.

As Holmberg et al. argue that a principle of Old Norse intertextuality is applicable to the other parts of the inscription, there seems to be good reason for investigating the conceptualisation of the moonlight in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Vǫluspá*. In both poems the moonlight is presented in the context of time reckoning. In *Vǫluspá* (stanza 5–6), the moon acquires this function by a decision of the gods, together with the other heavenly bodies. In *Vafþrúðnismál* (stanza 25), the divine creation of the moonlight is specified as *two* phenomena: *ný* and *nið* (cf. *Vǫluspá* stanza 11). Thus, the lunar disc is conceived as a composition of two halves, its waxing phase (*ný*) and its waning phase (*nið*).

I suggest that an application of the principle of Old Norse intertextuality would substantiate the claim that the two spoils of war in the first Rök riddle are *ný* and *nið*, the two halves of the lunar disc. They are conceived as two different phenomena, but always together (*bāðar sāmān* ‘both together’ line 5), and they change ownership twelve times every year, during the shift between months. Each old month drops these two halves of the lunar disc on the battlefield after the moon has been full, and each new month picks them up, first *ný* and then *nið*. Thus, the traditional interpretation seems to be right on one point: the spoils of war change hands twelve times in a row. The twelfth change of ownership occurs at the turn of the year when the last month of the year gives up both halves of the lunar disc, for the year’s first month to pick them up again.

The suggested adjustment of the interpretation argued for in Holmberg et al. (2020) is not particularly large, but will prove significant in relation to the next riddle.

3.2 *The second riddle: rethinking the death of the sun*

Crucial for answering the second riddle (lines 5–8) is the clue in the form of the *fornyrðislag* stanza that is inscribed directly after lines 9–11. The

identity of the riding champion in the stanza is the sun, Ralph proposes, as has been discussed above. The proposal is accepted by Holmberg et al. (2020: 23–24). This implies that the answer to the riddle should be the sun. If so, the challenge for this interpretation is to explain why the sun was dead nine generations ago with the Hraifgutar. The innovative proposal of Holmberg et al. is that this phrase refers to the events following 536 AD, when a series of volcano eruptions darkened the sun and caused a severe climate crisis (2020: 17; cf. also pp. 7–9).

In line with the principle of Old Norse intertextuality, the authors quote several parallels to support the idea about the death of the sun in 536 AD. The argument is that several Old Norse mythological motifs are coloured by the climate crisis experience: the *fimbulvetr* in *Vafþrúðnismál* stanza 44–45, the summers with *svört . . . sólskin* ‘black sunlight’ in *Völuspá* stanza 40, and the wolf *Fenrir* who swallows the sun in *Vafþrúðnismál* stanza 46–47. The value of these parallels should be evaluated by future research, but here it is sufficient to note that the writers do everything they can to argue on the basis of Old Norse intertextuality. The main problem with their reasoning, I think, is related to the other principle they claim to follow.

The principle of spatiotemporal relevance combines a spatial and a temporal condition. In terms of space, the inscription is expected to focus on local actions. In terms of time, the inscription is expected to invite the reader to participate in a forever ongoing dialogue about these actions. The idea that *fur niu aldam* ‘nine ages ago’ refers to the climate disaster following 536 AD seems to fulfil the spatial condition. We may imagine that Vāmōðr’s forefather, one morning nine generations before the erection of the Rök runestone, stood at the place where the stone would be erected, and waited for the sun to rise in the east ‘with the Hraifgutar’, but in vain. This makes the sun a better solution to the riddle than the suggestion that it alludes to Theodoric the Great. However, when it comes to the temporal condition, the interpretation runs into the same problem as its predecessors. If we imagine a reader of the inscription in the generation after Vāmōðr, it is clear that this reader would have to amend the text: “the inscription says nine generations ago, but now it should be ten”. The more time that passes, the greater the uncertainty will be about how many generations to add. Whether the inscription refers to the death of the sun in 536 AD or to the death of Theodoric the Great in 526 AD, in both cases we have to admit that it

violates the principle of spatiotemporal relevance, as it prepares very poorly for an eternal reading.

The problem may at first seem to be insoluble. However, the previous riddle can be taken as a hint to a solution that applies nicely the principle of spatiotemporal relevance. In the discussion above of the first riddle, I suggested that it refers to the twelve months of the year. Each of these periods of time may well be referred to as an *ald* ‘age’, since the word *ald* is, just like the English word *age*, used for an unspecified, often recurrent, period of time, the length of which is determined by the context. Admittedly, a month is otherwise called *mánaðr* (or *mánuðr*) but such a straightforward expression would have ruined the enigmatic construction of the second Rök riddle. As the riddle is now formulated, the temporal specification of the ages is a part of the solution.

If the phrase *fur nīu aldum* ‘nine ages ago’ is to be interpreted as a period of nine months, the riddle does not concern any specific historic event, as riddles very seldom do. Instead this interpretation indicates that the concern of the riddle is a recurring event in the circular time of the calendar. Also, the grammar of the clause seems to suggest that this alternative is more likely. If the clause had referred to a historical fact, be it the death of an emperor or a natural disaster, the expected grammatical choice would be past tense indicative, not the past subjunctive of *ǣn urði fiaru* ‘became without life’. The latter grammatical choice may be easier to justify when the clause refers to a recurring event.

It is well known by inhabitants of northern latitudes that the sun rises at different points of the horizon over the course of the year. The sun rises in the east at equinoxes, i.e. at the end of March and September. At midsummer in Rök, the sun passes the eastern point of the horizon at a rather high altitude since it has already been well and alive for two hours. In midwinter, on the contrary, there is not even a promise of dawn when the sun passes well below this point of the horizon. Therefore, the sun can be said to be without life in the east every midwinter, and every autumn equinox, nine months later, it is completely relevant to say that this happened *fur nīu aldum* ‘nine ages ago’. Such an interpretation makes good sense of the temporal shift that has been discussed since scholarly investigations of the inscription started. The fact that the sun was not visible in the east in midwinter (*ǣn urði fiaru meðr hraiðgutum* ‘became without life with the Hraiðgutur’ (lines 6–7) is first contrasted by its maintained function of time reckoning (*auk dǫmir ǣnn umb sakar* ‘but

still decides the matter' lines 7–8), and then by its steep rise over the eastern horizon at the autumn equinox (*strāndu Hraiðmarar* 'over the shores of the Hraiðsea'). The latter is, importantly, inscribed as the 'now' of the reading (*sitir nū garur ā guta sīnum*, 'sits now armed on its horse'). Thus, the conclusion seems to be that the inscription was carved for the situational context of the autumn equinox. Each year at this time, the spatio-temporal condition was satisfied when the reader, and probably also a crowd of listeners, could view the sun rise in the east and remember the midwinter darkness *fur nū aldum* 'nine ages ago'.

4. Concluding discussion

The investigation has uncovered two possibilities for establishing a more consistent interpretation of the Rök runestone riddles, given the methodological guidelines that are determined by Holmberg et al. (2020). I have argued that an application of the principle of Old Norse intertextuality to the first riddle as well provides a much easier solution. The idea is still that the riddle concerns the monthly phases of the moonlight, but on the basis of *Vafprúðnismál* stanza 25, the riddle can be understood as a change of ownership of the two halves of the lunar disc (*ný* and *nið*). Regarding the second riddle I have discussed a severe problem that applies to the principle of spatiotemporal relevance. It is very hard to explain how the phrase *fur nū aldum* 'nine ages ago' would function in the continued reading of the inscription, if it is understood as denoting generations. I propose instead that the riddle is about the turning of the year, which occurred at the autumn equinox according to Old Norse time reckoning (cf. Nordberg 2006: e.g. 29–36; Dahllöf 1990), and inscribed for a reading at each New Year. The nine ages are the nine months that have passed since the sun was dead in the east at midwinter.

These new suggestions fit nicely into the overall frame that was established by Holmberg et al. (2020): the cohesive theme of the inscription is the rhythm of light, and the struggle for its continuation. It is very likely that concerns about this issue were activated by memories of cold summers and the fear of crop failures, as the authors argue. However, the new interpretation does not assume any direct connection to the climate crisis following 536 AD. This event is taken by Holmberg et al. to be an omen of Ragnarok, which they understand on the basis of *Völuspá*

and *Vafþrúðnismál* as a disastrous chain of events at the end of times, to be followed by the recreation of the world. In this way, their understanding of the first pair of riddles contextualises the whole interpretation. If the runestone does not make any explicit mention of 536 AD, it is therefore necessary to rethink the context of the inscription. The big drama may not be “the end of the world” in the sense that Holmberg et al. imagined.

The new interpretation of the first two riddles suggests that every turn of the year might have been an extremely critical point where everything seemed to vanish: not only the old year, but significantly, also the bright and warm half of the year which was characterised by sowing, growth and harvest. This might be the end of the world as the Rök runestone inscription knows it, a recurring Ragnarok where a cosmic battle takes place, deciding the fate of the world.

Although our knowledge about Old Norse calendric rites is very limited, there is strong evidence that the end of all quarters of the year were celebrated with the ultimate goal of keeping the cosmos stable and ensuring good growth and harvests (see Nordberg 2006: 76–78; cf. also Sundqvist 2017). The earliest source documenting an Old Norse calendric ritual is probably the Stentoften runestone (DR 357) in Southern Sweden dated to the seventh century, raised around two hundred years before the Rök runestone. The inscription seems to contain a report about a sacrifice for the new year’s crop: ‘With nine bucks, with nine stallions HǫpuwolfoR gave good growth’ (Santesson’s translation 1989: 221; cf. Schulte 2006).

Sacrifices were performed in accordance with the lunar calendar, but to calculate at which full moon the transition between quarters should be celebrated, it was, of course, necessary to know the four benchmarks of the solar calendar: both the solstices and the equinoxes (cf. Nordberg 2006: 34–50). This sun-based division of the year was later presented by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*, 63:

Frá jafndægrí er haust til þess er sól sezk í eyktarstað. Þá er vetr til jafndægris, þá er vár til fardaga, þá er sumar til jafndægris.

‘From the equinox it is autumn until the sun reaches its lowest point. Then it is winter to the equinox. Then it is spring to the “travelling days”. Then it is summer to the equinox.’

It is rather easy to recognize the winter and summer solstices empirically, but the equinoxes were probably calculated as the midpoints between them (Nordberg 2006: 45–46). Thus, it makes sense that the second Rök riddle positions the autumn equinox in relation to the winter solstice.

It would be fruitful to review also the following riddles in the context of the critical turn of the year. This is, however, not the purpose of this study. A hypothesis for further research might be that each pair of riddles, in one way or another, concerns the rhythm of light at exactly this point in time, and the worries about the transition from one year to another. Further, the new interpretation opens for investigation of the spatial context of the monument. If Rök was the original site of the monument, which most scholars believe, it might be possible after all, to find reasons why the place would be significant in relation to the sun's movement from east to west at autumn equinoxes.

References

- Bugge, Sophus. 1878. Tolkning af runeindskriften på Rökstenen i Östergötland: Et bidrag til kundskab om svensk sprog, skrift og skaldekunst i oldtiden. *Antikvarisk tidskrift för Sverige* 5, 1–148, 211–215. <http://runeberg.org/antiqtid/5/0005.html>
- . 1888. *Om Runeindskrifterne paa Rök-stenen i Östergötland og paa Fonnaas-Spænden fra Rendalen i Norge*. Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner.
- . 1910. *Der Runenstein von Rök in Östergötland, Schweden*, ed. Magnus Olsen. Stockholm. <https://archive.org/details/derrunensteinvon0obugg/page/n4/mode/2up>
- Dahllöf, Tordis. 1990. "Det är inte säkert att vintern börjar med 'förste vinterdan'." Några tankar kring folklig tradition och kalendarisk kunskap. *Svenska landsmål och svenskt folkliv* 1989, 36–44. https://www.isof.se/download/18.585of85e15732eadob3596/1529495410573/Svenska%20landsmål%20och%20Svenskt%20folkliv_1990.pdf
- Donoghue, Daniel. 2004. *Old English Literature. A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Friesen, Otto von. 1920. *Rökstenen: Runstenen vid Röks kyrka Lysings härad Östergötland*. Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademiens.
- Grønvik, Ottar. 2003. *Der Rökstein: Über die religiöse Bestimmung und das weltliche Schicksal eines Helden aus der frühen Wikingerzeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Lang.
- Guðrúnarkviða III. In Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason. 2014, 2, 262–64.
- Harris, Joseph C. 2010. Varin's philosophy and the Rök Stone's mythology of death. In: *New Perspectives on Myth*, ed. Wim M. J. van Binsbergen, and Eric Venbrux. Haarlem/Nijmegen, 91–105. <https://es.scribd.com/doc/80766324/New-Perspectives-on-Myth>
- Höfler, Otto. 1952. *Der Runenstein von Rök und die germanische Individualweihe*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- Holmberg, Per. 2016. Svaren på Rökstenens gåtor: En socialsemiotisk analys av meningsskapande och rumslighet. *Futhark: International Journal of Runic Studies* 6 (2015), 65–106. <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:922588/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Holmberg, Per, Bo Gräslund, Olof Sundqvist & Henrik Williams. 2020. The Rök runestone and the end of the world. *Futhark: International Journal of Runic Studies* 9–10 (2018–2019), 7–38. <http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1383036&dsid=-5952>
- Jacobsen, Lis. 1961. Rökstudier. *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 76, 1–50.
- Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason, eds. 2014. *Eddukvæði*. 2 vols. Íslenzk fornrit. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag
- Kabell, Aage. 1964. *Rök*. Trondheim: Det Kgl. Norske Videnskabernes Selskabet.
- Lönnroth, Lars. 1977. The Riddles of the Rök-stone: A Structural Approach. *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 92, 1–57. <https://journals.lub.lu.se/anf/article/view/11849>
- Malone, Kemp. 1934. The Theodoric of the Rök inscription. *Acta philologica Scandinavica* 9: 76–84
- Nielsen, Niels Åge. 1969. *Runerne på Rökstenen*. Odense: Odense University Studies in Scandinavian Linguistics.
- Nordberg, Andreas. 2006. *Jul, disting och förkyrklig tideräkning. Kalendrar och kalendariska riter i det förkristna Norden*. Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur.

- Nordenstreng, Rolf. 1912. Vad är syftet med Rökstenens inskrift. *Studier i nordisk filologi* 3, 1–4.
- Noreen, Adolf. 1886. De nordiska språkens nasalerade vokaler. *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 3, 1–41.
- Pipping, Hugo. 1932. Rökstensinskriften en rättsurkund. *Studier i nordisk filologi* 22 (1), 50–2.
- Ralph, Bo. 2007. Gåtan som lösning: Ett bidrag till förståelsen av Rökstenens runinskrift. *Maal og Minne* 99 (2), 133–57.
<http://ojs.novus.no/index.php/MOM/article/view/258>
- Santesson, Lillemor. 1989. En blekingsk blotinskrift: En nytolkning av inledningsraderna på Stentofstenen. *Fornvännen* 84, 221–229.
<http://samla.raa.se/xmlui/handle/raa/2624>
- Schulte, Michael. 2006. Ein kritischer Kommentar zum Erkenntnisstand der Blekinge Inschriften. *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 135, 399–412.
- Schück, Henrik. 1908. *Bidrag till tolkning af Rök-inskriften*. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Skáldskaparmál. In Faulkes, Anthony. 1998. *Edda. Skáldskaparmál 1. Introduction, Text and Notes. Edited by Anthony Faulkes*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research University College London.
<http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Edda-2a.pdf>
- Stephens, George. 1866. *The Old-Northern runic monuments of Scandinavia and England. Now first collected and deciphered by George Stephens. Vol 1*. London: John Russel Smith, Copenhagen: Michelsen and Tillge. https://archive.org/details/gri_33125000703617/page/n307/mode/2up/search/Rök
- Sundqvist, Olof. 2017. Blod och blót: Blodets betydelse och funktion vid fornskandinaviska offerriter. *Scripta Islandica* 68, 275–308.
<https://rafhladan.is/handle/10802/16540>
- Vafprúðnismál. In Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason. 2014, 1, 356–66.
- Völuspá. In Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason. 2014, 1, 292–321.
- Vigfússon, Guðbrandur and Frederick York Powell. 1879. *An Icelandic Prose Reader: With Notes, Grammar, and Glossary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wessén, Elias. 1953. Nytt om Rök-stenen. *Fornvännen* 48, 161–177.
<http://samla.raa.se/xmlui/handle/raa/1659>

- 1958. *Runstenen vid Röks kyrka*. Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien.
 - 1964. Teoderik – myt eller hjältesaga? Svar till professor Höfler. *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 79, 1–20. <https://journals.lub.lu.se/anf/article/view/11890>
 - 1966. Svar till professor Höfler. *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 81, 255–257. <https://journals.lub.lu.se/anf/issue/view/1871>
 - 1976. Rökstenen ännu en gång. Tillika ett svar till professor Höfler. *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 91, 42–50. <https://journals.lub.lu.se/anf/issue/view/1848>
- Widmark, Gun. 1993. Varför ristade Varin runor? Tankar kring Rökstenen. *Saga och sed: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademiens årsbok* 1992, 25–44.
- Williamson, Craig, ed. 1977. *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Abstract

The points of departure for this article are the two methodological principles that are stated by Holmberg, Gräslund, Sundqvist and Williams (2020) for their interpretation of the Rök runestone inscription: At each point the alternative should be preferred that (1) can be said to contribute to a forever ongoing interaction about something that is relevant to the site of the erected stone, and (2) can be supported by other Old Norse texts. The study aims to conduct a critical evaluation of how these principles have been applied in the analysis of the first pair of riddles of the inscription, and to offer a more consistent re-analysis. The conclusion is that the context of the monument seems to be the critical turn of the year at the autumn equinox, and as a hypothesis for further research it is suggested that the subsequent riddles are also concerned with this specific point of time, and worries about the transition from the old year to the new.

Per Holmberg
 University of Gothenburg
 Department of Swedish Language
 Box 200; SE-40530 Göteborg
per.holmberg@svenska.gu.se