Jan Ragnar Hagland:

**The Corpus of Runic Inscriptions from Orkney and Shetland and the Notion of ‘Runic Literacy’.**

A certain amount of runic inscriptions has, over the years, been discovered in Orkney and Shetland, and elsewhere on the British Isles for that matter. It seems pertinent then in these Northern Isles to count on a certain degree of ‘runic literacy’. This is, however, a notion of modern times and not very precisely defined as a term. The present proposal will, nonetheless, be an attempt at approaching the difficult question of how and to what extent runic script was used in these islands from the Viking Age onwards, into high and late medieval times. This simple, or perhaps even simplistic, demarcation – ‘how and to what extent’ – shall in this proposed attempt serve as a working definition for the term ‘runic literacy’.

As a basis for considerations along the lines suggested above, we need access to the corpus of inscriptions from these islands known to us so far. We are, in that respect, fortunate to have the corpus established by Barnes and Page (2006, 117–214) as a point of departure: BP list seven inscriptions from Shetland and 19 from Orkney[[1]](#footnote-1), the latter not including some thirty in Maeshowe published by Barnes in 1994. As the Maeshowe inscriptions appear to constitute a separate case, they will be treated accordingly in the contribution herewith proposed.

Even so, and even if the numbers are low, there is a discrepancy in size between the Shetland and the Orkney corpuses of runic inscriptions as we known them at present. In addition the new finds after 2006, presented e. g. in the call for papers to the planned gathering, contribute to an impression of somewhat more active runic communities in Orkney than in Shetland. The proposed contribution will elaborate on this.

What then, if anything, can the preserved corpus of inscriptions tell us about runic literacy in the islands that interests us here? Answers to those questions depend, of course, on several aspects of the preserved material. At first sight the sources we have got do not tell us very much. They tell us that runic script was known and used for a certain variety of purposes that cannot easily be determined any further. The main reason for this is that a great majority of the scanty source material we have, is either impossible to read and/or is not giving much linguistic sense, if any at all. This and other challenges will be further discussed within the framework of the present proposal.

1. Barnes, Michael P. and R. I. Page. 2006. *The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain*. Uppsala = Runrön 19. They (p. 340) suggest that †**OR 2 Unstan** “should, we think, be omitted from the corpus”. Their abbreviation and numbering system (**SH** and **OR** + number) will be kept in the proposed presentation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)