To twig or not to twig: Secret Runes in the British Isles

The existence of runic cryptography in has long been recognised by runologists: numerous epigraphical examples have been found in Scandinavia, with the Rök-stone as the prime example, and René Derolez demonstrated different types of runic codes among the Continental *runica manuscripta*. In the British Isles, at first sight, there appears to have been less interest in this phenomenon, with Hackness in North Yorkshire and the Orkney islands being the only places to have produced epigraphical examples and London, British Library, Stowe MS 57 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 572 as the sole two manuscript representatives. In all four of these instances, twig runes are shown, yet they are geographically and chronologically disparate. The manuscripts were likely written in the South, but the carvings are situated in the North. The Hackness cross and Bodleian MS 572 have both been dated to the ninth century, whereas Stowe MS 57 and the Maeshowe twig runes, for instance, can be dated to the twelfth. In this paper I will be examining all four cases and determine if they are simply the result of a local interest and should be considered in isolation, or if it is possible to establish a relation between them.

Aya Van Renterghem

Centre for the Study of the Viking Age  
University of Nottingham