

# RUNIC TRADITION IN ORKNEY: FROM ORPHIR TO THE BELSAIR GUEST HOUSE

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## Introduction

In the early autumn of 1996, Tom Muir, Curator of Tankerness House Museum, Kirkwall, was visiting the Orkney island of Sanday. On a windowsill in his room in the Belsair Guest House, Kettletoft, he noticed a collection of stones — beach pebbles for the most part — left there by a previous guest, a chiropractor from St Albans. cursory examination of this lithic harvest revealed a small piece of sandstone, deeply incised with what appeared to be four or five runic characters. Upon enquiry he learnt that stone and pebbles had been gathered at Whitemill Bay in the north of the island, probably near Whitemill Point (Barnes and Page 1997: 22).

The piece of sandstone measures roughly 12.5 x 5.5 x 4 cm, and shows clear breaks on three faces. The runes, if that is what they are, consist — from left to right — of a fragmentary vertical, an almost complete vertical,  $\mathfrak{N}$ ,  $\mathfrak{Y}$  and a further partial vertical.  $\mathfrak{Y}$  indicates Scandinavian **m** (more plausibly than Anglo-Saxon ‘x’), but no Old Norse word immediately suggests itself. The incisions are weathered, making it unlikely they were carved recently. They are unusually deep for runes, however, the lines of the putative **u** and **m** reaching a depth of 1 cm in places. This might be a fragment of a runic inscription, but it could equally well be part of some other carved object. If the extant piece could be reunited with whatever it broke off from, it is possible we should discover the ‘runes’ are in fact not letters at all.

The circumstances of the find may be thought unusual enough in themselves to warrant uncertainty about an identification of the carving as runic. Even if we accept it was the hand of fate that placed a fragmentary rune-like inscription on the windowsill of a room about to be occupied by the curator of a local museum, we may perhaps legitimately wonder how such a fragment came to be lying on or near the beach at Whitemill Bay — unconnected, apparently, with any Norse site. To query the status of this piece on circumstantial grounds, however, has implications for other parts of the Orkney runic corpus. Several specimens have come to light over the years in circumstances less well documented but seemingly as problematic, even as improbable, as those attending the Belsair find.

I am not here referring to what must clearly be recent carvings: the name *Ingibjörg*, for example, written in medieval Scandinavian runes on one of the standing stones in the Ring of Brogar and on the south wall of Cuween Hill cairn. Since no one seems to have noticed either inscription until a few years ago (Jesch 1990: 13), and a postcard widely available in Orkney features the

name in almost identical form (reproduced from the beginning of Maeshowe No. 9 (cf. Barnes 1994: 95-102)), it is safe to conclude these are modern copies. No obvious model exists for the inscription in older, or possibly Anglo-Saxon, runes recently spotted by Anne Brundle (of Tankerness House Museum) inscribed on a stone in the Broch of Borwick, but, though less prominent than the two renderings of *Ingibjörg*, it must surely have been noticed earlier if it had been there to be noticed. One might also wonder what person of pre-Viking-Age Scandinavian, Continental German or Anglo-Saxon background would have been on the west coast of the Mainland of Orkney carving runes that give no linguistic sense.

While such inscriptions have unanimously been dismissed, others with scarcely a better claim to age have had a kindlier reception in scholarly literature. Judith Jesch (1990: 13-14) reports her discovery in 1989 of four twig-runes<sup>1</sup> on a stone in the east wall of Cuween Hill cairn. Lightly incised and not at all conspicuous, it is by no means impossible these characters were missed by those who excavated the site in 1901 (Charleson 1902: 733-738), and — in the murk of the central chamber — by subsequent visitors. However, the cairn is said to have been completely filled with debris at the time it was excavated, and the entrance walled up, so, as Jesch herself concedes, ‘it . . . seems unlikely . . . the . . . tomb was entered at an earlier period’. She nevertheless allows that the inscription may be medieval on the grounds that the runes are ‘not improbable’ and ‘plausibly executed’, by which I think she means that the number of branches they exhibit on either side of the vertical is within the bounds of the 6:5:5 system (i.e., no more than three on one side, six on the other). She also implies that the use of cryptic runes can of itself be taken as an indication of authenticity, stressing that the occurrence of such characters in modern inscriptions is rare.

I think it highly unlikely myself, given the evidence of a cairn filled to the top, that anyone forced their way into Cuween during the Norse period in Orkney — and had they done, we would surely on the evidence of Maeshowe have expected to find more signs of activity than four small twig-runes with no obvious meaning. It may be true in general that modern rune writers eschew twig-runes, although as a series of variations on a single pattern they are easier than plain runes for the uninitiated to carve.

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1. Twig-runes are one of several related manifestations of a runic cipher based on a division of the *fupark* into three groups. In Viking-Age and medieval Scandinavian tradition, where the *fupark* consists of 16 characters, the division is normally 6:5:5, i.e., **f u þ ã / o r k : h n i a s : t b m l y / R**. Twig-runes are composed by arranging branches on either side of a vertical, the number on one side denoting the group and on the other position within the group. Thus, for example, Ψ will normally stand for group 2, rune 1, i.e. **h**. To add to the puzzle, the groups are numbered in reverse order, **t b m l y / R** counting as 1, **f u þ ã / o r k** as 3.

Special circumstances obtain in Orkney, however. Since its opening in 1861 Maeshowe has provided a rare display of twig-rune versatility. What more natural than that the admiring visitor to the cairn should have felt the urge to imitate?

Some idea of the anomalous position of twig-rune inscriptions in Orkney can be obtained from comparison with the finds from Bergen, Norway. There of some 600 runic artefacts just thirteen (slightly over 2%) employ the 6:5:5 runic cipher, though several give it more sophisticated expression than the simple vertical with branches on either side (Liestøl 1964: especially 16-18). The percentage of 6:5:5-cipher inscriptions from other parts of Scandinavia nowhere seems greatly to exceed that attained in Bergen, though the samples from many areas are of course much smaller. In Orkney by contrast (discounting Maeshowe, largely or wholly the work of non-Orcadians, cf. Barnes 1994) 6 of 19 inscriptions (or 8 of 21 — depending on what is admitted to the corpus) consist of or contain basic vertical-and-branches twig-runes. Clearly there is something here that needs explaining.

We may start by examining the Orkney twig-rune inscriptions more closely and critically than has been done previously. The objects on which the runes are carved, the find reports, the possible context and meaning of the writing — all need to be scrutinised. Thereafter the plain-rune inscriptions can be brought into the discussion. From this, I hope, will emerge a clearer and more soundly-based picture of runic tradition in Orkney than has existed hitherto.

### **Orkney twig-rune inscriptions**

OR 1<sup>2</sup> is a series of runic or rune-like carvings on a steatite disc measuring c. 6 cm in diameter. According to Magnus Olsen (1954: 166), who received the information from W. G. Collingwood in November 1913, the object was found in 'a broch called Staker-row' (Stackrue). The broch, at the northern end of the Loch of Stenness, was at some point largely destroyed by the building of a road. Collingwood had learnt of the disc from W. Balfour Stewart, whose knowledge of its provenance derived from a note by W. G. T. Watt of Skail House, dated May 12<sup>th</sup> 1881. Watt himself had obtained the disc from the man on whose land the broch had once stood. Olsen's published account is contradicted by the original of a letter Collingwood wrote to him on 'Oct. 2. 1913' (preserved in Runearkivet, Oslo), which states that 'Professor Boyd Dawkins' found the disc 'lately in digging the broch and weems of Skara'. Presumably Collingwood's November missive to Olsen, apparently no longer extant, corrected the earlier one.

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2. I follow the numbering system employed in Barnes 1992, with additions to bring the list up to date. See '**Inscriptions discussed**' at the end of this chapter.

The runic or rune-like carvings on the disc clearly can have no connection with pre-Norse civilisation in Orkney. Whether we accept the second or fourth-hand account of the discovery or reject both as unreliable thus has little direct bearing on our understanding of the inscription. The uncertain provenance does nothing, however, to lessen general bewilderment about how it is to be interpreted. A deeply cut cross divides one of the surfaces into quadrants, within which are incised various symbols: an apparent **r** in one, perhaps **kob** in another, the possible twig-rune 3/1 (**f**) followed by **a** in a third, and in the fourth the bind-rune **ol** or another possible twig-rune 2/1 (**h**) followed by **n**. According to Liestøl (1984: 232), these are runes ‘of a type frustratingly commonplace in Norway’. They certainly look more like runes than anything else, even though precise identification is impossible in most cases, but they are only ‘commonplace’ in the sense that they do not easily lend themselves to interpretation; the inscription as a whole is unlike anything to be found in *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer* (NlyR).

OR 1 Stackrue is thus a unique object of uncertain provenance incised with eight runes or rune-like symbols, plain and twig, bearing no obvious message. While clearly this is not of itself evidence of modern origin, there is perhaps enough to arouse suspicion. The twig-runes that in another context might argue for authenticity provoke added doubt because of their startling frequency in Orkney. If the carving is indeed medieval, we must at least concede it was made by someone unskilled in writing runes. Possibly that is why its purpose is unclear — if it ever had a clear purpose in the first place.

The assortment of runes or rune-like symbols that make up OR 2 are found, together with other carvings, on the slab of Orkney flagstone that now forms the lintel over the entrance to the single side-chamber of Unstan cairn. None of the carvings seem to have been noticed during the excavation of Unstan in 1884 (Clouston 1885), but some of the runes or rune-like symbols are reported in *RC*<sup>3</sup> in the following terms:

During the preservation operations [1934] Mr. Baird, of H. M. Office of Works’ staff, found a set of six rune-like characters 2 in. high on a fallen slab that had not been replaced when the monument was visited [1928 and 1934]. The first character is the most distinct and resembles a twig rune. On the edge of the same stone is another incised mark (*RC*: 317).

The slab must have been raised to its present position as part of the ‘preservation operations’, although *RC* does not make this entirely clear, merely noting that ‘the lintel . . . has been restored by H. M. Office of Works’ (*RC*: 317).

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3. *RC = The Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland. Twelfth Report with an Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Orkney and Shetland 2: Inventory of Orkney* (1946). Edinburgh.

The runes, if that is what they are, consist of long-branch **n** followed by a non-runic symbol, then **ukf**, and, roughly 20 cm below, a possible twig-rune (most likely **2/3 i**). This latter is accompanied by five or six characters that might charitably be described as rune-like.

It is hard to derive much sense from either sequence, unless **ukf** represents the incomplete beginning of a confused *fupark*. This need not worry us unduly, however, since it is unlikely that any of the characters were in existence before the excavation of the cairn in 1884. Most are fairly deeply incised and stand out in such a way it is scarcely conceivable they could have been overlooked by the excavators had they been there for them to see. The **n ukf** sequence and most of the non-runic carvings found on the slab are quite clearly of modern origin. They are not mentioned in *RC* or the relevant field notebook underlying the published account. Indeed, the notebook contains a rough sketch of 'the thin end of the stone' (the section now to the left of the 'set of six rune-like characters' recognised in 1934) in which all that can be seen are a straight and a wavy line and a non-runic symbol. The picture of a bird and the **n ukf** 'runes' (twigs or branches connected with the bird?) now adorning this area must have been added subsequently. Even later than these, according to learned opinion, is the erroneous announcement 'PICTISH MARKS', done in roman capitals to the left of and at right-angles to the bird. And as if that were not enough, someone has recently (post 1995) scrawled over the rune-like sequence noted in 1934.

The Ring of Brogar has yielded two runic inscriptions generally treated as authentic. The third standing stone clockwise from the north-west crossing (cf. *RC*: 299-300) bears OR 4 Brogar I. The inscription has five characters: four twig-runes, most probably **2/2 4/3 3/2 2/2**, and between the first and second of these a plain **r** or **u**; underneath the third rune is a cross. OR 5 Brogar II consists of a single twig-rune **3/4** with cross beneath. The two symbols were scratched onto a loose piece of stone found in the south-western area of the circle in 1908 and subsequently lost. For our knowledge of this piece we have to rely on the account published by Albany Major in 1909 (1909a; 1909b) and the accompanying photograph. OR 4 came to light in 1906 when preservation work at the circle revealed what was thought to be the upper portion of stone no. 3 (now placed back to back with the stump) buried in the ground. After the stone had lain exposed for a time and 'wind and rain had washed its surface' (Spence 1907-8: 253), a local farmer spotted the runes.

The reading of OR 4 is difficult, not least because the shape of the **r** or **u** indicates a left-to-right direction, while the third character with three branches on the right of its vertical and four on the left suggests the opposite. The shape of the **r** or **u** weighs more heavily since although the runic group seems always to be marked before position within it (thus yielding a reading **3/4** — group 3, rune 4 — for the third character rather than **4/3**), right-to-left direction in cryptic

inscriptions is extremely rare, only one certain example so far having been discovered (cf. Barnes 1997). Reading from left to right we get **nroun** or **nuoun**, neither of which are Norse words. Magnus Olsen (1907-8: 258-259), rejecting the faint upper right twig of the rightmost rune and proceeding right to left against the normal direction in cryptic inscriptions, read **biorn**, but even if both these liberties are allowed, there is still the difficulty that the plain **r** or **u** faces right. *RC* observes laconically: ‘No satisfactory reading of the runes has yet been proposed’ (*RC*: 300).

It is hard to say whether OR 4 is a medieval or a modern carving. There are medieval parallels from Norway, of which the closest is Rødven kirke I (*Eysteinn reist* written in the 6:5:5 cipher with plain runes here and there, *NIyR* IV: 270-271), but these are chiefly from ecclesiastical contexts. Crucial is the length of time the piece of stone carrying the inscription had lain in the ground before it was exposed in 1906. The report of the finding suggests it may have been there some while: ‘the upper portion [of the upright] . . . had lain so long on the soft heath as to get quite buried beneath it’ (Spence 1907-8: 252-253). I doubt, though, whether the gradual inhumation envisaged is wholly incompatible with a date for the inscription sometime in the 1860s or 1870s, after the opening of Maeshowe. The two runes farthest to the right have suffered considerable weathering, but the other three are remarkably clear, as is the cross. Judging by the state of more recent inscriptions in the Ring of Brogar, the four latter symbols, at least, cannot have been exposed to wind and weather for a great length of time. If they are medieval in origin they must either have been covered up soon after they were carved, or have been re-cut in modern times.

About OR 5 nothing is certain. The  $\frac{3}{4}$  twig-rune looks very fresh in the published photograph, but Major’s report notes:

Unfortunately, before the stone came into safe custody, someone had gone over the lines with a pointed instrument, and in doing so had prolonged the lowest right-hand branch of the rune by nearly half-an-inch (Major 1909a: 49; 1909b: 45).

This perhaps indicates that the carving did not appear entirely fresh when Major first saw it, but it hardly precludes a modern genesis.

Few inscriptions consisting of a single twig-rune are to be found in Scandinavia, and the one or two that do exist seem to be copies by unpractised hands (thus Rødven kirke II repeats one of the twig-runes in Rødven kirke I, while Borgund VII, with four twigs on either side of the vertical, shows ignorance of the total number of groups; *NIyR* IV: 160, 270-272). Imitation is possibly the key to OR 5. Magnus Olsen, quoted by Major (1909b: 46), surmised that  $\frac{3}{4}$  **o** might be ‘the first rune in a name, for example “Olaf”’, and notes that OR 5 would then parallel OR 4 in presenting ‘a man’s name over a cross’. The explanation may be simpler. OR 4 contains a twig-rune of

the form 4/3. Could not someone have scratched a mirror-image copy of that rune and the cross beneath it onto a loose stone found lying in or near the Ring? Such a person might well also have been into Maeshowe and gained inspiration from the twig-runes and crosses there.

As improbable a runic artefact as OR 5 is OR 7: three twig-runes, one at some distance from the other two, and scratches of various shapes and sizes occupying one face of a block of 'Old Red Sandstone'. The stone, measuring roughly 41 x 14 x 10 cm, was found 'in a wall of a field at Brodgar [farm]' by James Richardson, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, who presented it in 1927 to the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh (*PSAS* LXII 1928: 8, 14). The runes make little sense, however read, and are most reasonably interpreted as the product of an unskilled doodler. Whether such a person is to be viewed as medieval or modern is impossible to decide given the almost total lack of pointers. Traces of lichen can be seen in some of the grooves of the inscription, but lichen grows quickly enough. Inscriptions like OR 7 are virtually unknown in Scandinavia. The nearest we seem to get is Tanberg IV, a loose stone covered with graffiti, a few of which bear a resemblance to twig-runes (*NjyR* II: 18-23). It is certainly worth stressing that Brogar farm is only a mile or so distant from Maeshowe, and adjacent to the Ring of Brogar where the twig-rune inscriptions OR 4 and 5 were discovered.

Even more dubious than OR 7 is the inscription on the similar-looking block of stone (probably also sandstone) 'found near south shore of the Loch of Stenness' and donated to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in 1931 (*PSAS* LXVI 1932: 13, 17). The block measures 29 x 19 x 15 cm and bears what appear to be two twig-runes as well as indeterminate cuts and scratches. Both characters are carved on the same surface, but one is at right-angles to the other and some distance separates them. If these were ever intended as twig-runes, they were carved by an incompetent. With a little good will one of them might be read as a vertical with four or five left and two right branches, but the other has five branches on the left and six or seven on the right — too many to be an example of the 6:5:5 cipher. This inscription may for all I know be medieval, though the evidence is no stronger than in the case of OR 7, but it can hardly be classed as runic, and is omitted from my 1992 classification.

The sizeable piece of Orkney flagstone bearing OR 13 (132 x 89 cm and 3-5 cm thick) apparently first attracted attention in 1963 while a group of Ancient Monuments workmen were repairing the sea wall at Skara Brae. A member of the team 'noticed that a slab had markings on one face'. The markings do not appear to have excited much interest, for according to reports, the slab was split into two thinner pieces and used for paving at Skara Brae, whereby the marked surface came to lie face down. In 1982 a search was instituted and OR 13 found. It seems reasonably assured that the

1963 and 1982 discoveries involved one and the same inscription, but the only published account of the goings-on does not confirm this in so many words (cf. Ashmore and Johnsen 1984: especially 183).

The stones used for the 1963 works at Skara Brae were sought in a number of different places nearby, possibly including a cliff site where a Viking cist was discovered in 1888. In the opinion of a surviving member of the work squad, however, the piece carrying OR 13 was 'most likely to have been one of those which eroded out of the sands around Skara Brae during the storm which necessitated rebuilding of the sea wall' (Ashmore and Johnsen 1984: 183).

The inscription is made up of six characters, arranged in two groups of three, one above the other. The upper group comprises twig-runes with the values  $2/3$ ,  $1/2$  and  $2/4$ , almost certainly **iba**, the lower group what appear to be three plain **rs**, the middle one misshapen so that it resembles somewhat a roman 'K'. Ashmore and Johnsen (1984: 185) take a tentative step towards interpretation with the suggestion that the six runes form a single text, perhaps 'the common name Ivarr followed by two unintelligible runes which are shortenings of one or two words'. This is problematic, not only because **b** is a very unlikely way of writing historical [w], but also because comparative evidence for the kind of violent abbreviation envisaged is patchy and often uncertain.<sup>4</sup>

For my own part I find it very difficult to discern a linguistic message in OR 13. In that respect it is like all the other Orkney twig-rune inscriptions (the two in Maeshowe excepted). Like several of these inscriptions also, it is context-free, which makes the intention behind it even harder to gauge. Scandinavia yields little in the way of comparative material: largish slabs of stone appearing out of nowhere with a few twig-runes, a few plain runes and no obvious meaning are not the common currency of runic tradition.

It is one thing to note the oddity of OR 13, another to account for it. Are we here — and with regard to Orkney twig-rune inscriptions in general — dealing with some kind of local cipher we do not understand? Or did Orcadian rune masters encourage the use of twig-runes for the carving of meaningless inscriptions? I suspect the answer to both questions is 'no'. More probably OR 13 is another example of doodling — a few characters scrawled for fun — though the layout looks fairly deliberate and the size of stone chosen for the purpose is unusual. Unfortunately this is not a conclusion that helps much in determining whether the carving is medieval or modern. It serves rather to underline the lack of diagnostic features that could be called in evidence. In favour of age is the hunch that the stone emerged from the sand and the

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4. Cf., e.g., Jacobsen and Moltke 1941-2: 1047-1049; the references under 'forkortninger' in *NlyR* V: 291, especially to III: 241.

concomitant assumption that it had lain there a while before exposure. In favour of a modern genesis is the sheer oddity of the inscription measured against runic traditions as we know them from elsewhere — though these can vary considerably (contrast, for example, Man and neighbouring Dublin).

It is difficult to gauge how far rune carvers in Orkney might have deviated from what we have come to expect. Before concluding that this and other of the twig-rune inscriptions here examined are modern, it behoves us to delve a little further in search of local peculiarities. Nearby Shetland, it is worth noting, seems firmly within the mainstream. Of the seven inscriptions so far discovered there — all in plain runes — one is on a raised memorial stone, three others are on fragments of apparently similar type, and one belongs to a medieval grave slab. The purpose of the remaining two cannot be determined, but neither looks particularly out of the ordinary (Barnes 1992; forthcoming).

### **Orkney plain-rune inscriptions**

The Orkney plain-rune material is more varied than that of Shetland. Maeshowe apart (which I ignore on the grounds that most or all of its inscriptions were carved by non-Orcadians), we have the following: five fragments that, with differing degrees of plausibility, might be said to come from raised memorial stones (OR 8, 9, 16, 17, 18); three stones with what appear to be runic graffiti (OR 6, 10, 14); inscriptions on a spindle whorl (OR 3); a bear's (previously thought to be a seal's) tooth (OR 11); a bone pin (OR 12); and finally, both from the same context, a piece of bone with a graffito and various slivers of bone sporting odd runic characters or the remains thereof (OR 15, 19).

The find circumstances of these artefacts vary greatly. OR 11, 12, 14, 15 and 19 were discovered during controlled excavations, the bear's tooth on the Brough of Birsay in the late 1930s, the bone pin at Westness, Rousay, in the 1970s, the stone at Tuquoy, Westray, in the 1980s, and the bone pieces at Orphir, also in the 1980s (Curle 1982: especially 59, 101; Owen and McKinnell 1989; Batey 1991; Barnes and Page 1997: 22-23).

The probable memorial stone fragments OR 17 and 18 were chance finds, from Sanday and Skail (Mainland) respectively, but being recent, there are detailed reports in both cases (Barnes and Page 1995: 12; 1997: 21).

OR 6, a confused assemblage of graffiti, was also a chance discovery, made by Hugh Marwick in the ruined church on Birsay during his first visit to the Broch in 1921 (Marwick 1922: 67-68; Dickins 1966-9: 7). Two very fragmentary pieces of what may have been raised memorial stones, OR 8 and 9, also come from the Broch, but regarding their finding we have little more than the casual note in *RC*: 'Two other runic inscriptions [other than OR 6] came to light here in 1934 during excavations carried out by H. M. Office of Works' (*RC*: 36). A further piece, OR 16, similar in appearance to OR 8 and 9,

is located in the wall of the ruined church on Birsay. The earliest clear reference I can find to this is in the field notebook of Anders Bæksted, who visited the site in 1955. Radford (1959: 18) indicates that more than two ‘fragments of Runic inscriptions’ were found ‘in the course of clearing the Cemetery area’ (presumably in 1934), but it seems unlikely that any of these would have been rebuilt into the wall of the church.

Even less is known about the circumstances in which OR 10 came to light. This fragmentary graffito on a small block of stone broken at both ends comes from Orphir. There is no find report, but a letter dated 5.12.1980 (preserved in Runearkivet, Oslo) to Aslak Liestøl from the then Orkney Archaeologist, Raymond Lamb, makes it plausible the stone was discovered in 1953 and associates it with the medieval round church at Orphir.

Finally we have the spindle whorl inscription, OR 3, for which there is likewise no find report. All we learn is that the whorl was obtained in Stromness by Malcolm Mackenzie Charleson during a visit to Orkney in 1896, and that it was ‘said to have been found in Shetland’ (Charleson 1898: 320-321).

There is no reason, I think, to harbour serious doubts about the medieval origin of any of these plain-rune pieces. The authenticity of those found during archaeological excavations seems secure. Even though there does not appear to be a find report for the Birsay fragments OR 8 and 9, the fact that they are on stones split longitudinally with only the lower parts of the runes remaining argues against a modern origin. The same applies to the similar-looking third Birsay fragment, OR 16.

The fragmentary nature and worn appearance of OR 17 and 18, their apparent status as pieces of raised memorial stones, and the evidence of the find reports all point to a Viking-Age or early medieval genesis. OR 3 is likewise considerably knocked about, presumably from frequent use, which implies the runes were engraved on the whorl before it was used in spinning.

The Orphir graffito, OR 10, could be modern, but the runes are more than casual scratches and made by someone quite at home with runic script. Moreover, the meaning that with a little good will might be extracted from the inscription does not appear to derive from any model available to the modern carver (cf. Hagland 1993).

Only the Birsay graffiti, OR 6, seem mildly suspect, partly because of uncertainty about the provenance of the stone on which they are carved, partly because of the haphazard nature of the carvings. If the stone had been part of the church fabric in the Middle Ages, we would first and foremost have expected the expression of recognisable religious sentiments. What we find is a surface that begins with an almost blank section where an inscription may once have stood, continues with a group of rune-like characters and ends with a sequence of runes which seems to contain the name *Filippus* and a garbled rendering of the word *rīnar*. On the other hand, there are Scandinavian

churches that contain material not wholly unlike this, though usually in wood (e.g. Lom, *NlyR* I: 77-101), and it is hard to see why anyone in modern times should have adorned a stone with rune-like signs and a barely comprehensible runic inscription — and then placed it in the church wall in such a position that the writing was concealed from public view, which is how Marwick found it.

## **Conclusion**

It seems a reasonable pedigree can be established for all, or virtually all, the plain-rune inscriptions from Orkney. In this they contrast markedly with their twig-rune counterparts. The Belsair Guest House find, despite the curious circumstances in which it came to light, ought on that showing to be a fragment of a Viking-Age or medieval runic carving. As the foregoing survey has demonstrated, however, there are other important factors to be taken into account. Foremost among these is context, and for that a detailed and reliable find report and a recognisable type of inscription are crucial. Here Belsair is at the opposite pole from inscriptions like those found as part of the Orphir excavations. In appearance the Orphir bone slivers and the Belsair stone have much in common: fragments too small to suggest even a word, let alone a text. But the Orphir bones come from the controlled excavation of a well-known Norse site, which has also yielded up a longer inscription, OR 15. The Orphir graffito, OR 10, is possibly from the same milieu, and there are further possible indications of runic activity in the immediate area (Barnes and Page 1997: 23). Belsair lacks any of this corroborative evidence, and one comes back to the question posed at the outset: What are we to make of a small piece of stone incised with a few vertical and oblique lines compatible with runes, about which we know nothing other than that it was found lying on the windowsill of a guest house on Sanday and was said to have been picked up on a nearby beach?

The current discussion has probably not brought us much closer to an answer, but it has drawn attention to some of the problems surrounding the runic material from Orkney, and will thus, I hope, have helped foster a more critical attitude towards this often puzzling corpus.

### Inscriptions discussed (in transliteration)

OR = Orkney. ( ) = uncertain character. \* = unreadable but countable character. ... = unreadable and uncountable characters. = bind-rune. ] = break at beginning of extant inscription. [ = break at end of extant inscription. Divisions within individual inscriptions are as indicated (see also the descriptions in the text).

OR 1	Stackrue	<b>r   k(ōþ)   3/1 a   (ol)n</b>
OR 2	Unstan	<b>(n ukf) (2/3 p)i*ii</b>
OR 3	Orkney	<b>**ka***r(r)is*run**</b>
OR 4	Brogar I	<b>2/2 (r) 4/3 3/2 2/2</b>
OR 5	Brogar II	<b>3/4</b>
OR 6	Birsay I	rune-like symbols, then: <b>filibusranru</b>
OR 7	Brogar farm	<b>2/3 1/3 (1/3)</b>
OR 8	Birsay II	lower half of fragment (illegible)
OR 9	Birsay III	bottom part of fragment (illegible)
OR 10	Orphir I	<b>ikirkirkiakōþ(li)ufs[</b>
OR 11	Birsay IV	<b>*uþork*</b>
OR 12	Westness	<b>aaa</b>
OR 13	Skara Brae	<b>2/3 1/2 2/4 r*r</b>
OR 14	Tuquoy	<b>þorst**n*inarssun:ræist:runarþ*sar</b>
OR 15	Orphir II	<b>]*(t)a·bain:uas·i*(u)**[</b>
OR 16	Birsay V	?bottom part of fragment (illegible)
OR 17	Isegarth	<b>]n*in:osk(a) **:(:)r[</b>
OR 18	Skaill	<b>A: þurfin:r*****:**n*:**...[ B: 16-18 verticals, one or two (k)s and (r)s among them</b>
OR 19	Orphir III	<b>**** (ss)r, (o) or (f), and a few individual verticals</b>
Loch of Stenness		<b>(5/2 5/7)</b>
Cuween Hill		<b>3/1 (3/1 1/4 3/1)</b>
Belsair		<b>](**um*)[</b>

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