



Runic sticks and other inscribed objects from medieval Bergen:

Challenges and possibilities*

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Artikkelen drøfter utfordringer og muligheter i undersøkelse av skriftbærende gjenstander fra middelalderens Bergen. Ut fra tidligere forskning kan en få inntrykk av at materialet er ensartet, siden det i stor grad består av runegjenstander. Størst oppmerksomhet har små trepinner med runer fått, men det mangler nærmere gjennomganger av gjenstandenes epigrafiske og materielle egenskaper. Artikkelen diskuterer framgangsmåter i beskrivelse og analyse av runegjenstander. Utvalgte case-studier belyser deler av korpuset nærmere og framhever runematerialets utforskede sider. Artikkelen bygger på perspektiver fra runologi, visuell epigrafikk og studier av materialitet. Disse tilnærmingene gir ny innsikt i runegjenstander fra middelalderen, og de kan dessuten være relevante i undersøkelse av sammenlignbare innskrifter.

1 Introduction

One of the volumes in the series of The Bryggen Papers states: “The archaeological finds from the urban subsoil of Bergen constitute one of the most diverse and altogether largest assemblages of medieval artefacts in Norway” (Øye 2013: 9). Among this impressive collection, there are objects that bear runic inscriptions and date roughly from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. Their number – over 680 finds are known – is

* I wish to thank Professor Gitte Hansen, University Museum of Bergen for granting me access to the Bryggen corpus and for her expertise and assistance. Further thanks are due to Professor Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide for her advice on assessing the objects and to Professor Emeritus James E. Knirk for providing a copy of a database of the Runic Archives, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo and sharing his runological knowledge over the years. I am also grateful to the reviewers of this article for their helpful advice.

modest when compared to the hundreds of thousands of artefacts recovered from the excavations in Bergen. At the same time, these script-bearing objects have provided novel insight into the presence and practice of writing in a medieval town setting.

In view of the diversity of the archaeological material from Bergen, the artefacts jointly referred to as the Bryggen runic corpus may at first glance appear to be uniform.¹ In general overviews the inscriptions have been described as follows (Knirk 1993: 553): “The great majority are on wood, especially small sticks whittled flat on several sides, as a rule four, in order to serve as runic writing material. Runic inscriptions are also found on utensils and other objects not primarily intended to bear texts” (Knirk 1993: 553, see also Liestøl 1974: 21). A distinction is drawn between objects used for writing and those that could be equipped with writing, while not specifically made for that purpose. Another point concerns “runic inscriptions”, which forms a customary label of the epigraphic evidence in focus.

Early reports on a number of Bryggen inscriptions are provided in the works of Aslak Liestøl (for example 1964, 1966, 1968, 1973, and 1974). One hundred and seventy-one inscriptions (roughly 25% of the corpus) have been published in the two parts of volume 6 of the corpus edition *Norges Innskrifter med de yngre Runer*, NIyR (Liestøl 1980, Sanness Johnsen and Knirk 1990). Parts of the material have been examined in runological dissertations and theses (Markali 1983, Spurkland 1991, Fjellhammer Seim 1982, 1998, Nordby 2018). Various inscriptions have been treated in individual studies, dealing for example with runic Latin (Dyvik 1988, Knirk 1998a) and practices of runic literacy (Knirk 1994, Spurkland 2004, Hagland 2011, Schulte 2012).² More recently, attention has been paid to the artefacts as script-bearing media with varying communicative properties (Zilmer 2018, 2019).

This article looks critically at some analytical and methodological challenges in the study of the Bryggen corpus. The objective is to highlight issues of definition and assessment while at the same time increasing our understanding of medieval inscribed (runic) artefacts. The article

1. The label “Bryggen corpus” refers here to all the runic finds recovered from the Bryggen site as well as those from other locations near the main archaeological site in central Bergen.
2. These lists are not exhaustive; various other contributions will be referred to below.

focuses on the underexplored dimensions of the material and centres on the following questions: 1) How can we identify and characterize the Bryggen artefacts collectively as inscribed items? 2) What does the designation “runic stick” imply in relation to the overall epigraphic material? 3) Which features amplify but also blur the functions and meanings of individual objects?

The study combines perspectives from runology, visual epigraphy and object-centred materiality studies. Runographical and linguistic considerations are part of the discussion, but the point of departure is a broad notion of runology – the study focuses on the features and functions of the inscribed objects. The formal properties of the objects reveal their diverse meaning-making resources and highlight their nature as script-bearing artefacts. The focus is simultaneously on the variability of forms of writing and that of the inscribed items themselves.

2 Inscribed artefacts: understanding the corpus

2.1 Presentation of the material

The Bryggen corpus presently contains 684 registered objects. The number is based on information in databases and my own investigations during the period 2013–18.³ The most recent field studies were conducted in February 2020. I have examined all the artefacts first-hand (except for a few lost or unavailable items). My own field notes and photographs are supplemented with other information and photographic evidence, including the materials of the Runic Archives at the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. The primary runological database consulted is that of the Runic Archives (hereafter the Oslo runic database), which contains information on inscriptions not yet published in the NIyR.⁴ Other databases are referenced for comparative reasons, and with the purpose of highlighting some limitations of the existing widely used re-

3. The inscribed artefacts belong with the collections of the University Museum of Bergen; they are mainly stored or exhibited at the Bryggen Museum.
4. James E. Knirk (1998b) discusses the database-related work on the Norwegian runic inscriptions and provides an overview of the materials in the Oslo Runic Archives.

sources. The Scandinavian Runic-Text Database bases the core of its information on the Norwegian inscriptions on the corpus edition and the records of the Runic Archives, but this has not been consistently updated over the years.⁵ General archaeological data on the artefacts is provided in the joint online database of the Norwegian university museums.⁶ However, the runological information included there is of varying scope and quality. An online catalogue and database “Runic Inscriptions from Bryggen in Bergen” (hereafter the Bryggen database) has been hosted by the Norwegian National Library.⁷ The original project did not intend to compile a scholarly database, but it sought to provide an overview of the inscriptions (Haavaldsen and Smith Ore 1998). The resource is outdated, but as it has been used internationally by scholars searching for information on the Bryggen inscriptions online, some examples are mentioned here when discussing problems of classification and description.⁸

The inventory, which this article is based on, contains the inscribed items B1–B672. Inscriptions published in NIyR are referred to according to their N-numbers. In addition to the material in NIyR volume 6, these include eight small objects recovered from the Bryggen area during the first half of the twentieth century, i.e. prior to the fire in 1955. These are published as N288–N295 in NIyR volume 4 (Olsen 1957: 46–61).⁹ Additional finds are preliminarily identified by their museum numbers.¹⁰

5. The database can be downloaded at: www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm. An ongoing project called “Eivighetsrunor” – involving the Swedish National Heritage Board and Uppsala University – develops and integrates the database with open data infrastructure (<https://www.raa.se/kulturarv/runor-och-runstenar/projektet-eivighetsrunor/>) (accessed 20.01.2020).
6. Accessible at: <http://www.unimus.no/arkeologi/forskning/index.php> (22.01.2020).
7. The database was previously available at <http://www.nb.no/baser/runer/>, last updated 07.01.2003 (accessed 20.01.2020). The data is mainly based on Aslak Liestøl’s preliminary notes and registration cards; updated readings and interpretations have not been included. At present, the database is still accessible via <https://web.archive.org/web/20200111133557/https://www.nb.no/baser/runer/>.
8. A forthcoming doctoral dissertation on the Bergen material by Elisabeth Magin (University of Nottingham) will complement the available resources. A new database will be a part of the results of the project.
9. The museum numbers are: B6029a, B6601a, B7097b, B7097d, B7097e, B10266b, B10266c, and B10266d.
10. B + number refers to the preliminary registration of the Bergen inscriptions in the Runic Archives of the University of Oslo. BRM + number (or B + number + letter) refers to the accession numbers of the artefacts in the archaeological catalogues of the University Museum of Bergen. The runic signum refers to the inscription, the

These are: BRM 346/4200 (stone spindle whorl with a cross and other marks, one shape resembles **u**); BRM 0/27301 (comb with a rune-like sign); BRM 0/3097 (comb with sequences of runes and traces of runes). One recent find is BRM 1157/2330, which is possibly a reworked wooden lid, with two identifiable runes.¹¹ The latest addition to the inventory is MA214 – a golden finger-ring, with a text in the Roman letters on the outside (documented in previous studies). I examined the ring in February 2020 and observed a carving on the inside, which to my knowledge has not been registered before. The sign has the shape of a bind-rune (i.e. runic ligature), which consists of three runes: **ɑ**, **u** and **æ**. This probably stands for the word *Ave*, marking the beginning of the prayer *Ave Maria*.

The basic criterion for the present count is the inscribed artefact itself. Some objects bear multiple inscribed sequences. For instance, the inscriptions N693 and N694 (published in NlYR volume 6) appear on the same item; the inventory registers these as B349a–b (BRM 0/31901). Two parts of a broken stick previously registered with inscriptions B311 (BRM 0/30746) and B312 (BRM 0/30751) are in accordance with the Oslo runic database now counted as one object. With some other damaged items, it remains uncertain as to whether these formed the same artefact. They are currently registered as separate inscribed artefacts; this concerns, for instance, B299 (BRM 0/30428) and B300 (BRM 0/30429).

Some clarifications are needed with regard to what is included in the corpus and what is lacking. A few items appear to be lost, with limited descriptions surviving.¹² One such item is B2 (BRM-number unknown); according to the Oslo runic database (also mentioned in the Bryggen database), the archaeologist Asbjørn Herteig mentioned this wooden plate in a letter. Presumably the item did not bear any identifiable runes. B579 (BRM 0/95076) is registered in the databases, and a few photos are avail-

museum number identifies the object. In this article, these are used jointly as references to inscribed artefacts.

11. I saw the artefact in its frozen pre-conservation state at the University Museum of Bergen in February 2020; I have also obtained a photograph of the item. Thanks are due to conservators at the University Museum of Bergen and archaeologists at the Bergen office of NIKU.
12. Some other artefacts are marked as possibly missing in the storage facility at the Bryggen Museum, but there exists more detailed documentation of these.

lable in the museum collections, showing the inscription. The Bryggen database notes that this item, part of a wooden construction post, is not preserved, but this information is currently not corroborated. These artefacts are part of the inventory but excluded from the source base in further examinations of the material.

Some of the registered items are probably post-medieval. One example is B670 (BRM 0/93321); the archaeological dating of the wooden stock (part of a well) is 1476–1702, possibly from the later part of the period.¹³ The markings on the item resemble runic shapes, but most likely they do not display intentional runic writing (Knirk 1995 (publ. 1996): 15–16). At least two included wooden artefacts have inscriptions in Roman letters, with no detectable runes – this concerns B459 (BRM 0/42653) and B655 (BRM 0/57189).¹⁴ There are some additional finds of Roman inscriptions on metal artefacts such as rings, brooches and pilgrim badges.¹⁵ Among those, there is a gilded silver ring (BRM 0/70459), bearing religious quotes in Latin and a reference that dates the ring to the sixteenth century. Other samples are golden rings with inscriptions that mention the three biblical magi Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. Two early finds are discussed by Jan Hendrich Lexow (1954: 81–83);¹⁶ one find from the 1990s is on display at the Bryggen Museum (BRM 346/1681). The inscribed rings as well as other jewellery from Bergen are presented in the works by Alf Hammervold (1997) and Sonja Molaug (1998). Systematic epigraphic surveys are still lacking, but ongoing research at the University of Oslo will serve to fill in such gaps.¹⁷ I have

13. The item listed as B670 (BRM 346/4200) in the Bryggen database (<https://web.archive.org/web/20041031092155/http://www.nb.no/baser/runer/fu/llpost.php?bnr=B670>), is a different object – a small spindle whorl of stone. BRM 0/93321 and BRM 346/4200 are part of the inventory, identified by their museum numbers.
14. One wooden stick (BRM 1154/1279) that displays lines and potentially letter-like shapes was briefly examined in February 2020 (pre-conservation). Further analysis is needed in order to determine the exact nature of the lines.
15. Susanne Iren Busengdal presents some artefacts in her MA thesis (2012) on medieval jewellery from urban settings: BRM 0/70459, BRM 39/1181, BRM 0/95078, BRM 0/50364, BRM 0/50366, B6242a. Previous discussions and catalogues which also include other finds are provided by Alf Hammervold (1997, particularly pp. 63–68) and Sonja Molaug (1998: 59–65).
16. The museum numbers are MA209 and MA212 (Hammervold 1997). MA212 also has the inscription *ihuxpe + miserere me M.*
17. See the project led by Elise Kleivane: <https://www.hf.uio.no/iln/forskning/pros->

only been able to examine a few finger-rings (BRM 0/70459, MA209, MA212 and MA214). These items are hence not part of the present study (where the focus remains runological), but should certainly be of interest in future epigraphic investigations.¹⁸ Inscribed gravestones are not in the present inventory either; these artefacts represent monumental funerary discourse, which distinguishes them from the urban artefacts from Bryggen.¹⁹ The Bryggen corpus in the meantime contains one smaller rune-inscribed slab with a vernacular carver formula B572 (BRM 0/83953) and a piece of reused carved stone with a rune-inscribed name B133 (BRM 0/17379). The communicative properties of these two stone artefacts are comparable to the other Bryggen artefacts.

A few objects in the corpus display a mixture of scripts, and with yet others it may remain unclear whether the inscribed signs belong with the runic or the Roman script or rather display more inventive versions of writing. These are all included in the corpus; the notion of “inscription” is not limited to clearly identifiable sequences of runic writing. This accords with the approach followed in the studies of other corpora of inscribed artefacts (for example, Imer 2017). An inclusive approach is further justified due to the blurred lines of distinction between runic inscriptions and sequences of rune-like characters, or between scribbling and other ways of visually marking the object. A considerable part of the corpus consists of items that bear shorter or longer sequences of runes, rune-like signs or imitations of writing. Many do not mediate any evident lexical meaning or may not be intelligible due to their fragmentary state of preservation. Some incomprehensible sequences have been explained as following cryptographic systems of runic writing (Nordby 2018: particularly pp. 315–46). Other inscriptions may use complex abbreviations that do not reveal their meaning to modern readers (see Nordby 2018: 60–66). Nevertheless, numerous inscriptions do not provide for any clear linguistic explanations. In a comprehensive epigraphic study, all

jekter/bokstavar-mellom-runer-og-manuskript/index.html (21.03.2020). An interesting category of evidence also consists of medieval seals.

18. Further studies may reveal other Roman-script inscriptions. It is possible that not all inscribed items (for example those with monograms or script-like personal marks) have been systematically registered.
19. One rune-inscribed grave monument found from central Bergen is published as N287 in volume 4 of NlYR. Roman-script gravestones are in focus in the doctoral dissertation by Johan Bollaert, University of Oslo; his project will be completed in 2020.

such artefacts need to be considered, not least due to the complications of distinguishing consistently between runes and rune-like signs, or between writing, imitations of writing and non-writing. Theoretical parameters and sets of criteria have been proposed in studies of other material, for instance with the early South Germanic inscribed artefacts (Graf 2011, Waldispühl 2013). Approaches that operate with distinct criteria also have their challenges. Modern analytical premises do not automatically grasp the visual meaning potential generated through imitations of writing (including marks deemed as “non-writing”) by recipients in their contemporary contexts. This study bases its approach on a dynamic understanding of writing and epigraphic visibility in terms of recognizing the fluctuating borders between different forms of mark-making (on scripts and images, see for example Bedos-Rezak and Hamburger 2016).

2.2 *Forms of writing*

The inscribed objects of Bergen bear different types of inscription and illuminate varying uses of writing (for some illustrative overviews, see Spurkland 2001: 186–209, Barnes 2012: 106–16). In his study of writing in Early Rus, Simon Franklin (2002) distinguishes between primary, secondary and tertiary types of writing as a way of organizing the material preserved from that area. The concept builds upon the idea that pre-modern writing was in its essence connected to physical and visual objects. It is hence necessary to explore the relations between the objects and the writing that is present on them (Franklin 2002: 20).

Primary writing is associated with artefacts that “exist where the principal purpose of the production of the object is that it should bear a written message” (Franklin 2002: 20). Secondary writing is explained as “integral to, but not the main purpose of, the object’s production” (ibid.). This is distinguished from tertiary writing (such as graffiti) – later (casual) additions to artefacts that were originally produced for other purposes. Franklin clarifies that one object may display several types of writing, and that the categories are not rigid. Another point is that such classifications may not be equally meaningful in analyzing writing traditions from other areas.

The notion of primary writing fits with the nature of whittled sticks in the Bryggen corpus, as items made for writing. Among other finds, flat wooden tablets of different sizes exemplify the idea of preparing wri-

ting material, though the resulting objects display different material properties as compared to sticks (Zilmer 2018). Not all the items of primary writing from Bergen come across as carefully planned and designed, but they are defined by the presence of writing. This applies to numerous random-looking pieces of wood as well as some pieces of bone that bear inscriptions.

Objects of secondary and tertiary writing can also be identified in the corpus. Different everyday items, objects of personal significance or religious devotion show that writing formed an integral part of the finished object, but was probably not the decisive motive for its production. Parts of leather shoes with embroidered decorative runic sequences similarly serve as examples of secondary writing. Fragments of wooden bowls or tankards probably represent secondary writing in that the placement, design or other features show the inscriptions as integrated components of the object. In contrast, we find sundry vessels, tools and implements on which the inscribed sequences or isolated signs more likely express tertiary writing; they appear as later or independent additions to completed objects. It may be discussed whether small inscribed sheets or plates of lead formed objects of primary or secondary writing. Arguably, they came into existence as inscribed amulets, defined by their written messages. At the same time, recent metal detector finds from different parts of Norway also show the presence of pieces of lead with no identifiable script or markings. Inscriptions could have been optional components of such amulets, not necessarily their key purpose.

The present outline is not an attempt to accomplish a complete division of the Bryggen corpus into these three groups. Instead, it highlights interesting ambiguities in the material. One question concerns the effect of writing on different objects. How does writing, through its interaction with the objects, contribute to changing their nature and (intended or actual) functions? Even potentially later additions to existing objects interact in various ways with the setting and surface they have become a part of, altering the further history and use(s) of the object. Another question is whether specific features (for example notches or other markings) of some presumed objects of primary writing could express complementary purposes and signal extended functionalities. Overall, we are dealing with a variety of epigraphic artefacts. It is necessary to explore what writing means and does to these objects, in combination with other features. The visuality and materiality of the artefacts also

constitute fundamental (yet still underexplored) meaning-making resources. Significant shifts in the ways in which the humanities think about materiality and objecthood – including epigraphic studies – can be followed in recent collective publications (for example, Piquette and Whitehouse 2013, Enderwitz and Sauer 2015). On a general level, the Bryggen artefacts share some epigraphic and material capacities. At the same time, they are determined by individual traits and transformations that were a part of their existence as material signs of communication.

2.3 Materials and types of object

The principal material for inscribed objects in the Bryggen corpus is wood. Out of the 684 items, some thirty-five appear on bone, antler, leather, metal, stone, ceramics or some other material. These objects include pieces of bone, parts of leather shoes, strips of lead, pieces of pottery, some stones of different sizes, two golden rings, etc. As a small sample, they highlight the variability of inscribed artefacts from Bergen.²⁰ At the same time, if one uses writing material as the principal criterion, it is evident that nearly 95% of the corpus are wooden objects.

The question arises as to how to identify and describe these wooden objects. As mentioned above, whittled sticks are considered especially characteristic of the material. Sometimes this designation is used to comprise all the runic finds from Bergen, i.e. the total number of known inscribed artefacts is made to stand for that of runic sticks. As part of an ongoing survey I have organized the corpus into two broad categories in order to determine the actual predominance of the medium of runic stick. I have evaluated whether a given artefact can be included in the comprehensive category of wooden sticks and pieces of wood, or whether it should be determined as representing something else. The principal distinctions are then not drawn between forms of writing as presented above (i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary writing); such perspectives are added in further descriptions. The classification of the artefacts is based upon my own investigation, in combination with databases, expert consultations and publications (for example Walaker Nordeide 1989 (publ. 1990), Weber 1990: 11–180). In several instances, I have found

20. The Roman-script inscriptions on different metal artefacts will further complement this picture.

the database identifications to be questionable. Neither the establishment of the type of item nor the assessment of its writing is, however, a straightforward matter. Having presented some distinctions, I also discuss evident challenges.

The **first category** is called “wooden sticks and pieces of wood”. It comprises all instances of sticks of different sizes and shapes. Flat sheets or slivers of wood that have the appearance of small tablets as well as numerous irregular pieces are in the same category.²¹ The writing surfaces on the latter have sometimes also been flattened or smoothed out, but they do not bear evidence of any extensive shaping. A number of wooden items that exhibit supplementary material properties are in the same category. The functional nature of some such artefacts remains ambiguous – their shapes may look like nails, pegs, shafts, wedges, heads of distaffs, and such, but the traits are not sufficiently clear to allow certain classifications. Instead, the size or other properties may suggest that the object simply worked as writing material. Some possibly reflect stages during which a piece of wood was roughly modelled into an intended utensil, but the process was not completed, and the item became writing material instead. Finally, the first category comprises artefacts customarily called owner’s tags or labels, as well as tally-sticks. Such objects have extended functionalities, and they can also represent secondary or tertiary events of writing. As physical objects, however, they do not differ fundamentally from sticks or other shaped pieces of wood. It is debatable whether their features altered their nature as script-bearing objects or not. To conclude, although the presence of writing forms the central characteristic of the artefacts in the first category, not all were objects of primary writing. Some are ambiguous due to combined purposes, others represent secondary or tertiary writing.

The **second category** contains all such objects that with some certainty can be determined to be something *other* than sticks or varyingly shaped pieces of wood. The survey demonstrates that a number of artefacts do not fit under these customary concepts.²² They exhibit alternative properties or

21. Descriptions can vary according to the individual judgment of the investigator; for example, there is no evident systematic way of distinguishing what one may call an irregular wooden stick from a piece of wood that displays some form of shaping.
22. The survey of the objects in the second category is available at: ojs.novus.no (Maal og minne, nr. 1, 2020). The purpose is to provide other researchers with insight into the material that is at present not easily available.

functionalities – as identifiable tools and utensils or objects made out of materials other than wood. The category mainly contains items that represent secondary or tertiary forms of writing; they were equipped with writing as part of the production of the object, during the process of being used, or as a result of particular transformations. Some examples of primary writing are also present, exemplified by pieces of bone. The assessment of several objects and their forms of writing poses its challenges. For instance, one can determine a wooden item to be a broken-off fragment of a tool or vessel that had its independent purpose. It is often impossible to establish at what point during its life the object was inscribed; perhaps this happened after it was broken. Does it then still make sense to view the fragment as expressing the meaning of the original tool? Arguably, it now functioned as a surface for writing, much like casual pieces of wood. Similar arguments concern parts of objects (for example bases of wooden bowls and tankards), which have their distinct shapes and bear writing, but survive as separate artefacts. When evident signs of use are lacking, one can wonder whether the objects were used in intended ways or ended up as handy writing surfaces. In cases when the features of the intended (original) item are a recognizable part of their materiality – expressing the idea of alternative functionality – it is reasonable to place them in the second category.

This approach allows us to evaluate how large a proportion of the corpus consists of wooden sticks and pieces of wood. The first category contains 562 artefacts. The second numbers eighty-seven wooden items (or eighty-five, if leaving out two lost items). When adding the thirty-five items of other writing materials than wood, the total number reaches 122. The second category makes up over 17% of the corpus; thus far such variability has remained undercommunicated.²³ That wood made up a common writing material in a medieval town is not surprising. It is nevertheless interesting that the preserved objects are diverse.²⁴ Not

23. Note that the Bryggen database has a list of only twenty-nine objects “other than wooden sticks” (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070705003438/http://www.nb.no/baser/runer/ribwww/norsk/rib13.html>). An apparent shortcoming is that the list excludes various wooden vessels and tools.

24. Lise Maren Lereim Sand (2010) examines sixty-nine medieval runic artefacts from Oslo in her MA thesis. Distinctions are made between functional (practical) objects, possibly functional objects, and objects with the function of bearing inscriptions. The study is archaeological and does not discuss the complexities of writing further. At the same time, the author underlines the importance of studying runic artefacts as their own type of object.

every item lets itself be easily defined according to the basic criteria, and there are instances of complementary, overlapping or unclear purposes. The size of the first category can be challenged, since it contains artefacts that could be classified as different object types, if placing emphasis upon specific properties. This concerns in particular owner's tags, labels and tally-sticks. Alternatively, one could further isolate all questionable instances. The number of objects in the second category may also increase or decrease once we start modifying the criteria for what should count as a tool or some other independent object. Among other factors the set-up of the categories depends upon how inclusive the designation "wooden stick/runic stick" is taken to be. One could claim that "runic stick" is a self-explanatory term, and that to clarify its uses is an unnecessary act of fine-tuning. General labels, however, generate the idea that finds from a given site are more homogeneous than they actually are. This will affect scholarly approaches and interpretations on a number of levels – for instance with regard to understanding the underlying communicative practices. The next section discusses the concept of a wooden runic stick.

3 What is a runic stick?

3.1 Branches and sticks

One of the most popular specimens in the Bryggen corpus is B149 (BRM 0/18959); the archaeological dating of the artefact is around 1200.²⁵ The inscription on one side says: **gya:sæhir:atþu:kakhæim**, *Gyða segir at þú gakk heim!* ("Gyða says that you: go home!"). This utterance is a good example of the kind of practical literacy with which the Bryggen material is commonly associated. There are runes on another side of the same object. The sequence is lexically incomprehensible (or is yet to receive an explanation): **p̄ansak:āb̄aḱiḱiḱstān:r̄pis**.²⁶ Some have interpreted this as

25. The archaeological dating in relation to the identifiable fire-layers at best provides us with approximate indications of phases with which the items connect. On issues of archaeological dating, see Herteig (1990–91) and Hansen (1998, 2005). On the dating of runic artefacts, see also Knirk (1990: 245–48).

26. The symbol $\bar{\quad}$ indicates a bind-rune, a runic ligature. The dot underneath **ḱ** shows that the reading is uncertain, in this case due to damages to the object. Alternatively, the rune can be read as **æ**. I also assess the bind-rune **āb̄** as uncertain.

a response to Gyða's message. Michael Schulte's analysis draws parallels between the medium of runic stick and modern text-messages. Gyða's incised words are the first note in a small conversation, whereas the runes on the other side are an attempt made by their recipient (a man) to res-



Figures 1a, 1b, 1c. Three sides of B149 (BRM o/18959). Bergen, University Museum of Bergen. Photos by author.

pond (Schulte 2012: 177). This explanation follows Aslak Liestøl's popular discussion of the inscription, as connected to a medieval pub scene. He envisioned a drunk man attempting to reply to Gyða's request but failing to make sense (Liestøl 1964: 21, see also 1966: 54, 1974: 24). In reality, we cannot assert the order of the inscriptions or prove any such internal connections and contextual interpretations. We also do not know what exactly to read into Gyða's words, or whether the inscription was written by Gyða herself or by someone who acted as her messenger.

B149 thus illustrates various problems of study. In this context, its features as an inscribed object are of the greatest interest. Starting with what is evident: this roughly 9 cm long item is of wood. Various studies and sources refer to the object as a runic stick.²⁷ The Oslo runic database registers the item as a "branch" (Norwegian "gren"); the added description ("gjenstandsbeskrivelse") clarifies that this thin branch has two of its sides smoothed and that there are some remains of bark.²⁸ Small branches formed the source of many runic sticks, without always leaving behind explicit traces of their original nature. In the case of B149, the little side twig and remnants of bark add recognizable features to the item (Figures 1a–c).

Already on the level of such identification, there are various options to consider. Placing emphasis on the object being an inscribed branch, one can create associations to a spontaneous use of easily obtainable natural pieces of wood, which did not require much preparation. Calling the item a runic stick makes it possible to indicate that the branch has undergone some shaping and become a type of written medium. The exact connotations depend upon how one defines and describes runic sticks. In combination with such labels, one may focus on the side that bears a personal message or instead turn to the illegible sequence. These considerations highlight the ambivalent nature of inscribed artefacts, and they raise questions about the concept of a runic stick.

27. See for instance the Bryggen database: <https://web.archive.org/web/2007072-0050535/http://www.nb.no/baser/runer/fullpost.php?bnr=B149>. Cf. <http://www.unimus.no/artefacts/um/search/?oid=191989&museumsnr=BRM0&f=html> (22.01.2020).

28. Cf. also Aslak Liestøl's registration as well as the description in the original archaeological catalogue of the University Museum of Bergen (copies found in the Oslo Runic Archives). The latter source calls the object a runic stick, while specifying that it is a natural stick ("naturpinn"), which has two sides roughly smoothed.

3.2 *The concept of a runic stick*

The general meanings of the word “stick” are assessed on the basis of dictionary definitions, here taken from the Oxford English Dictionary (<https://www.oed.com/>):

- I. A long or (relatively) thin piece of wood, esp. when cut or shaped for a particular purpose.
1. a. A relatively small and thin branch of a tree or shrub, esp. when cut or broken off; a twig. [...]
 2. a. A small, thin piece of wood cut and shaped for a specific purpose. [...]
 - 1b. A piece of wood used as a tally. Obsolete. [...]
 3. A long and relatively slender piece of wood used as a tool and often cut or shaped for ease of handling. [...]
- II. Something resembling in shape or quality, or originally made from, a long or thin piece of wood. [...]²⁹

The “relatively small and thin” appearance of sticks is mentioned, as is the fact that the word is especially used with regard to pieces of wood “cut and shaped”. When it comes to references in Old Norse sources, the explicit term for a rune-inscribed piece (stave) of wood was *rúnakefli*. In Johan Fritzner’s dictionary the explanation is: “Træstykke hvori man har ind-skaaret Runer” (“Piece of wood into which one has cut runes”).³⁰ Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson’s Icelandic-English dictionary clarifies that *kefli* can in some contexts be understood as a “round piece of wood”, for carving messages.³¹ References to runes and rune-inscribed items (including *rúnakefli*), which are recorded in sagas as well as other narrative and poetic sources, have been discussed in separate studies (see Dillmann 1995, with references).³²

29. See <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/190148?rskey=IRFbuQ&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> for full definitions and examples (21.01.2020).

30. See Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog*. Electronic version: <http://www.edd.uio.no/perl/search/search.cgi?appid=86;tabid=1275&lang=ENG> (accessed 21.01.2020).

31. See Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson [Guðbrandur Vigfússon], *Icelandic-English Dictionary*. Electronic version: http://lexicon.ff.cuni.cz/html/oi_cleasbyvigfusson/b0504.html.

See also *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*

<https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?065650>; on definitions and examples of *kefli*, see <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?042915> (accessed 21.01.2020).

32. Anne Holtmark (1963: 445) gives examples of Old Norse references to the use of

Dictionary understandings and past uses do not necessarily provide us with an idea of the present-day scholarly conventions. In relevant scholarship, the shaped form of runic sticks in the meantime appears to be a common concept. Frequent mention is made of *whittled* runic sticks, as media that have had their natural shape modified. These can be differentiated from more irregular and natural pieces of wood. In one of his articles, Aslak Liestøl emphasizes the significance of *rúnakefli* as a practical tool of correspondence; *rúnakefli* is explained as “a faceted wooden stick” (Liestøl 1971: 76). Presenting the Bryggen finds in volume 6 of NIyR, Liestøl uses the Norwegian word “runekjevle” as an equivalent to *rúnakefli*. The designation in particular relates to whittled sticks of rectangular shape that have four available writing surfaces. Similar descriptions figure in Liestøl’s separate articles where he writes about the wooden sticks: “They were mostly four-sided and meant to carry one line of runes on each side. The people called them *rúnakefli*” (1974: 21).³³ The four sides can be of nearly equal dimensions; frequently, though, two sides are slightly wider, making up the broader faces of the item. Some or all of the sides may bear runes; longer inscriptions often cover the whole stick. The sticks may narrow at the end(s); they may be straight or have a rounded shape. One conclusion from such descriptions would be that the four-sided whittled sticks – objects of primary writing – were well suited for inscribing somewhat longer texts, such as letters, religious quotations or poetry. At the same time, the term “runekjevle” is not used exclusively in NIyR or other sources; it overlaps with general references to wooden sticks and other shaped pieces of wood.

From a broad perspective, runic sticks can be characterized by two central properties. For one, these are objects of wood, shaped or modified to some degree, in order to make them into suitable writing materials. Secondly, they are inscribed objects; the common perception is that they bear some identifiable runic writing. With regard to the actual artefacts, a runic stick can be many things since the forms, measurements and other properties of the items vary. For this reason, one may wonder what could distinguish a stick from a shaped piece of wood, or from a chip or slice

runes and *rúnakefli* in connection with magical love spells.

33. The idea of the Bryggen corpus as consisting of *rúnakefli* is adopted by other scholars in their discussions of the material (for example, Garrison 1999: 85–88).

of wood. The assessments reflect ambiguities and inconsistencies, as shown with the Gyða stick.

When it comes to the presence of writing, runic sticks may contain anything from single runes or rune-like signs to small units and longer sequences of runes. This also broadens our understanding of what an inscribed stick can be. The preserved items may bear writing as well as other visual markings on one or several sides. It may be that the same inscription continues from one side to the other, or that the inscribed sequences on two or more sides connect through the same event of writing. On the other hand, some represent separate acts of inscribing, and it is difficult to establish their hypothetical connections. The (re)use of one item on separate writing occasions or by different individuals cannot be ruled out, despite the tendency to describe the Bryggen finds as quickly produced and easily disposable objects. A closer examination modifies the impression of the unprompted and ephemeral nature of the artefacts. Many bear evidence of some planning and further use, including traces of transformations, which occurred during their existence as inscribed objects.

These are some of the challenges related to the concept of a “runic stick”. This does not mean that we ought to abandon such labels – they allow us to approach the material in broad terms. However, we have to reflect upon what they suggest about the objects and how such suggestions affect the scholarly interpretation. The third part of the article illustrates this further by looking at some ambiguities related to the items and the ways in which they exhibit writing.

4 Individual objects of writing

4.1 *Ambiguous items*

The ambiguities of assessment come to expression on the level of individual artefacts. The items in Figure 2 can all be analyzed in various ways. In this manner different inferences can be made about their nature as inscribed objects, their production and purposes.³⁴ Some may, for

34. In general overviews, these items would normally all count as runic sticks.

example, find it reasonable to describe N294 (B10266b) as an irregular piece of wood. In volume 4 of NIyR it is identified as “a wooden stick” (“trepinn”, see Olsen 1957: 61).³⁵ B214 (BRM 0/24255) is in the Oslo runic database (and thus also in the Scandinavian Runic-Text Database) registered as “a piece of wood” (“trestykke”). The description in the former in the meantime specifies that it is a “finely whittled piece of wood” (“fint tilspikket trestykke”).



Figure 2. On the left: B214 (BRM 0/24255) on top, N294 (B10266b) below. On the right: B128 (BRM 0/18052) on top, B34 (BRM 0/3520) below. Bergen, University Museum of Bergen. Photo by author.

The extended functionalities of objects can be made explicit or left out. B34 (BRM 0/3520) is in the Oslo runic database identified as a “tally-stick” (“tellepinne”).³⁶ The description adds that the object is “a small wooden stave” (“liten trestav”), with notches that number seventeen along one of its sides and two along the other. In the Bryggen database, the item has the label “wooden stick” (“trepinne”); whereas the designation in the online archaeological database is “stave, runic inscription” (“stav, runeinnskrift”). The description in the latter then adds that the item is a “tally-stick” (“tellepinne”), but this is registered with a question mark.³⁷

35. The archaeological database describes the item as a coarsely cut runic stick (“runepinne, rått tilskåret”): <http://www.unimus.no/artefacts/um/search/?oid=19057& museumsnr=B10266&f=html> (22.01.2020). This follows the original catalogue registration of the University Museum of Bergen.

36. On the tally-sticks among the Bryggen finds, see for example Grandell (1988).

37. <http://www.unimus.no/artefacts/um/search/?oid=171602&museumsnr=BRM0&f=html> (22.01.2020). The original catalogue description of the University Museum of Bergen describes the item as a flat piece of wood, with notches along its sides.

B34 is over 18 cm long, with slightly varying width, as one of its ends is around half a centimeter wider than the other. It has two broader faces and two notched edges (see Figure 2). On one of its broad faces, by the narrower end, four runes have been incised: **salt**. The item can on this basis be considered a tally-stick for salt – recording some numbers or quantities in connection with salt trade. The multifunctional features and the potential reusability of the notched stick should also be taken into account. The inscribed word could turn the item into a label, when using its rune-marked side. The notches for counting, which were visible on both sides, however, did not have to be tied to one particular transaction including salt.



Figure 3. Detail of the tally-stick B34 (BRM o/3520), taken with digital microscope. Bergen, University Museum of Bergen. Photo by author.

Different properties can be highlighted when connecting this object to primary, secondary or tertiary forms of writing. The distinctions depend on what we see as the defining and integral feature(s) of the object, what is considered supplementary, and on what basis this is done. The runes

may have been inscribed after the stick was notched (tertiary writing), or during the course of making the stick (primary or secondary writing). Sometimes it is evident that an artefact was notched after the inscription was made, as its runes have been damaged or partly cut off. These features demonstrate some changes that could take place with an inscribed object. It could then be argued that initially the object represented a primary form of writing, whereas later its nature was altered. The height of the runes of B34 follows the outline of the notches; the tops of the first, second and the fourth runes are slightly lower than that of the third rune (see Figure 3). Possibly the runes may have reached slightly higher; the tops could have been cut off by the notches. However, this is not supported by the fact that the branch of the final **t** still runs from the top of the main stave.

Similar considerations relate to other sticks and pieces of wood from Bryggen, which have notches, cuts or incisions along one or several of their sides. Not all of these are categorized as tally-sticks with clearly defined purposes; among other factors, this has to do with the contents of the texts as well as the number, layout, size and design of the cuts. The notches and incisions have their distinctive visual and material presence, but their functions could vary from occasion to occasion.

Earlier the question was raised as to whether a piece of wood of a shape that resembles a tool necessarily represents that object. B128 (BRM O/18052, see Figure 2), is according to the Bryggen database “a label/owner’s tag” (“merkelapp”). In the Oslo runic database it is called “a wedge” (“kile (blei)”). The original archaeological catalogue registration (copy in the Runic Archives) describes the item as a wooden peg (“trenagle”) that has been halved (vertically).³⁸ B128 is close to 17 cm in length. Its narrow end is less than one centimeter, the opposite one over 2.5 cm wide. The form can resemble a wedge, but the purpose of the object remains uncertain. The presence of inscribed personal names could suggest that it was an ownership marker or simply a suitable piece of writing material (on the inscription, see Zilmer 2019: 181–85).³⁹

38. Cf. also <http://www.unimus.no/artefacts/um/search/?oid=191288&museums-nr=BRMO&f=html> where the designation “runic stick” is used (22.01.2020).

39. “Ownership marker” functions here as an overarching term for items that display names and ownership statements; it is not limited to the specifically shaped tags or labels.

The side bearing runes is whittled flat, providing a suitable writing surface, while the opposite one is rounded. Through this, the item shares qualities with several other inscribed artefacts. The runes run from its wide end towards the narrow one, and their sizes follow the outline of the object. Of special interest is the design of the final four signs; these are double-lined runes with small dots inside their contours. As a decorative or stylistically distinctive way of inscribing, these runes could provide the item with recognizable properties. B128 can further be compared to other artefacts, which have one wide and one pointed end. One of these, B12 (BRM 0/8602) measures only around 7.5 cm, and it is in the databases registered as a piece of wood. The Oslo runic database describes it as “a wedge-shaped piece of wood (a wedge)” (“bleiformet trestykke (kile)”). Considering its size, form and other features – including the deeply cut runes **inra** – this item could also be an owner’s tag.⁴⁰

The ambiguities connected to owner’s tags and labels need separate attention, since these are frequently treated as a group of their own. They make up a large portion of the material in NIyR volume 6 (N660–N773, i.e. 114 out of 171 inscriptions).⁴¹ In the summary, Ingrid Sanness Johnsen (1990: 223) describes their features in some detail. She mentions the sharpened and pointed ends as evidence that they were inserted into something, whereas their holes, notches, cross-shaped or arrow-shaped heads, small barbs or handles provided ways of attaching the tags to goods. Such features are the main reason for the identification of particular items as tags and labels. The material is understood as reflecting pragmatic, trade-related communication (on runic evidence of trading correspondence see for example Sanness Johnsen 1987, Hagland 1990, 2011). Similar properties are underlined in other studies of owner’s tags and labels, dealing with the material from Trondheim (Hagland 1990, Hagland unpubl.).⁴² At the same time, the Bryggen edition includes objects that have the appearance of ordinary shaped sticks.⁴³ According to Ingrid Sanness

40. The Oslo runic database contains a suggestion by Terje Spurkland that the inscription consists of an unknown male name **Inr* and the verb *á* (“owns”).

41. The numbers vary to some extent in different studies, but the usual range is around 100–120 artefacts (see for example Hagland 1988).

42. The unpublished manuscript *Runer frå utgravingane i Trondheim bygrunn 1971–94. Med eit tillegg av nyfunne innskrifter elles frå byen* (N774–N894) is available online: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120708194247/http://www.hf.ntnu.no/nor/Publik/RUNER/RUNER.doc> (27.01.2020). A revised and updated version (by Hagland and Knirk) is forthcoming as NIyR vol. 7.

Johnsen, in such cases the textual content documents their function. In her treatment, five items are deemed uncertain, while a few other are left out from the publication. The inclusion or exclusion criteria are not explained in any further detail.



Figure 4. One side of N751 (B357, BRM o/32060) on top, N765 (B522, BRM o/60383) below. Bergen, University Museum of Bergen. Photo by author.

The items on Figure 4 illustrate some challenges. N765 (B522, BRM o/60383) is a roughly 19.5 cm long, round and thin stick with a pointed end. According to the explanation given in NIyR this shape makes it likely that the item was an owner's tag ("eiermerke", Sanness Johnsen and Knirk 1990: 218). The four runes, read as **pona**, may contain an unidentified name. Several other Bryggen items demonstrate similar formal features. Some have been identified as runic sticks, others are described as pins for fastening something. Some of the rounded sticks, which have a pointed end, could be compared to sausage pins (items used for closing the sausage casings) – a common find type in medieval towns (Hansen 2010).⁴⁴ Another possibility is that particular objects fulfilled combined purposes or altered their functionality. There are artefacts that clearly show traces of having been cut into shape after the inscription was made; such shaping has damaged the runes. This is not the case with N765, which has its four runes clearly incised on the flattened part of the stick.

43. Elisabeth Magin (2014) undertakes a systematic assessment of previous research on owner's tags and labels in her MA thesis; the presented corpus in the meantime follows the same general outline.

44. The archaeological database designation of the item is "sausage stick, runeinnskrift" ("pølsepinne, runic inscription"), the description adds "ownership marker?". <http://www.unimus.no/artefacts/um/search/?oid=245589&museumsnr=BRMo&f=html> (22.01.2020).

With a runic artefact like N751 (B357, BRM 0/32060) different questions arise. In its present form, the item is only 6.5 cm long. One end is straight; the other one is damaged, with traces remaining after a small handle or a neck. The two broad sides are inscribed. On one of them stands: **porer:amik** *Þórir á mik* (“Þórir owns me”), on the other **rap**. The latter may be the verb *rað*, with an appeal to read the inscription, or it may be a start of an incomplete inscription. NIyR describes the object as a rectangular and flat piece of wood, but places emphasis on the text “Þórir owns me” and includes the item among the group of owner’s tags. The end with the neck could support the latter classification.⁴⁵ In its present state it is, however, primarily the inscription that provides the main argument.

There are also complications when determining what forms of writing the inscribed tags exhibit, and how such acts of writing differ (or do they at all differ) from ownership formulas on other sticks and shaped pieces of wood. Jan Ragnar Hagland (unpubl.) underlines the extended role of tags and labels; the texts did not mediate that the piece of wood belonged to someone – the point was to inform who owned the items that were equipped with the tag. In accordance with such broad functionality, these objects could have been used repeatedly. Nevertheless, even with such criteria in mind there remain questions on the level of individual artefacts.

4.2 *Ambiguous inscriptions*

In connection with the presence of writing, the ambiguities have to do with what is understood as inscribed objects. One issue concerns the fuzzy distinctions between inscribed objects that are runic and those that bear rune-like characters, imitations of writing or various stylized and decorative marks. The co-existence of different scripts and epigraphic markings is also of interest.

Many Bryggen artefacts have separate sequences of signs inscribed on different sides, some lexically meaningful, others seemingly not. In the case of B24 (BRM 0/9291, see Figure 5) there is a division between

45. The archaeological database designation is “runic stick”; the description adds “owner’s tag”. See: <http://www.unimus.no/artefacts/um/search/?oid=210882&museum-nr=BRM0&f=html> (22.01.2020).

identifiable runes and signs that appear at best rune-like and minuscule-like. The item represents primary writing; it is rectangular and flat, with two broad sides. It is roughly 14 cm long, 2.5 cm wide and around half a centimeter thick. In databases the object is registered as a rectangular stick (the Bryggen database calls it a piece of wood). Alternatively, the artefact could be designated as a small tablet, used for the purpose of practising or visualizing writing.



Figure 5. B485 (BRM 0/45930) on top, one side of B24 (BRM 0/9291) below. Bergen, University Museum of Bergen. Photo by author.

One side has a row of shapes that display graphic elements of runes. A possible transliteration would be: **iækkkkimmkæ**. The runes numbered four, five, six, seven and eight are followed by small vertical incisions by their base, as an additional way of marking. The other side of the tablet has sequences that cannot be clearly identified. One bigger sign has a shape that resembles an **æ** †. Most of the surface is covered by two horizontal lines that (depending on how one turns the item) have rune-like characters on top and minuscule-like letters below.

We may wonder whether one and the same writer attempted to imitate signs associated with different scripts. Or are these separate samples of runic and non-runic writing, perhaps collected for the purpose of exemplifying their distinct visual features? With the runic sequence, we can detect characteristic components of individual runes and ways of relating the shapes to each other. The sequence demonstrates some visual logic or symmetry. This is of interest when tracing evidence of emergent

skills of literacy; processes of learning to write and read also entail visual exercises and experiments with graphic units and script-like patterns.

The first rune can be identified as an **i** | – if proceeding from the idea that the line is runic. This shape can be turned into an **æ**, which is rune number 2, by adding a branch that cuts through the stave †. The branch of this particular **æ** crosses the stave relatively high up, which does not make it that different from a **k** † (with the part of the branch removed on the left). On the item we can observe that **æ** is followed by a possible reversed **k** and then an ordinary **k**, recorded three times. In combination, the two **k**-shapes provide an image of the components of **m** †. One can also form a runic **m** when the two required branches are added to the vertical **i** (which stands as number seven in the row). The **i** is followed by two **m**-runes, and then another **k**, and finally a possible reversed **æ**. The latter two appear as a mirror images of the runes number 2 and 3 at the start of the sequence.

Parallels can be drawn to the three slightly scratched shapes on B485 (BRM o/45930, see Figure 5), characterized as runes or rune-like signs. The first could be **p** of the form **K**, the second **k** †, and the third **n** where the branch reaches to the base **k**. Visually, **K** can be explained as combining the shapes of † and **k**; or alternatively, you get † when you remove the bottom branch of **K**, and **k** when taking away the top one. On this basis, one can support the understanding of the inscription as an intentional piece of writing, not accidental scratching – this may be an attempt to visually imitate or practise runic shapes.

This particular explanation of the runic shapes in B24 and in B485 may be mistaken. However, the idea of the visibility of script and the realization that varying graphic shapes had their visual links and effects are worthy of consideration. Seemingly random rows of runes and other markings do not always require explicit linguistic explanations, neither do they have to be assessed from the point of detecting underlying systems that conceal their real meaning. The acknowledgment of the visual impact of letters and letter-like shapes, the internal links and symmetrical connections they create, belongs with a broader understanding of the significance of writing. Epigraphic writing especially performed its varied roles as a visual and material form of mark-making, which expressed different communicative intentions.

Occasionally, the artefacts leave it open as to what form of script one may have intended to produce: are the signs we see runes or Roman let-

ters? One example is an 8 cm long rectangular, partly burned stick B436 (BRM 0/40763). Both of its ends are damaged, but in its present form it still displays a row of identical **K** shapes; at least ten are wholly or partly visible.⁴⁶ As discussed in the case of B485, **K** can be interpreted as a runic **p**. This is a known graphic innovation in medieval runic inscriptions; another option was to use the dotted **b** **ᚷ**. When the form **K** stands in isolation, its visual experience is not distinct from the Roman capital **K**. Perhaps it could be argued that the object in itself – a wooden stick – creates connotations to the presence of runic writing. However, as mentioned above, we do also find wooden artefacts that display inscriptions in Roman letters.

Some inscriptions mix in occasional signs that represent a different script. B454 (BRM 0/42433) has inscriptions on two of its four sides. The inscriptions are almost identical: **AVROVE** and **AVRoV**. They are inscribed in majuscules, which for the main part have the design of double-contoured letters. The only difference is that on one side the inscribed word lacks one letter at the end, while in position number four we find the runic **o** **ᚩ**. Why the shift occurs at this exact spot is hard to establish, but such mixtures may suggest fluid experiences with and overlapping uses of different scripts.⁴⁷

When it comes to some more unusual, decorative or stylized marks or signs, the approaches in the databases and other sources differ. We see this for example with B31 (BRM 0/73460, Figure 6). The Oslo runic database identifies the 7 cm long item as an irregular stick that narrows towards one end. Looking at its form – one pointed end, the other one shaped as a handle or a head – it does not appear much different from sundry tags and labels. Two incised marks appear on one of its broad faces, possibly made before the item was shaped further, as their bottom parts seem to be missing. The marks are in the database determined to be rune-like characters, it is also added that they may be decorative. B31 has not been included in the present version of the Scandinavian Runic-Text Database, the reason possibly being that the marks cannot be identified,

46. There may possibly stand a different sign at the spot where the inscribed sequence starts.

47. A recent study by Michelle Waldspühl on a group of Anglo-Saxon inscriptions from Southern Italy introduces the term “heterographia” when describing phenomena of script-mixing on the level of “graphetic (or typographic) features and spelling practices” (2018–19: 155).

i.e. “read” as actual runes. These premises in the meantime pose challenges, especially since the database does include other inscriptions of rune-like nature (which do not always have any clear identification and meaning). B31 displays intentional visual marking, and the signs share some graphic components with shapes known from runic writing. We observe two staves and diagonally added twigs or branches. Different explanations may see the marks as attempts to imitate or experiment with runes or rune-like shapes, or create pseudo-cryptic twig runes. These may also be personal marks that served to make the item easily recognizable.

Another inscribed object currently not included in the Scandinavian Runic-Text Database is B97 (BRM o/16310, see Figure 6); in the Oslo runic database described as an elongated piece of wood. Its one, rounder end is broken while the other one is flat and wide. One sign is visible, this could be a rune, a bind-rune, a rune-like character or a personal mark. The Oslo runic database describes it as a reversed runic **f** or **u** that consists of two bows **h** (also mentioning Liestøl’s suggestion that this is an open **r**). In cases like these, we have to operate with several possible alternatives. Corresponding marks cannot be linked to identifiable runes, but they may again communicate visual associations to rune-like shapes.



Figure 6. On the left: B286 (BRM o/29804) on top, B282 (BRM o/29676) in the middle, B97 (BRM o/16310) below. On the right: B497 (BRM o/52098) on top, B31 (BRM o/73460) below. Bergen, University Museum of Bergen. Photo by author.

On the other hand, B497 (BRM o/52098, see Figure 6), with its similarly irregular sign, is included in the Scandinavian Runic-Text Database, with

the suggested reading **u** (based on the Oslo runic database). The sign could be explained as a doubled rune, a triple/quadruple-lined rune or a rune-like shape – but not necessarily producing an intentional **u**. Two other ambiguous inscriptions contain signs identified as reversed **f**-runes in the databases. These are B286 (BRM o/29804) and B282 (BRM o/29676). They share some formal properties in that both have holes by their ends; the signs also appear identical (B286 has an additional short line incised next to the main sign). However, it is not evident that the signs represent reversed **f**-runes. Depending upon how the items are turned (see Figure 6), one can spot similarities between these markings and some of the previously described rune-like shapes. Collectively these and various other examples illuminate the dynamic nature of script and script-like markings.

5 Concluding discussion

This study has explored the inscribed artefacts from medieval Bergen as epigraphic, visual and material objects of writing. Special attention has been given to the concept of the “runic stick”, seen in relation to the overall corpus. The artefacts customarily labelled “sticks” with recognizable “runes” present themselves as inscribed objects of varying properties. General labels and criteria have their limitations, and current scholarly resources demonstrate terminological difficulties and inconsistencies. Clarifications are therefore warranted as to how broadly or narrowly a given term is to be understood in different studies. Not every piece of wood with runes is necessarily to be counted as a runic stick, although this term will most likely still serve as an easy way of characterizing a great bulk of the material. More importantly, however, overarching labels do not translate into evidence of the uniformity of the corpus. One concrete step to take is to clarify whether the label “runic stick” is used primarily in reference to whittled, somewhat regular sticks, or whether it also covers irregularly shaped pieces of wood as well as those that have retained a natural appearance of branches and twigs. Another matter concerns the criteria used to argue that a given artefact belongs with the specific group of owner’s tags and labels.

Overall, it is meaningful to approach the Bryggen material and other comparable corpora as a continuum or spectrum of inscribed artefacts.

The idea is then to examine their overlapping and individual features as well as multifunctional potentials. As predominantly small, portable objects, they have some shared as well as distinctive formal and physical features. As script-bearing artefacts, they demonstrate the presence of different forms of writing, and they employ runic and other scripts in various ways.

To draw some parallels to current scholarship on literacy – medievalists are increasingly interested in the coexistence of multiple literacies, in settings like the medieval town (see Mostert and Adamska 2014). Regarding medieval Scandinavia, one has traditionally distinguished runic literacy from the advancing Roman-script literacy, operating with functional dichotomies or complementary domains. The idea of a continuum has been proposed as an alternative to that, since it brings to the fore the existence of “various kinds of interferences and interfaces” (Schulte 2012: 182). In the present study, this premise of “interferences and interfaces” does not only relate to linguistic or stylistic registers or types of inscriptional content. It is equally important to consider the formal, script- and object-related properties of the inscribed artefacts.

A theoretical platform of continuum can provide different ways of approaching the inscribed artefacts. One could envision the use of different tools in future digital multimedia collections and presentations of these and other medieval (inscribed) artefacts – for example, with the aim of tracing dynamic transitions from one object (type) to another. This would provide different ways of experiencing and understanding the similarities and differences between the objects. One can examine constellations of simultaneously overlapping and differing features. The assessment of seemingly uniform and static categories would be modified by zooming in on sets of variable features, varying degrees of planning, possible traces of changes and transformations that were connected to the existence of particular objects.

The case studies of individual objects presented here have brought to the fore some of the underexplored properties of inscribed artefacts. Some key challenges have been discussed, but first and foremost the study has underlined the possibilities opened up by alternative paths of inquiry when examining the artefacts as an assemblage of script-bearing, visual and material objects. With these objects, the question is never only about writing, on the one hand, or their materiality, on the other. They represent both, in various forms and combinations – this is what lies in

their essence as inscribed artefacts.

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Abstract

The article explores challenges and possibilities in the study of inscribed, predominantly runic artefacts from medieval Bergen. Previous scholarship has created the impression of the relative uniformity of the material regarding types of inscribed object. The common idea is that the corpus consists largely of wooden runic sticks, without further elaboration on the features of the artefacts. This study examines the Bergen artefacts as an assemblage of script-bearing, material objects. It addresses challenges related to general criteria of description and analysis. Selected case studies illustrate underexplored aspects of the corpus and focus on the ambiguous presence of writing and the material properties of the objects. The article combines perspectives from runology, visual epigraphy, and materiality studies. Such analytical angles will provide new insight into medieval runic artefacts, and they may be relevant in the study of comparable corpora of inscribed artefacts.

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