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Carving sound

Inscriptions in churches as a representation of the church soundscape

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Prayer inscriptions in churches relate to the church soundscape in various ways. I discuss whether epigraphic inscriptions were read aloud or silently and argue that at least the less literate readers would need to use their voices as aids in the carving and reading process, thus contributing to the church soundscape by producing sound. Prayer inscriptions also evoke sound through spurring its readers to pray for people named in the inscriptions. These prayers may have been voiced or unvoiced, audible only to the reader and prayer's inner ear. Inscriptions in churches may also reflect sound, both through their spelling and by reflecting popular prayers sung or read in the church. Finally, I consider a group of inscriptions which are closer to symbols than to verbal text, and how these relate to sound. I argue that although the connection to sound is less apparent in these inscriptions, they attest to the popularity of the *Ave Maria* prayer and thus reflect popular prayers spoken time and again in the church.

Introduction

Textual inscriptions are, literally speaking, reflections of sound; every grapheme reflects a phoneme in spoken language. However, the relation between text and sound may also be much more complex than that. Inscriptions may reflect the soundscape of its surroundings through repeating it in writing, and they could also contribute to the soundscape by spurring oral responses. In churches, the prayer inscriptions in particular engage with – and spur – sounds in their surroundings. If "sound was seen as the essential matter of words" in the Middle Ages,[1] every prayer in the church, be it carved in stone or wood, painted on an altar piece, sung, or vocalised by the priest or members of the public, or silently recited, evokes sound. If not a sound that the outer ear may hear, the sound of the prayer will still be evoked to the inner ear. Beth

[1] This is stated in the introductory article of the present special issue (Eriksen 2024).

Williamson argues that notations of song in medieval manuscripts and artworks appeal to a range of senses, both the eye and the inner ear of the viewer (2013). In the same sense, a carved prayer would appeal to the reader's inner ear, whether the prayer was consecutively vocalised or not.

The purpose of this article is to engage in the discussion of the multifaceted relations of prayer inscriptions and invocations to sound, mainly on an extradiegetic level, i.e. how the inscriptions relate to sounds outside the texts themselves.[2] I aim to explore these relations by using prayer inscriptions and invocations from medieval Norwegian churches as a case-study. I will do this through the following research questions:

How did prayer inscriptions and invocations relate to the church soundscape?
How did prayer inscriptions and invocations form part of the soundscape in a society where not everyone, not even every carver, was literate?

I will first give an overview of the inscriptions which are found in and close to churches, before discussing voiced and silent reading of epigraphic texts. From there, I will discuss how inscriptions could evoke sound, and how they can also be reflections of sound. Finally, I will turn to categories of inscriptions where the carver may not have been literate, and thus unaware of the direct phoneme-grapheme relations that are the fundamental building blocks of every alphabetic script system, including runes and Latin script. Although these inscriptions have lost their direct phoneme-grapheme relations, I argue that they still both evoke and reflect the church soundscape.

Material

In Norway, the oldest extant churches are from the twelfth century, and the oldest extant inscriptions on church walls are as old as the church walls themselves. Thus, the inscriptions to be discussed were carved in the period between the twelfth century and the reformation. Most of these inscriptions are runic, while a few are carved in the Latin alphabet. Before the first churches in Norway were built, and the first church inscriptions carved, runes had been in use in Norway for several centuries, while the Latin alphabet became gradually more widespread in the Norwegian society from the eleventh century. Runes were primarily an epigraphic script, while the Latin alphabet was used both in manuscripts and epigraphy. Runes were widely used as graffiti in the churches, while the vast majority of Latin alphabet inscriptions were

[2] See the discussion in Eriksen 2024.

formal, primarily used in epitaphs: in Bollaert's (2022) overview of medieval public inscriptions from Norway, 330 of 399 runic inscriptions are categorised as graffiti, while only 69 belong to the categories of building inscriptions, dedications and epitaphs. For the Latin alphabet inscriptions, the numbers are turned. Of 211 inscriptions, 21 are categorised as graffiti, while 172 inscriptions are epitaphs, of which most are on gravestones. These are also part of the inscriptions in the church environment, although they are not found on the church walls. The remaining 18 Latin alphabet inscriptions in Bollaert's overview are building inscriptions and dedications (Bollaert 2022: 26). From c. 1200, the Latin alphabet seems to be preferred for high-status and formal inscriptions, particularly in urban areas (Bollaert 2022: 261).

During the fourteenth century, runic literacy decreased drastically, and in the fifteenth and particularly sixteenth century, runic literacy was a fringe phenomenon found in a few rural areas. However, while runic literacy decreased, Latin alphabet literacy remained an elite phenomenon. This means that when runic literacy fell in the Late Middle Ages, the general popular literacy fell as well. It is notoriously difficult to date inscriptions on church walls, though there is reason to believe that at least some belonged to the last centuries of the Middle Ages, when popular literacy was low.

The body of Norwegian church inscriptions includes close to 400 inscriptions on walls, pillars and other construction elements, and the majority of these are located in the rural parts of southern Norway.[3] In particular, the stave churches Borgund, Hopperstad, Urnes near Sognefjorden, and Lom, located further to the north and east of these, are rich in inscriptions. Moreover, Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim is extremely rich in both runic and non-runic graffiti, ranging from the Middle Ages to the present day. In addition, Trondheim houses by far the largest collection of inscribed medieval Norwegian gravestones, all carrying Latin alphabet inscriptions.[4] The Nidaros Cathedral inscriptions are the only substantial corpus of urban church inscriptions from Norway; the cathedral is also one of the medieval urban churches in Norway with the best preserved wall surfaces.

Of the almost 400 church inscriptions, about one third are explicitly religious references. There are also two other large groups, the name inscriptions and the agent inscriptions, that is inscriptions following the formula "X carved these runes", or a variant of this. These are usually considered to fit in with the church context in the sense that it is assumed that the carver, by carving a name, implicitly encouraged others to pray for them. In addition, there are also some smaller and quite diverse groups

[3] These numbers exclude gravestones with epitaphs; the majority of these are urban.

[4] There is one potential runic gravestone, N 508 (Bollaert 2022: 42–43).

of inscriptions, some of which cannot be tied thematically to the church context (see Holmqvist 2021: 138–144). In this article, the emphasis will lie on a subgroup of the religious inscriptions, namely the prayers, and in particular those invoking the Virgin Mary.

The sound of inscriptions

In this article, I discuss how inscriptions could evoke or be a reflection of sound, and it is thus necessary to discuss whether and how inscriptions evoked or reflected sound, and whether the carving and reading of inscriptions in itself may have been meant to be audible, or to symbolise sound. This is connected to the larger discussion of voiced vs. silent reading in the Middle Ages. Jonas Carlquist discusses the evidence for voiced and silent reading in medieval Sweden and concludes that there is evidence for both (Carlquist 2022: 275–281), and that the Swedish term *läsa* ("read") can also be found in contexts where it is natural to assume that the reader recited from memory (Carlquist 2022: 291). Moreover, Carlquist cites examples where the term is also used to cover those listening to texts being read aloud (2022: 278–279). In other words, "read" had different dimensions of meaning in the Middle Ages than today. Carlquist discusses the term from a Swedish perspective, though there are also examples of the verb *lesa* being used in the same way, particularly for reciting from memory, in West Nordic contexts (cf. Fritzner 1973, vol. 2: 485–486).

However, one cannot make inferences directly from manuscript culture, which Carlquist discusses, to the epigraphic material. Terje Spurkland argues that there is a distinction in mentality regarding the reading of Latin script in books and the reading of epigraphic runes, tied to the dichotomy of orality and writtenness (1994: 13–14). For runes, the verbs used for reading and writing are primarily *ráða* and *rísta*, while the most common verbs used for reading and writing books are *lesa* and *skrifa/rita*.[5] According to Spurkland, most runic inscriptions are individual: they are carved by an individual and meant to be read by another individual (Spurkland 1994: 14). This claim is supported both by the contexts in which *ráða* and *rísta* are used, and by the medieval runic material, which is dominated by short personal messages, e.g. on rune sticks. In contrast to this, Spurkland argues that Latin letters were often tied to public and collective contexts and were intended to be read aloud, as indicated for instance by the standard opening phrase of diplomas: *ǫllum mǫnnum þeim sem þetta bref sjá eða heyra* "all those who either see or hear this letter" (Spurkland 1994: 13). As Spurkland shows, runic and Latin script often occurs in widely different con-

[5] Spurkland 1994: 4–5. In some cases, *ráða* is also used in contexts with Latin script (Spurkland 1994: 12; Fritzner 1973 vol. 3: 9–10).

texts, tied to different mentalities. However, it is worth mentioning that Spurkland compares epigraphic runes with Latin script in charters, diplomas and manuscript; he does not give examples of epigraphic use of the Latin alphabet. Therefore, we should be careful when drawing conclusions from both Spurkland and Carlquist's arguments regarding voiced or silent reading of epigraphic runes and Latin script. Rather, we should look at what we know of the reading of epigraphic inscriptions in other contexts.

From late medieval Sweden, a large number of medieval wall paintings with incorporated written texts in Latin script are preserved (Sandquist Öberg 2017). These wall paintings are, of course, decorative, though Sandquist Öberg argues that they also had a didactic function (2017: 28). And as literacy in general was low during the Late Middle Ages – not to mention literacy in Latin – it is likely that the priest or parish clerk would interpret the written word orally to the church goers. The late medieval wall paintings are quite far from the runic church inscriptions, both in formality, time, layout, interaction with imagery and in the general visibility. Nevertheless, it is likely that some Norwegian medieval inscriptions were intermediated in the same way. For instance, altar pieces such as that from Tingelstad (fig. 1) integrate the written word and imagery in a similar fashion to that of the Swedish late medieval wall paintings and may also have been used by priests and parish clerks as a teaching tool. Moreover, it is possible that some of the more visible runic church inscriptions were also read aloud or mediated to a non-literate public. An example is the dedication inscription N 526 (*Pétr á mik*, "Peter owns me"), carved in fairly large runes, approximately 5–7 cm tall, to the left of the door leading into Sakshaug Old Church's chancel. Two more examples, both runic Ave Maria prayers, are discussed in the following section.

A final point that should be considered regarding voiced or silent reading of the church inscriptions is the carvers' level of literacy. As the spelling of the inscriptions may tell us, runic carvers belong to all parts of the spectrum from highly skilled and trained in Latin literacy to barely literate or even illiterate. We can also infer from the extant inscriptions that quite a few of the carvers belonged to the latter part of this scale, where the carvers are more or less untrained readers and writers. For them, a central part of the reading and writing process is the connection between sound and writing – phonemes and graphemes (Cabell, Tortorelli & Gerde 2013; Svanes 2021: 47, 61). In this process, articulating the sound of each grapheme is central (Høien & Lundberg 2012: 62–72). This articulation may be done in the reader and writer's mind or through use of one's voice. Research on early reading and writing, and also mere observation of children who are in the early stages of their reading and

writing development, show us that untrained readers and writers often use their voice to aid their reading and writing (Kulbrandstad 2022: 36–40). Thus, the carving and reading of inscriptions may not necessarily have been as silent a process as the carving of graffiti usually is today. In a society where most people were illiterate or barely literate, reading and spelling aloud may have been part of the runic textual culture. At the same time, some runic carvers were undoubtedly highly skilled. Although we cannot be sure if these carvers also spelled their inscriptions out loud, they would not have needed it as an aid.

Fig. 1: The Tingelstad Frontal, from c. 1275–1300, 98.5 x 160 cm. The panel is preserved at the Historical Museum at the University of Oslo (C 5040). The written word is integrated with the imagery, and illiterate viewers would be able to infer the content of the text from the imagery. Photo: Mårten Teigen © KHM, UiO.

Prayer inscriptions

I use the prayer inscriptions as an example because prayers are usually oral, and I will argue that the carved prayers are in a double relationship with oral prayers, and thus to the church soundscape. The prayer inscriptions may be seen as reflexes of the

church soundscape, where they repeat popular prayers from mass. But inscriptions may also spur its readers to pray, thus evoking new oral prayers and contributing to creating the church soundscape. Prayer inscriptions in churches come in a range of lengths, styles, and formats, from those invoking a standard formula to longer, more personalised prayers.

Prayers evoking sound

Inscriptions in churches may, in some instances, spur their readers to recite an oral prayer. Two inscriptions, which illustrate this phenomenon well, are the inscriptions N 493 and N 494[6], both from Nidaros Cathedral, found beside each other inside the octagon.

> N 493
> **(k)kuþta͡kisa͡l ketil͡ls s**[7]
> *Guð taki sál Ketils.*
> May God take Ketill's soul.
>
> N 494
> **kuþkætiþinærlingrsikmuntarsonnuo͡kiafna͡n**
> *Guð gœti þín, Erlingr Sigmundarsonr, nú ok jafnan.*
> May God protect you, Erlingr Sigmundr's son, now and always.

Both are carved in two stages: first, someone has written a name. Later, someone else has added a prayer to the name (as discussed in NIyR vol. V: 56–57; Holmqvist 2018: 117–119). The inscriptions illustrate how prayer inscriptions are not entirely written and visual, but also part of an oral context. Presumably, one reason medieval people wrote their names on the church walls was to be remembered in prayers. We know that some of the carvers were about to embark upon a pilgrimage or another journey (e.g. N 358 from Borgund Stave Church, N 529 and 530 from Sakshaug Old Church, and N 57 from Ringebu; see also N 42 from Lom Stave Church, where the carver prays for a person away on a journey). Carving their name on their home church, the traveller's family could pray for the traveller near their inscription while they were

[6] N + number refers to the corpus edition *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer* (NIyR 1941–).

[7] The reading of these inscriptions is based on the corpus edition (NIyR V: 56) and verified against the inscriptions *in situ* by the author in November 2017. The overbow (⁀) indicates a bindrune. Parentheses indicate uncertain runes. The name in N 493 is framed by a carved square.

away. In the Nidaros Cathedral inscriptions, we see a different case. Ketill and Erlingr have written their names, and then someone else has added a prayer later on. These second carvers have chosen written, rather than oral, responses. This is very rare, but these inscriptions could nevertheless be read as an indication that it was a well-known practice to pray for inscribed names.

Gravestones in the Latin alphabet are a parallel to this phenomenon. Here, the reader is often explicitly or implicitly requested to pray for the soul of the deceased. For instance, the inscription T33[8] from a gravestone from Nidaros Cathedral reads:

> + IES[VS:DRO // TTIN:HI]MIRIKIS:BLEZCI:SALL:
> BRYNILD(A)R:RANVEIGAR: DOT(T)[O]R: H̄R·IV:ER:HE //
> R:HV[ILIR:OC // GEVE:HENN]E: (Æ)[I](L)IFAN:FAGNAÐ:
> HIMIRIK[I]S:DYRÐ:S(I)NE:FINE:AMEN: // AVE:MARIA[9]
> *Jesus dróttinn himinríkis blezi sál Brynhildar Rannveigar dóttur [...] er hér hvílir ok gefi henni eilífan fagnað í himinríkis dýrð sin fine, amen. Ave Maria.*
>
> Jesus, lord of the kingdom of heaven, bless the soul of Brynhildr Rannveig's daughter [...] who rests here, and give her eternal joy in the glory of the heavenly kingdom, without end. Amen. Ave Maria.[10]

The final Ave Maria here is likely an encouragement for the reader to pray for the soul of Brynhildr (Kleivane 2018: 114). In the Late Middle Ages, everyone were required to know both the Pater Noster and Ave Maria, in addition to the Credo (Kleivane 2020: 215), so writing out the title of the prayer would suffice; the reader would know the rest by heart. We find such explicit requests for prayers on church walls too, where the carver asks the reader to pray either for himself or for the soul

[8] T + number refers to an inscription from the archdiocese from Trondheim. These inscriptions are recently published in Bollaert (2022), and are published with the same numbers in Martin Syrett's edition of Roman alphabet inscriptions from Trondheim (Syrett 2002).

[9] The reading is based on Syrett (2002: 241) and Bollaert (2022 Appendix: 27). Bollaert indicates some more characters as uncertain or missing, and Syrett has supplied a reasonable guess for the missing characters in the first two lines. Both agree on the interpretation. I have kept Syrett's supplied characters and Bollaert's indication of uncertain and missing characters. The inscription runs along the edge of a gravestone, and // indicates where the inscription breaks due to the corners of the stone. Square brackets [] indicate missing characters which are supplied through reasonable guesses or comparison with drawings by Klüwer (see Syrett 2002: 239).

[10] Normalisation and translation from Kleivane (2018: 114).

of another person. One example is found in Talgje Church in Rogaland (N 258), where the priest Eindriði Jónsson asks the reader to pray for him:

> **þessa͡r:runar:reist:ein͡driþ(i):pres͡tr:io͡ns:so͡n:o͡k:b(iþi)t:fyr(i)r:mik**
> *Þessar rúnar reist Eindriði prestr Jónsson, ok biðið fyrir mik.*
> Priest Eindriði Jónsson carved these runes, and pray for me.

This forms a parallel to Ketill and Erlingr's name inscriptions, and it shows how, for some carvers, it did not suffice to carve their name and hope for the best. Eindriði thought it best to write his request out explicitly.

We do not know whether these prayers were always vocal, though in two Norwegian inscriptions (N 227 on a piece of wood from Klepp Church, Rogaland, and N 457 on a gravestone from Skålvoll) the reader is encouraged to sing (*syngja*) for the soul of the deceased. In N 227, the text specifies that the reader should sing the *Pater Noster*, and this may also be implicit in N 457. More common in such encouragements, however, is the verb pray (*biðja*), found in N 258 from Talgje Church, N 264 from Utstein Abbey, N 297 from Hamre Church, N 536 from For Church, and N A222[11] from Ervik. Although the encouragement to pray is just as plain in these inscriptions, it is not clear whether the prayer is expected to be vocalised.

We may see these requests for prayers also in relation to Archbishop Árni's statute from the mid-fourteenth century where he encourages people to say the prayer *Pater Noster* at the graves of relatives and friends before or after attending service or visiting church. In this statute, the verb "say" (ON *segja*) is used, again indicating a vocal response:

> Nu er prestir ey till kirkio komen. edir ey þa en til messo buen. þa stendir uæll at medan þer gangir kring um kirkiuna. gange huar till graftar sins fadhur. modhur. syskina edir frenda oc vina oc seghi þer sina Pater noster. oc gange swa iin i kirkiuna. ellighar geri þet eftir messona før en þeir gangir or kirkiu gardhenum.
>
> Now when the priests have not arrived at the church, or they are not yet ready for mass, then it is fitting that while you [i.e. the public] walk around the church, you should go the graves of your father, mother, siblings or fellows and friends and there say *Pater Noster*, and then you should enter the church. Or you may do

[11] N A + number indicates an unpublished inscription from Norway. Brief details of these inscriptions can be found in the Scandinavian Runic Text Database (2020).

> it after mass before you exit the graveyard. (Archbishop Árni's statute, 1346-49, NGL III: 298).

Just as the relatives could pray at graves, we may presume that people could also pray for named people on the church walls. Here, it is also relevant to mention requiem masses for the souls of the dead on their death day, which the wealthy, in particular, paid for, so that requiem masses would be held every year on their death day. During these masses, prayers would be sung for the soul of the deceased. Individuals who could not afford individual prayers would have been collectively remembered on All Souls' Day and in requiem masses paid for by rich donors (Molland in KLNM XX 1976: cols. 453–457). In these masses, the prayers would be voiced.

Prayers reflecting sound

So far, we have seen how inscriptions may generate prayers. In other instances, we rather see how carved prayers reflect oral prayers. This is the case for the Ave Maria inscriptions, which were well known orally in medieval churches. One example is the Ave Maria inscription found on a door ring from Tønjum Stave Church (N 347). If we look at the runic spelling, we will see that the carver writes the Latin prayer as he has learnt it from listening to it:

> **+hafemariakrasiablenatomiusstekumbenatitausinmulieribusæþbe**
> *Ave Maria gratia plena! Dominus tecum benedicta tu in mulieribus, et be[nedictus ...]*

As argued by Kleivane (2018: 108), the carver does not know the Latin spelling conventions; he is likely not learnt in Latin, and has learnt the prayer orally. When carving the prayer, he implements Old Norse spelling conventions like *f* for intersyllabic *v* in *ave*: He writes **hafe**. He has also doubled the *s* in *dominus tecum* and writes **stecum** (ibid.). Thus, this inscription is, quite literally, a reflection of oral prayers. The inscription's function on this door ring may be didactic, teaching or reminding church goers of the prayer. Moreover, it may also be connected to its liminal position at the entrance, in "the space between what is consecrated and what is not" (Andås 2007: 46). The church entrance is tied to several rituals and is, in itself, rich in symbolism (ibid.).

Another long *Ave Maria* inscription, in fact the longest found on a Norwegian church wall, may also have had a didactic function. This inscription was carved into the wooden wall, visibly located close to the northern nave entrance of Fortun Stave Church, which burnt down in 1992:

auemariagraciabtenadominuslecumbenediclaluinmutie[12]
Ave Maria gratia plena! Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulie[ribus].

This inscription (N 307, NIyR IV: 85–87) is much closer to the Latin spelling. This carver appears not only to have learnt the greeting by heart, but also the Latin spelling conventions. This, in addition to the fact that the carver interchanges the **l** and **t** runes, may indicate that the carver was more versed with Latin than runic script. The inscription was very visible, located close to the northern nave entrance, and its function on this church may have been didactic, teaching those attending mass the prayer in runes, or at least most of it. If so, runes would be the natural choice of script, as that would reach a wider audience.

Mostly, however, the Ave Maria inscriptions are much shorter. In some instances, they may contain only the first three syllables, *Ave Ma*... (N 383 from Borgund Stave Church, fig. 2), or simply *Ave* (N A105 from Bø Old Church, N 343 from Urnes Stave Church) or invoke the Virgin by her name only (N 373 from Borgund Stave Church (fig. 3), N 561 and 562 from Vestre Slidre Church, N 327 from Urnes Stave Church, N 412 from Hopperstad Stave Church, N 484 from Nidaros Cathedral). In these inscriptions, the rune shapes are so simple and condensed that the carvers would not have needed to crack the alphabetic code to be able to understand and use the inscriptions as symbols.

In the runic material (both from churches and in the wider material), the Virgin is by far the most popular recipient of prayers. A few inscriptions mention God, Jesus, and various saints, though the *Maria* inscriptions abound. In total, there are a little over 30 *Maria* inscriptions among the close to 400 church inscriptions. This attests to the popularity of the Virgin Mary and the Mary cult, which was widespread in Scandinavia during the Middle Ages (Johansson, Bekker-Nielsen & Widding in KLNM XI 1966: cols. 352–367), and which can be seen both in artworks and inscriptions on various materials (see e.g. Kjesrud 2018; 2015; Kleivane 2018; 2019; Sidselrud 2000). And, most of all, these inscriptions attest to the popularity of the *Ave Maria* prayer itself, which the carvers would have both learnt by heart and heard time and again in church. Thus, the inscriptions form a visual choir of prayers to the Virgin, reflecting the voiced prayers said and heard in church.

[12] The carver has interchanged the **l** and **t** runes in this inscription. This interchange is quite common as the two runes mirror each other.

Fig. 2: N 383 from Borgund Stave Church. The inscription reads a͡u͡em͡a, giving the first three syllables of the Ave Maria prayer. Photo by the author.

Fig. 3: N 373 from Borgund Stave Church, showing the name m͡a͡ria. The first three runes are fixed to the same stave. Photo by the author.

Prayers, literacy, and sound

Medieval carvers cannot tell us what they wanted to express through their inscriptions; we may only interpret the textual content of the inscription itself, its context and other inscriptions which may shed light upon it. This poses a problem when we meet non-lexical inscriptions on the church walls, that is, inscriptions where the inscriptions do not have any apparent lexical meaning. Here, we have a context and often nearby inscriptions, though the runes themselves give no definitive answers as

to how the inscriptions should be interpreted. We may assume that the carvers of non-lexical inscriptions were illiterate, and research on the writing of present-day children who have not yet cracked the alphabetic code may therefore shed light on the non-lexical runic inscriptions.[13] Observing how these children write, it is apparent that they often wish to express much more complex ideas through their writing than their abilities allow them to; you do not have to be literate to have a message that you want to convey through writing. Texts written by children who have not yet cracked the alphabetic code will not be legible for anyone unless they have heard the child convey their written message orally, though the texts are still perceived as meaningful by the children themselves (on present-day children's early writing and its inherent meaningfulness, see e.g. Hagtvedt 1988; Hjertås, Fjeldstad & Rygg 2023; Høigård 2019: 205–225; Michelsen 2021: 72–87; Bloodgood 1999). Research on early children's writing is ripe with examples of children's texts where only the children know what they have written. Returning to non-legible runic inscriptions, these are often described in quite derogatory terms, and described as though the carver had no aim with their writing. However, even though medieval illiterate runecarvers cannot tell us what they wrote, I argue that we should assume that non-literate carvers also had a message to convey through their carving. They used their abilities as best they could to convey their message, and we should assume that the ideas behind these inscriptions may be quite complex, even though the carved expressions are not.

One could object that an illiterate adult carver is likely to have a greater understanding of his/her own lacking writing competence than what a child has. However, in a society where the overall literacy was vastly lower than today, the understanding of what literacy was may also have looked very different from today. The church inscriptions include a considerable proportion of inscriptions which carry no apparent lexical meaning, and we must either assume that these were meaningful to the carver, or that carvers used the church walls for training their runic skills.[14] I argue that the first alternative is the more likely. This view is supported both by the evidence of

[13] The present article is not the first to compare contemporary children's writing with runic inscriptions. See also Hagland & Lorentzen 1997; Söderberg & Larsson 1993: 67–71; Olofsson 2008.

[14] In addition, a few could be uncracked cryptic runic messages. K. Jonas Nordby has done a considerable effort in cracking runic codes, also on church walls, though some more uncracked codes may still exist (2018: 77–89). For instance, several uninterpreted inscriptions start with an invitation to interpret the runes (Nordby 2018: 78–82). The inscriptions most likely to be codes do, however, look quite different from those most likely to have been carved by illiterate carvers. As writing runic code requires highly skilled carvers, the runes in coded inscriptions will also likely be neat, and it will often be possible to see some sort of systematic features (ibid.: 82–83).

present-day illiterate children's writing, which is essentially meaningful to the child, our knowledge of the medieval view of church buildings as sacred spaces, and by the vast majority of inscriptions with lexical meanings, which clearly relate to the church as a sacred space.[15]

Elise Kleivane (2018) has argued that even non-literate people living in the Middle Ages would have been able to recognise a runic or alphabetic Ave Maria by sight, and that they knew the apt response, for instance if the Ave Maria was carved into a gravestone. A gravestone has diverse aids for the reader, not least iconographic ones. You do not have to be literate to recognise the shape of the gravestone or the picture of the Virgin Mary with Christ on her lap.

However, carvers, who were able to recognise the shape of the runes in Ave Maria, would probably also be able to reproduce these rune forms. A question is, then: What effect did Ave Maria have on a church wall without a name added to it? We could propose that these inscriptions simply echo the oral prayers from inside the church, making the ephemeral oral prayers eternal, carved in stone or wood. However, these carvers, carving Ave Maria, may have had more complex ideas behind their inscriptions than they were able to express in writing. Through carving the prayer on the wall, they would, in a sense, reach out to people to take part in the practice of praying and being prayed for. And even though their names were not present in their inscriptions, they did, perhaps, hope that later readers would say an Ave Maria for them as well. Evoking Ave Maria, or simply the name Maria, could perhaps also have had an apotropaic function, or the carver may simply have had a vague idea that carving the prayer would be the right thing to do, or lead to something good. Whatever their intentions, these inscriptions are clearly a form of interaction with the prayer culture and with the church fabric itself.

When looking at the shorter inscriptions, this form of carved interaction with the prayer culture is a widespread phenomenon. The material of Maria inscriptions ranges from the long inscriptions, which are few in number, to shorter versions with the first few words of the prayers, such as N 383, *Ave Ma…*, from Borgund Stave Church, seen in fig. 2. In addition, we also have inscriptions which are likely to be references to the Virgin Mary, for instance two similar inscriptions saying **mai** in Dale Church in Luster (N 310 + 311). These shorter inscriptions may have been

[15] For a discussion on parallel inscriptions on a different material, see also Marco Bianchi's discussion of non-lexical inscriptions on rune stones from Uppland and Södermanland in Sweden (2010: 165–222). Although the texts on these stones are illegible, they adhere to the textual conventions of runestones in general and use the same semiotic resources (Bianchi 2010: 221).

carved by illiterate carvers, remembering the name or prayer in runes as an image, rather than as a denotation of sound.

We also have a group of inscriptions termed "same-stave runes", where an entire word, typically a name, is merged in one complex rune, a monogram. The name Mary is the most commonly found version of these same-stave runes, found in the stave churches Torpo (fig. 4), Lom, Øye, and Høre, as well as in the stone church of Vestre Slidre. Geographically, all five churches are located in central parts of Southeastern Norway, high up in the three valleys Ottadalen (Lom), Valdres (Øye, Høre, Vestre Slidre), and Hallingdalen (Torpo). There are few of these inscriptions in the corpus of church inscriptions, and there is also a dispute over whether they should be understood as monograms at all. The monograms, except from the one from Vestre Slidre, were discovered by Magnus Olsen, and are discussed in the relevant volumes of NIyR, though in a review of NIyR, Anders Bæksted (1944: 265) has questioned Olsen's readings, suggesting that they are rather personal marks. Since Bæksted published his remarks, however, several new bind-runes have been discovered, including

Fig. 4: N 115 from Torpo Stave Church, showing a same-stave rune with the maria monogram, where all runes are fixed to the same stave. The r is mirrored, so that the twig on the lefthand side functions both as the twig in the r- and the a-runes. The a-rune should be read twice. Photo by the author.

both Maria monograms and other names. For instance, the name Arni occurs three times on the church walls of Byneset Old Church.[16]

The monogram from Vestre Slidre was discovered by Johs. Sivesind in 1952 (Sivesind 1958: 320), and in addition, several Maria monograms on artefacts have been unearthed in archaeological excavations in Greenland (Imer 2017). Therefore, there can be no doubt that several medieval rune carvers experimented with runic monograms, and that monograms of the name Maria were by far the most popular monograms to be carved.

Moreover, there is a clear qualitative distinction between the personal marks found in churches and these monograms. While personal marks are usually carved with a knife, and much more deeply into the surface than what is common for runic inscriptions, all the Maria monograms are particularly shallow; the monograms from Høre, Torpo and Lom seem to be pressed into the wood, rather than carved with a knife. The carver may, for instance, have used his or her fingernail for carving. I have visited all five churches personally to study these monograms, and indeed, the runes are very shallow and almost impossible to see – so much so that I sometimes wondered whether I saw them at all, or simply imagined them. It is, therefore, impressive that Olsen managed to find these inscriptions, though the surfaces of these inscriptions may have deteriorated slightly in the time that has passed between Olsen's visits to these churches and mine.

Among the personal marks, we also find marks similar to the monograms, and this could indicate that the monogram was well known and was passed on even after literacy in runes decreased. We also have other Mary references among the personal marks. In fact, an A+M monogram (fig. 5) is the most commonly found personal mark in the reference material of Tuve Skånberg's extensive study of personal marks (Skånberg 2003), collected from across Northern Europe. According to Tuve Skånberg, this particular mark may also be seen as a combination of *alpha* and *omega*, thus being a reference to Jesus, so its popularity may be due to its double reference to both Jesus and Mary. Skånberg's material also has several marks which are exclusively referencing Mary, or the prayer Ave Maria, attesting that references to the Virgin were immensely popular. These marks may also be found at church walls, e.g. in Borgund, Hopperstad and the Nidaros Cathedral. Here, I assume that they are meant to have a similar function to the runic Mary-inscriptions.

In the inscriptions discussed in this last section of the article, the relationship between inscriptions and sound is gradually vaguer for each category of inscriptions.

[16] These inscriptions are not published, though they are discussed in reports stored in the Runic Archives (Seim 2005; Holmqvist 2019).

Fig. 5: Personal mark based on an A+M monogram, found in Borgund Stave Church. Photo by Johan Bollaert.

While the illiterate rune carver of e.g. the **mai** inscriptions from Dale Church (N 310 + 311) was seemingly able to identify some of the sounds in *Maria* and convert these sounds to runes, the carvers of runic monograms – and maybe even some of the *Maria* inscriptions – may have carved their inscriptions from a visual memory only, without a full understanding of the relationship between phonemes and graphemes in writing. However, the runic monograms – although possible to remember as symbols, still contain all the rune shapes of the name *Maria* and thus preserve the necessary graphemes for reading the name. In the final category, of personal marks, even this connection is lost. The marks are no longer verbal texts; they are symbols which may even hold several connotations at once, such as the A+M monogram which may be connected both to *Ave Maria* and *Alpha et Omega*. Nevertheless, the extensive use of this particular mark, and others which are also likely references to the Virgin, may bear witness to a continued Mary cult and the popularity of the *Ave Maria* prayer. Thus, although the direct connection to sound is lost, the marks may still evoke oral or silent prayers.

Conclusion

Prayer inscriptions in churches relate to the church soundscape in several ways. They may both reflect sound and evoke sound, in the sense that inscriptions may spur its readers to pray – vocally or silently. But even silent prayers will be heard – by the reader's inner ear. Carving and reading inscriptions may also evoke audible sound in the process where the carver carves and the reader reads, particularly if the carvers or readers are untrained and use their full attention at connecting phonemes and graphemes, encoding or decoding the inscription. And prayers may reflect sound quite literally, as the carver often carved by ear. This is particularly visible where the carvers carve Latin prayers that they know from listening; through their spelling, we may see how the carvers have analysed the sounds of the Latin words that they heard. Prayers may also reflect the church soundscape in a less direct sense, as they may be read as testimonies of popular prayers, where *Ave Maria* is by far the most commonly cited prayer. This could be seen as an indication of *Ave Maria*'s popularity also as an oral prayer. Even inscriptions, which are closer to symbols than to verbal texts, such as monograms and personal marks, attest to the continuing popularity of the Virgin and her prayer. So, to conclude, our medieval church walls, though silent to the ear, do talk. And if we listen with our eyes, this "visual soundscape" talks with hundreds of voices. They talk of names not to be forgotten, and they pray. And most of all, they pray and call to the Virgin mother.

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