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Two Scripts in an Evolving Urban Setting: The Case of Medieval Nidaros Once Again

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In 1997 the city of Trondheim celebrated—with great pomp and circumstance—its millennium. The choice of this particular year reflects a 200-year-old tradition of jubilees in Trondheim, the first of which took place in 1797 when eight hundred years of urban history was felt to call for public celebration. The historical sources used to establish the date of founding of the town that was later to become the holy city of St. Olaf were first and foremost the various sagas about Óláfr Tryggvason (Hagland 2001, 96 f.). Here is not the place to go into detail about the early history of Nidaros or its historiography. Suffice to say that the date decided on in 1797 has not been seriously challenged since, neither by historians nor archaeologists. That is to say, there is at present a reasonable consensus about the early phases of the medieval city: its beginnings go back to the last decade of the tenth century or so—which gives us a perspective of about a thousand years—an unusually long period for a process of urbanisation in these northern latitudes.

In general the emergence of urban settlements seems to have provided seminal contexts for the growth of literacy, in medieval times and earlier. One important reason for raising yet again the question of literacy and the use of different scripts in the evolving urban environment by the estuary of the river *Nið* (in Norway's Trøndelag region) is the fact that since the previous International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions more evidence on the subject has become available. As far as the epigraphic evidence in particular is concerned, we are in a better position than before to study the interplay between runes and roman letters. The main reason for this is Martin Syrett's thorough and well-documented publication *The*

Roman-Alphabet Inscriptions of Medieval Trondheim (2002). Together with the inscriptions already published in *Norges innskifter med de yngre runer* and a recent web publication of the medieval Trondheim runes,¹ Syrett's work allows for more comprehensive comparison and analysis of the entire epigraphic material than has previously been possible.

An additional reason to want to look once again at questions pertaining to early literacy in a medieval Norwegian city in the context of the International Symposiums on Runes and Runic Inscriptions is the present author's modest foray into the subject ten years ago – at the fourth symposium in Göttingen in 1995. This contribution was however based on less extensive evidence and its purpose was to shed light on a more general aspect of medieval studies (Hagland 1998, 621–26).

Looked at in the context of the main theme of the sixth symposium in Lancaster in 2005, "Languages and Scripts in Contact", it seems fair to say that Nidaros up to about 1200 displays aspects of literacy which involve both languages and scripts in contact. Right from the start there seems to have been a relatively well-established tradition of runic writing in the city. From the latter part of the eleventh century there is evidence for the epigraphic use of roman letters as well. And as early as the middle of the twelfth century manuscript literacy is documented in Nidaros, encompassing, it seems, both a foreign strand in Latin and a domestic one in Old Norwegian written with roman letters – the Carolingian-insular minuscule in particular. We shall look briefly at each of these aspects in turn, with the initial aim of summing up our present knowledge of literacy in Nidaros around the year 1200. For reasons of space this paper cannot go much beyond 1200. Thereafter we will try to investigate the intricate question of contact or interplay, if any, between runic and roman writing in a Norwegian context in the early years of the Scandinavian High Middle Ages.

In order to do so we need a quick survey of the sources currently known that can be dated between the end of the tenth and the beginning of the thirteenth century. Datable finds carrying runic inscriptions indicate that runic script was available and used from the very beginnings of the town-like settlement by the estuary of the river *Nið* (cf. Hagland 1998, 623). All the runic material found in archaeological contexts earlier than c. 1200 during the Trondheim excavations carried out from 1973 onwards is presented in Tables 1–3. In addition to this material there is the possibility that a few of the forty-one inscriptions found on the walls of Nidaros cathedral may be older than 1200. That cannot be established with any degree of certainty,

¹ <http://www.hf.ntnu.no/nor/Publik/RUNER/runer-N774-N894.htm>

however. On the other hand, there is an inscription on a gravestone, reused as building material in a part of the cathedral erected in the first decade of the thirteenth century that can most probably be placed in the late eleventh century (cf. Hagland 1994, 36).

At present a total of 168 runic inscriptions are known from medieval Trondheim. As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, forty-three, or more than a quarter of the total, are from archaeological contexts older than c. 1200, to which can be added a few inscriptions with runelike characters (cf. Table 3). There is thus every reason to assume a certain degree of runic literacy in the first two centuries of urban settlement in Nidaros—even though it does not seem to point in any particular direction in terms of function. The arguments concerning this need not be rehearsed here as more detailed discussion of those aspects of the oldest part of the material can be found in Hagland 1998 (pp. 623–26).

Co-existing with runic writing in Nidaros in the period up to c. 1200 is a certain amount of non-runic, that is to say roman-alphabet, epigraphic writing. The extent of this is more difficult to assess and its use seems to be confined to fairly well defined functional domains. Most notable is the use of roman script on coins struck in Nidaros, amply evidenced in finds from elsewhere. The Trondheim excavations, however, have unearthed only one coin minted in this early period that carries a clear legend in roman letters. The great majority of coins, including a possibly runic one, have garbled or confused legends. The purpose of writing in this particular case was apparently its expressive and not its denotative function, and its effects in terms of literacy above all symbolic—“literacy displayed” is an expression used about similar manifestations elsewhere (cf. Mitchell 1990 and Hagland 1998, 623).

As Syrett points out (2002, 1:106–08 and 133–36), the Trondheim inscriptions in the roman alphabet are extremely difficult to date. Even so it seems that his corpus contains very few written before c. 1225.² Based on a combination of typological and archaeological criteria he places—with considerable reservation—a total of just eight in the early period, while the complete corpus numbers 119. These eight early inscriptions are all listed in Table 4. They are—one or possibly two excepted—all written in Latin.

Manuscript writing—the third type of literacy—was clearly in existence in Nidaros by the second half of the twelfth century. The manuscripts

² Syrett (2002, 1:135 f.) divides the corpus of roman-alphabet inscriptions from medieval Trondheim into three periods: early (c. 1150 to 1225), middle (c. 1225 to 1325/50), and later (c. 1325 to 1537).

Table 1. Trondheim runic inscriptions from before c. 1200 with possible linguistic meaning

<i>NlyR</i> no.	Museum no.	Transliterated text	Phase ^a
N 807	[N-37328]	(a) —] ?n·þurkrimr:kupmutr:suin: (b) ????h:krimr (c) —]halkiair[—	2
N 831	[N-96784]	(a) sa:ristisaatsumarлакantakhru[— (b) uksiuitame	2
N 851	[N-38298]	skraþi	2
N 828	[N-94621]	×ulfr·risti·?? [twig runes]	3
N 830	[N-40930]	þurkair·raist	3
N 832	[N-94416]	rifraþ·ilfaraukristnokhuast	3
N 837	[N-57185]	(a) ilir:men:æro:þeir:era:mela (b) os	3
N 839	[N-94415]	airikr:kerþisbitu:o:hafi	3
N 840	[N-95829]	ek·an·ikeu:u??	3
N 883	[N-93775]	þ	3
N 881	[N-32965]	þ	3–4
N 804	[N-37425]	kirira	4
N 835	[N-33434]	(a) ×uintauka:alokaþspita× (b) uitauki:loka?	4
N 844	[N-33456]	—] ?lt·es·uer·	4
N 845	[N-37975]	—]irþeunana	4
N 853	[N-32000]	—]æzur×	4
N 882	[N-33552]	þ	4
N 797	[N-91694]	(a) sikmuntrasæk (b) þena	4–5
N 824	[N-93495]	isisa:isisa ??	4–5
N 826	[N-31495]	iuar:ræist:runar:þæsar:her:ero: þær:uer:uarom?þorstæin[—	5
N 850	[N-30690]	(a) lukilsk (b) sk	5
N 855	[N-30844]	þo	5

^a Phases 2 and 3: early 11th century; phase 4: late 11th century; phase 5: early 12th century, and phase 6: late 12th century.

[Table 1]

NlyR no.	Museum no.	Transliterated text	Phase
N 810	[N-37065]	—]iastbmly	6
N 811	[N-52445]	[f]upork	6
N 812	[N-93494]	fpr	6
N 815	[N-27723]	(a) ×fpuorkhniastbmly× lio[<u]la (b) patirmønøpruormønøprti (c) kina:ræistrunarþesar:friakoælt	6
N 816	[N-32836]	(a) bater·nuster·kuiesinseli:santibisetur (b) suæen·oupunarsunr:ræist:runar:þesar (c) fuporkh	6
N 827	[N-92238]	arkilristirunarpissar	6
N 843	[N-93816]	×???:kus:mik:merir	6
N 846	[N-29151]	sikrmin	6
N 847	[N-31496]	lutr	6

concerned were written primarily in Latin, it seems, and concerned ecclesiastical administration. A certain production of literary texts in Latin as well as in the vernacular must also be assumed to have taken place in Nidaros in this period. Even if we do not know the precise details of the textual history or the manuscript transmission of important works such as *Historia Norwegiae* and *Passio Olavi*, there must have been a relatively high degree of literary activity in Latin in Nidaros, particularly during Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson's period in office (1161–88, cf. Mortensen 2000, 97). Rather as with the literary texts, the administrative correspondence from the archbishopric of Nidaros has left us with very little evidence, if any, of early, locally based literacy in Latin. It is, however, possible to deduce a certain level of activity indirectly from sources such as papal letters and later transcripts of archiepiscopal decrees. In addition fragments of liturgical books from this early period may still be extant. In the present state of research, however, the number of such survivals is uncertain.

The emerging manuscript literacy in Latin was paralleled by a modest production of literary texts in the vernacular. The extent of this is likewise unknown, but as distinct from Latin manuscript culture in Nidaros, palpable traces of its vernacular counterpart still exist. Two manuscript fragments, apparently written in Nidaros before c. 1200, are preserved. One consists of three leaves of a book of legends (AM 655 IX 4to; cf. Seip 1955, 87), containing

Table 2. Trondheim runic inscriptions from before c. 1200 — apparently nonsensical

<i>NlyR</i> no.	Museum no.	Transliterated text	Phase
N 870	[N-39592]	— ^a	3
N 859	[N-78941]	urna:poisar unt:rist	4
N 860	[N-78942]	niua·auaft ^b	4
N 861	[N-78943]	×unaek:mhiu·enbepr· ·enb[<m]ep[<r]r	4
N 864	[N-32395]	iurlurukiaikwaitu	4
N 865	[N-37974]	×r?u:irnuhi?????ruarnisr ×irik:ak:iui:kumukis?irtil×	4
N 866	[N-38509]	×urastanrpaanik kari·kral:sbfuyu×	4
N 869	[N-38150]	—]?ifr:lata:ahtuapr:brypn[— —]i:fiartif:iqhankā?[—	4
N 876	[N-33833]	ri[— ri[—	4
N 884	[N-33909]	[coin] ×uininiuqia+ ^b	4
N 863	[N-34071]	kui:n??[—]?i	4–6

^a This is a heavily damaged inscription. It has been tentatively restored by Aslak Liestøl as **entripiristiruna**[—, *Endriði risti rúna*[r], which is possible but undemonstrable. Should Liestøl's interpretation be correct, the inscription would of course no longer be nonsensical.

^b Perhaps merely runelike characters.

parts of a *Plácíðuss saga*, a *Blásiuss saga*, and a *Matheuss saga*. The other is part of a cadastre for St. John's Church in Nidaros (NRA 73; cf. Seip 1955, 88). Both the fragments display linguistic features commonly associated with Nidaros and the Trøndelag region (cf. Hægstad 1899, 12–14; for details about regional features in Old Norse in general, cf. Hagland 2004). The three leaves of the book of legends have been dated by Seip (1955, 87) to about 1150 or somewhat later and have since commonly been considered the oldest extant Norwegian manuscript written in the vernacular. The fragment seems to be copied from an exemplar, the age and origins of which are uncertain. Ultimately these texts are translations from Latin. The very fact, however, that the extant fragment is copied from an exemplar indicates the existence, to some extent at least, of a manuscript culture in Nidaros as early as the middle of the twelfth century — a manuscript culture which implies the use of

Table 3. Objects from Trondheim from before c. 1200 with runelike characters

Museum no.	Inscribed object	Phase
[N-39374]	Fragment of wooden plane	3
[N-93231]	Whittled piece of wood	3
[N-93649]	Piece of wood	3
[N-93773]	Piece of wood	3
[N-64300]	Fragment of bone	6
[N-77614]	Whittled piece of wood	6

Latin as well as the vernacular. By the end of the twelfth century this culture was able, it seems, to create literary texts of its own, not merely undertake translations. *Ágrip*—a short text dealing with the history of the kings of Norway from the late ninth to the early twelfth century—is most probably a product of twelfth-century Nidaros manuscript culture (cf. Driscoll 1995, xi). Beyond that, the extent of literary activity of this kind is difficult to assess. Altogether then, the manuscript literacy of pre-1200 Nidaros has left us with very few concrete traces. Even so, it must be regarded as an indisputable part of life in the city by the time the twelfth century was drawing to a close.

When comparing the corpus of runic inscriptions presented in Tables 1 and 2 with those in the roman alphabet listed in Table 4, certain differences become apparent. First it is worth noticing that with one exception (N816) none of the runic inscriptions found in archaeological contexts older than c. 1200 can with any degree of certainty be determined as Latin or even as attempts at writing in that language. Some of the nonsensical ones might perhaps represent ambitions in that direction, but judging from the transliterations given in Table 2 this does not seem very likely. Apart from the opening words of the Lord's Prayer in line a of N816 the closest we come to Latin in this small corpus is, it seems, the word fragment *–æzur*, or possibly *–æsuz*, in N853 (Table 1). Carved on a decorated bone fragment of what might well be a jewel box, the runes here no doubt denote the final part of a word *tressuz* evidenced as *træzsur* in the apparent sense 'jewel box' in a fourteenth-century charter from Bergen (cf. *Norrøn ordbok*, 441). At the time it was carved this word probably had the status of an assimilated loan in Old Norse.

On the other hand five, possibly six, of the eight non-runic inscriptions (Table 4) are written in Latin. Syrett's no. 103 is the only unambiguously Old Norse one—a gravestone inscribed with the text HER HVILA BON

Table 4. Non-runic inscriptions older than c. 1200

Syrett no.	Type of inscription	Language
[2]	Dedication in chapel	Latin
[3]	Dedication in chapel	Latin
[4]	Dedication in chapel	Latin
[25]	Gravestone	Latin
[80]	Gravestone	Latin
[103]	Gravestone	Old Norse
[112]	Insription on excavated object	Old Norse (?)
[113]	Insription on excavated object	Latin

ENDRIÐA OK LVCIV — *Hér hvíla börn Eindriða ok Lucíu* ‘Here the children of Eindriði and Lucía rest’. Syrett’s no. 112 is a neatly inscribed metal knife-handle, which says ERIC NEDRI. The spelling of the personal name with a final *c* and the uncertain linguistic form and content of the second word might well imply, if not Latin, an intended Latinisation (cf. Syrett 2002, 1:399).

The remaining six inscriptions are all written in Latin: Syrett’s nos. 2, 3, and 4 are chapel and altar dedications in Nidaros cathedral, nos. 25, 80, and 103 (fragments of) gravestones. The first of the three dedication inscriptions dates itself to the year 1161 (Syrett 2002, 1:143). The roman-alphabet texts in Latin are on the whole longer than those in the runic corpus. The runic inscriptions vary from one single rune to seventy-eight (N816) while their roman-alphabet counterparts have from six (Syrett’s no. 113) to 214 characters (Syrett’s no. 2). One feels tempted on the basis of such evidence to conclude that inscriptions written in Latin with the roman alphabet carry more information than the runic examples and could thus be considered to represent a more advanced level of literacy—to be more “literate”. The modest number of preserved non-runic inscriptions and the rather specific nature of the longer texts, however, scarcely allow far-reaching generalisations based on length.

Even if a solid majority of the runic inscriptions convey more or less intelligible messages in the vernacular, and the majority of the non-runic ones bear texts in Latin, there is not a compete correlation between script and language, as we have seen. That is to say, either script can be employed, to a certain extent at least, to write both the vernacular and Latin. Nonetheless, the evidence currently available appears to suggest both a chronological and a functional distribution of some sort between the two scripts as used

in Nidaros prior to c. 1200 for epigraphic purposes. Except on coins there is no evidence at all of the epigraphic use of roman script in the early part of the period dealt with here. The inscriptions we know in the roman alphabet are clearly connected with the Church — on gravestones and in dedications in the main. Only two are found on portable objects comparable to those on which the runic inscriptions are carved — and even one of those is inscribed with the abbreviated form of the *Nomen sacrum* (Syrett's no. 113). Judging from the scanty material we have, then, epigraphic use of the roman alphabet in Nidaros is a phenomenon first and foremost of the latter part of twelfth century and later. The impression of a chronological shift in the use of scripts in Church contexts is strengthened by the knowledge that the only inscribed gravestone that is undeniably older than the mid-twelfth century carries a runic rather than a roman-alphabet inscription.³ It would nevertheless be wrong to think that people stopped using runes in ecclesiastical contexts completely at any given point in the twelfth century. The inscription N816 with the seven first words of the Lord's Prayer in impeccable Latin together with the formulaic carver signature in Old Norse — *Sveinn Auðunarsunr reist rúnar þessar* 'Sveinn son of Auðunn carved these runes' — was made by someone with a modicum of clerical education, we must assume.

On the epigraphic level, then, scripts as well as languages can be shown to have co-existed to a certain extent during the first two centuries of Nidaros's history — two scripts and two languages, that is to say: runes and roman letters, Old Norse and Latin. Use of runes seems to have been fairly common right from the earliest days of the city's history. At some point towards the end of the eleventh or at the beginning of the twelfth century epigraphic use of roman letters begins, first and foremost in Church contexts, it seems. The fact that the roman-alphabet inscriptions are almost exclusively found in or near the cathedral together with the almost total lack of such inscriptions on the portable objects found in the city excavations argues for a functional distribution of the two scripts. This is, of course, something that has been suggested before. But the existence of a *Pater noster* in runes on a portable object and of runic graffiti on the cathedral walls (most likely younger than c. 1200) suggest that this functional distribution should not *per se* be related to Christianity and the Church in an abstract sense, as has been urged by some. On the basis of current evidence it seems more relevant to think of a "monumental" or "memorial" factor associated with the Church as decisive for the choice of what appears to have been the marked epigraphic script

³ Namely N508, containing what seems to be the oldest attested form of the Old Norse personal name *Vilhjálmr* (cf. Hagland 1994, 34–37).

(roman). Whether or not this also has to do with social status of those who made or commissioned these inscriptions is difficult to tell from the evidence adduced here.

As is well known, the co-existence of runes and manuscript literacy has been seen as important in determining certain developments in the medieval *fupark* and runic orthography. The material presented in Table 1 shows a runic inventory beyond the sixteen in the *fupark*. What we see in the inscriptions from phase 3 onwards is the dotted *íss*-rune representing the front unrounded mid vowel /e(:)/ (and /æ(:)/) together with the long-branch *ár*-rune representing /æ/, as it seems (and often in addition /e/). There is no sign of dotted consonant runes, nor do we see geminated runes used to represent long consonants. This is all as is to be expected—entirely according to the book. It is, nevertheless, reassuring to see everything fall into place in a real corpus of runes. If, conversely, we look at the scanty Nidaros manuscript evidence, it is possible to detect features that can be interpreted as the result of contact or interplay with what Terje Spurkland likes to call “runacy”. Thus on one leaf, chosen at random from the fragment AM 655 IX 4to mentioned above (a fragment of *Blasiuss saga*, cf. Kålund 1905, no. 9), a striking uncertainty about how to represent long consonants catches one’s eye, e.g. *aller matto ~ mate han* ‘all must ~ must he’; *ec ~ ecc* ‘I ~ I’; *biart læicc ~ grim læic* ‘brightness ~ cruelty’, etc. Even if instances like these should not be over-interpreted, such variation might be explained as confusion caused by the scribe’s two-script competence. As runologists we are used to looking for the effects of this kind of situation first and foremost on runes and runic writing. It is, though, needless to say, also possible to see the interplay between the scripts from the opposite vantage point.

To conclude: let me point to a possible common ground—in a very tangible sense—for interplay between the two scripts. In Trondheim, as in other places, a corpus of wax tablets—diptychs—has been unearthed, the finest of which are from contexts dated between c. 1175 and c. 1225 (cf. Christophersen 1987, 85)—towards the end of the period under discussion here. We know from elsewhere that tablets such as these were used to convey texts written with roman letters. The Trondheim tablets have marks in the wood that clearly indicate that runes were carved in the wax above. That implies that runes were used for writing much longer texts than the ones we know from the corpus of casual portable objects. It is possible that such tablets were also bearers of texts in roman letters in Trondheim, but that we cannot prove. Nevertheless, the equipment for a very close interplay between the scripts was undeniably available towards the end of the twelfth century.

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