

The RUNES of BERGEN

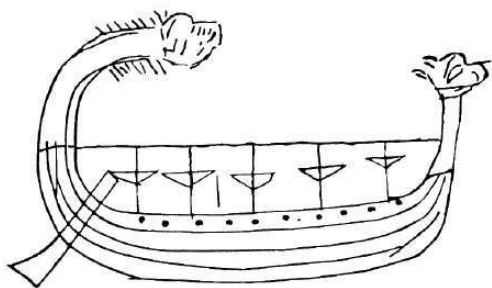
VOICES from the MIDDLE AGES

ASLAK LIESTØL

IN JULY, 1955, a disastrous fire swept through a section of the waterfront in Bergen, Norway, destroying nearly half of the ancient district known as "Bryggen." This area is at the heart of the city and has a history reaching far back into the Hanseatic period of the late Middle Ages, when Bergen was one of the most important trading centers and seaports of western Europe. Following the fire, archaeological exploration was begun on the site, and the work of excavation has been carried on ever since, bringing to light many unexpected and important finds. Among the most interesting are some five hundred runic inscriptions—the largest collection ever found.

This discovery has not only yielded insight into the history of Bergen and the life of the Middle Ages, but has resulted in a broader knowledge of runic writing and its various uses than was heretofore possible.

Below and above are Viking carvings from the thirteenth century, depicting ships.



Of particular interest to Minnesotans is the fact that among the runes found were many dating from the mid-fourteenth century—the alleged period of the Kensington inscription. Because of this, and because of the increased interest in early Viking contacts with the New World, the Minnesota Historical Society invited Aslak Liestøl, chief curator of the University Museum of National Antiquities in Oslo, to deliver the McKnight lecture at the society's 117th annual meeting on April 28.¹ Mr. Liestøl has written and lectured widely on runology and has made a particular study of the inscriptions found in Bergen. He is probably the world's foremost living runic expert.

At the conclusion of his paper, which is here presented, Mr. Liestøl made a statement regarding the Kensington inscription. This was based mainly upon previous study, although during his visit to Minnesota he also made a personal examination of the rune stone. The statement is printed in *Minnesota History* not as representing the position of the society, but as one more chapter in the fascinating history of the Kensington controversy. Ed.

WHEN CRUSADERS bound for the Holy Land gathered in the North before joining Richard Coeur de Lion on the Third

¹ Mr. Liestøl's trip to this country was made possible by Pan American World Airways.

Crusade, one of them gave this firsthand description — in Latin — of the city of Bergen:

"Its eminent power and wealth make Bergen the most famed city of the realm. Its ornament is a royal castle, its glory the relics of holy virgins: Saint Sunniva is enshrined in the cathedral. The city is populous, with convents and monasteries. Stockfish they call *skrei*, and its quantities defy description. Ships and people from all parts foregather here in great numbers: from Iceland, Greenland, England, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Gotland, and other lands too numerous to mention. There is plenty of wine and honey, of wheat and fine stuffs, also much silver and other goods for sale. And trade of all kinds is passing brisk.

"But in all cities of this realm the vice of constant drunkenness is deep-rooted and often leads to breaches of order. Sometimes even serious men are by it tempted to behave in the worst way, and crimes are held of no more account than jests and sport."²

In 1191 Bergen was a metropolis of the North and capital of Norway, which in the Middle Ages included the Isle of Man, the Hebrides, Orkney, Shetland, the Faeroes, Iceland, and Greenland. The brisk western and southern trade of the Viking age had started this success story, for Bergen lay on that long, sheltered sea route among the islands of the coast, "the way to the North," which gave Norway its name.

Stockfish (dried cod) was all-important. It came from the great fisheries of the North, and southern merchants would barter their wares for it. Grain — north-German rye, in particular — was especially sought after in exchange. Wine, it seems, also arrived and was certainly to the taste of the Norwegians. The crusaders themselves were not saintly enough to resist its temptations. Kings before this time and after tried to end the wine trade — mostly in the hands of German merchants — but their efforts were unavailing. Despite royal opposition, the Germans played an ever-increasing part in trade. In

the fourteenth century they began to settle in Bergen, and before long they completely controlled the fish trade. That was in the heyday of the Hanse. The eastern shore of Bergen harbor came to be known as German Bryggen. Centuries after the Hanseatic monopoly had been broken, the houses of these German merchants still stood, a unique memorial to this strange period in Norwegian history.

IN THE early summer of 1955 the alarm sounded over Bergen: Bryggen was on fire. This was the first conflagration in more than 250 years, but it was actually the eighth time the district had been visited by fire. Bryggen burned in 1170, 1198, 1248, 1332, 1413, 1476, and again in 1702. These dates are important to the archaeologist. The excavations carried out in the past eleven years on the site of this recent fire show that each time the city was burned down it rose anew from and on the ashes. Thus the ground level rose, and underneath are horizontal strata sharply divided by thick layers of charcoal. The excavations have also revealed that every time the city was rebuilt the same type of house was built on the same site. The houses of today, that is, are pretty well unchanged in type from those built there eight hundred years ago.

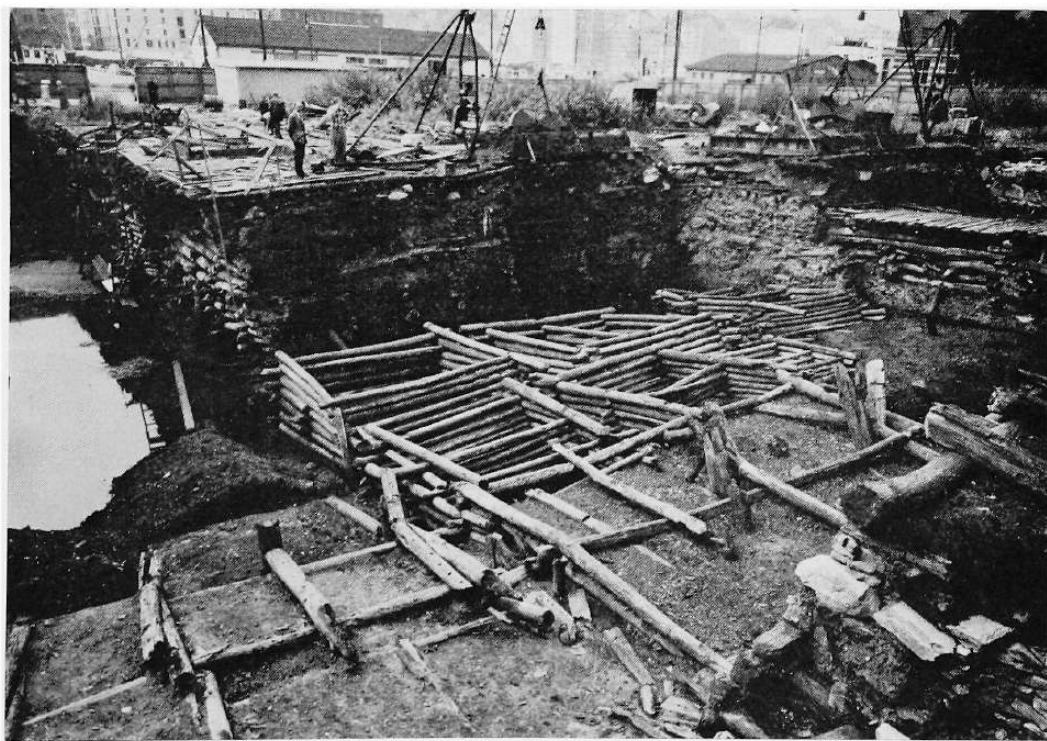
A great deal of rubbish accumulated in the city through the ages; in some places the fill reaches a depth of almost forty feet. In this fill, hermetically preserved in rubbish, as it were, are enormous quantities of building remains and all kinds of objects connected with trade and with everyday life from the beginning, almost, of the Middle Ages down to the present time. Parts of ships have turned up. They add considerably to our knowledge of the development of shipbuilding in medieval Europe. The 300,000 lesser objects which have so far appeared include much material of interest

² *Historia de profectione Danorum in Hierosolimam*, Chapter 11 (*Scriptores minores historiae Danicae medii aevi* II — Copenhagen, 1922). The quoted passage was translated by the author.



Above: Part of an old timber wharf excavated in Bryggen. It dates from about 1200.

Below: A section of the excavation showing a bulwark for houses and quays. 1200.



to students of pottery; leather chasing and wood carving are likewise well represented.

All these things speak a kind of language, but it is a silent one. We are fortunate indeed in having — almost literally — voices, too, in the form of some five hundred runic inscriptions that have come to light.

Bergen offers unusually good opportunities for dating, and thus it has been possible to place each inscription in its historical context. They fill in gaps in our picture of how the people lived; they speak of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Most of the inscriptions arose from everyday life, and they shed light on some very personal situations and extremely private thoughts and opinions.

They appear on objects of many kinds, mostly wooden. Not a single inscription on metal has been found. In fact, very little metal of any kind has been found in Bergen. The longest inscriptions — and the most interesting — appear on wooden sticks especially made for the purpose. The people

*A hand-decorated shoe from the
thirteenth century*



called them *runakefli*. There are many shorter inscriptions also. Some were intended to safeguard the right of ownership to tools or other articles, such as shoes, handles, bone needles, ferrules, and so on. Turned bowls of wood, plates, buckets — even clay vessels — have some runes. These are probably meant to protect the contents from evil spirits.

Many of the inscriptions are in a poor state of preservation and very difficult to read. Some were damaged or intentionally destroyed in the past. Many of the sticks, for instance, were broken before they were thrown away — much as we tear up a letter before throwing it into the wastepaper basket. Other inscriptions have been worn away by wind and weather. This damage is also likely to be ancient, dating from a time when the sticks were exposed amid the rubbish on one of the refuse heaps around the city. But although many of the inscriptions are now mere fragments, there are a number of interesting ones. Some examples will illustrate the various groups into which they may be divided.³

FEW THINGS are so cheap that people will not take some little trouble to maintain their ownership, and one way of doing this is to write one's name on the object. Many inscriptions of this type have been found — among them the decorated front portion of a walrus skull, with runes giving the owner's name: "John owns." The skull itself probably never was valuable; the value lay in the great tusks. Another example is the handle of a great key with the inscription, "Gyrdr owns the key." One wonders about Gyrdr's wisdom in telling whoever might find the key what lock it fitted.

A particular type of ownership inscription is characteristic of Bergen — small wooden sticks of various shapes and sizes which served as labels. Some of the tie-on variety

³ Transliterations of all the runic texts quoted here have been supplied by Mr. Liestøl and are on file in the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*



*A runic "letter," addressed by one Thorer Fair to his business partner,
Havgrim, in Bergen, about 1330*

have a hole or a narrow neck where the string could be attached. Others were meant to be stuck into a consignment of goods — stockfish, meat, or the like — and were commonly shaped like arrowheads, many with barbs which often broke when the tags were removed. There are about a hundred of these labels, most of them giving just the owner's name: "Arni owns," "Thorlak owns," "Thorstein owns." Two, however, say what kind of goods they marked — yarn, as it happens, in both cases.

These labels are witnesses to the trade and barter in Bryggen. Longer inscriptions dealing with trade and commerce tell us more. One, for instance, is an account showing the settlement of three outstanding debts. The creditor, it seems, had sent his collector, the money was paid, and the collector noted on an oblong piece of wood (a *runakefli*) the amount paid by each debtor. On receiving this account together with his money, the creditor added his receipt. The inscription reads: "Bard paid nearly 1½ øre, Heinrek 2 ørtug." But the collector seems to have been in doubt about the quality of Heinrek's silver, and he made a note to that effect. Ingmund Sheep had paid 2½ ørtug. In a different hand — probably the creditor's own — the word "*uihi*" appears upside down beside each amount. It is probably a corruption of the Latin *vidi* (I have seen), a well-known phrase in bookkeeping, which is still used when ticking off sums with a capital "V."

Medieval business correspondence exists at Bryggen as well. There is, for instance, a letter from the 1330s — a time when Norwegian merchants began to feel seriously the strain of competition with the foreigner. A member of a business partnership centering at Bryggen was to have ordered a con-

signment of fish and beer somewhere in the countryside south of Bergen, but times were bad, his credit poor, and he wrote back to headquarters:

"To Havgrim, his partner, Thorer Fair sends God's and his own greetings, and partnership and friendship. Things are bad with me, partner. I did not get the beer, nor the fish. I want you to know this, and ask you not to press me. Ask the goodman to come south to us, so that he may see how things are here. Urge him to come, and do not press me, nor let word of this get to Thorstein Lang. Send me some gloves. If Sigrid is in want, ask her to your house. Promise me that all this trouble will not lead to unpleasantness for me." (The reading of the last sentence is not certain.)

A touching document, and one which Thorer Fair found it difficult to write, for he made several false starts, whittled the writing away, and started anew. The goodman, whom he expects to be able to put matters right, must be the head of the firm at Bryggen. Thorer trusts him but not Thorstein Lang, whom he expects to make trouble if he hears of all these difficulties. Whatever happens, Thorstein Lang must not find out! Thorer is worried about Sigrid — a relative, one fancies. A sad little letter indeed, showing the human factor in the decline of Norwegian trade.

Still later, a letter was sent by a man living outside Bergen to his wife, who had gone to town. Unfortunately the stick was cut to pieces, so the end of three lines is missing, including the man's name. After the usual opening, in which he sends God's and his own greetings to Lundney, his wife, we can read the following: "I want Otto . . . stockfish, if you get some . . . not too expensive."

The letter is beyond reconstruction, but not the background. A deal in stockfish was involved; it was the wife who was in town, and not the husband; there was a chance of her acquiring something or other, but the husband was afraid that it might prove to be beyond his means. The situation is not entirely unknown even today.

SEVEN such letters are known by now. In addition there are other shorter inscriptions — not letters exactly, but messages of a sort. They were probably written in the early taverns or “pubs,” where people went for amusement and relaxation, and where, no doubt, they tried to drown the drabness of poverty. The entertainment seems to have consisted of drink, women, and noise. The stage is set by a bone which some customer must have fished straight out of the soup, for want of other writing material. He simply commented, “What a fight.” With a little imagination one can see the rest — a dark room, smoking oil lamps, the smell of beer pervading everything, drunkards lolling about with stupid grins on their sweaty faces, quarrels, and at last a fight for good measure.

To the frequenters of these pubs, the women they saw there looked perfectly gorgeous. One who wore a new belt, for instance, drew a comment from one of the men: “The belt from Fana makes you still prettier.” Presumably he gave the inscribed stick to the girl.

A small, rounded stick bears an inscription which may have been either a boast or a warning: “Ingebjørg loved me when I was in Stavanger.” A nicely cut piece of wood, probably given by a man to his favorite girl, is rather more personal: “How nice if mine had been like you.” But another man, possibly with similar ideas in mind, received a message reading: “Gyda says that you are

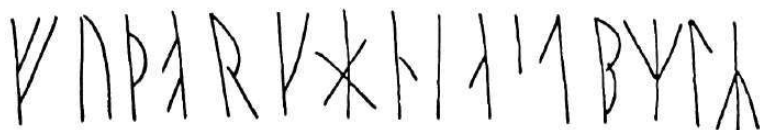
to go home.” Obviously the man had drunk rather more than was good for him, for he tried to write an answer on the same piece of wood, but the result is so nonsensical that one cannot make head or tail of it.

There are more inscriptions of this “pub” type. Some are not fit for mixed company; others are harmless, such as the simple request, “Kiss me, my darling.” The reverse of this stick, however, reveals that the boy was not at all sure of his kiss. He resorted to magic and on the back of the stick wrote the runic alphabet — the futhark, it is called, from the first six signs. This was a common form of sorcery and immensely old. It was often used in defense against evil spirits, witchcraft, and misfortune; it is found on many tools and dishes and on amulets. More than a hundred of the Bergen inscriptions are magic, about half of the alphabet type.

RUNES could be employed magically in various ways. They were not magic in themselves, but they were an important medium of magic. Charms and spells, thanks to them, could be committed to writing. There are a great many of these, some expressive of ancient pagan tradition, others Christian.

One intact specimen on a nicely shaped piece of wood reads: “*Ime* heated the stone. Never smoke shall smoke. Never shall the food be cooked. Out with heat. In with cold! *Ime* heated the stone.” This is apparently aimed at somebody’s cooking. The time-honored method of preparing food in a pit lined with hot stones required both skill and luck. The writer of the runes invoked *Ime*, a demon, who is to work the charm by heating the stones in his special way — very maddening, surely, if it is effective!

Another charm — a really flamboyant one — was designed to ensure a girl’s love for a man and at the same time to protect her. It appears on a long, four-sided stick, un-



The runic alphabet

fortunately broken, so that the end of each line is missing. One side reads: "I cut runes of help, I cut runes of protection, once against the elves, twice against the trolls, thrice against the ogres" On the second side is inscribed: "Against the harmful 'skag'-valkyrie, the evil woman, so that she never shall, though she ever would, injure your life. . . ." The third side reads: "I send you, I look at you, wolfish evil and hatefulness. May distress and misery unbearable descend upon you. Never shall you sit, never shall you sleep" The fourth side gives the end of the charm and makes clear its intention: "Love me as yourself." A few extra magic words are added.

This is powerful magic: a spell against elves, trolls, ogres, and the pernicious valkyrie; horrific curses on the object of the incantation. Its author was something of a scholar. The charm is probably based on a German spell, but still more interesting is the fact that he used themes and expressions—whole phrases, even—from the *Elder Edda*, the mythic and heroic poems of the Vikings. In fact, on some points this runic text is better than the corresponding text in the main *Edda* manuscript, the *Codex Regius*, which is more than a hundred years older. The moral is that oral transmission may be remarkably sound, sometimes superior to that of the scribes. All points on which the runic text is an improvement on that of the *Codex* may be due to errors of copying in the latter.

The writer of this spell was well versed in ancient Norse lore. International and even classical learning are also reflected in some texts. More than twenty Bergen inscriptions contain some Latin or Greek—or what the writer took to be Latin or Greek. Some of them are easy enough to understand. One—no doubt an amulet—has magical mumbo-jumbo on one side; on the other is a Biblical quotation. Although slightly garbled, the latter is unmistakably the beginning of Psalm 110: "Dixit dominus domino meo: sede a dextris meis. (The Lord said unto my Lord, sit thou at my right hand.)"



A crowned head, possibly representing a king, Saint Olaf, or Christ

Another inscription is a straightforward invocation of the Virgin. The text is in rather a bad state: the writer had no Latin, and the stick was split so that two of the lines have disappeared. It is still clear, however, that this must be the so-called "Five *Gaude* antiphon," an anthem that sometimes formed part of the alternating song of the liturgy, where it was introduced in connection with the medieval adoration of the Virgin. The inscription originally read:

*Gaude! Dei genetrix, virgo immaculata.
Gaude! quae gaudium ab angelo suscepisti.
Gaude! quae genuisti aeterni luminis claritatem.
Gaude! Mater.
Gaude! sancta Dei genetrix virgo.*

(Rejoice, Mother of God, immaculate Virgin.
Rejoice, thou who received the tidings of joy
from the angel.

Rejoice, thou who brought forth the clarity of
light eternal.

Rejoice, Mother.

Rejoice, Holy Virgin, Mother of God.)

Yet another Latin inscription, beautifully cut, comes from quite a different context. Unfortunately, both ends of the stick are broken off so that only fragments remain — enough, however, to show that the text was metrical and its subject probably a love lyric. A search among the tremendous mass of medieval secular poetry turned up a parallel to this text — fortunately after just a few days. The author of the poem, it seems, was one of those anonymous wandering scholars, the *clerici vagantes*, who flourished in Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. *Carmina Burana*, a well-known collection of poems, is the work of such scholars, and the poem of the inscription occurs there, although in a rather different form. But it also appears in a Florentine manuscript, and it is this version which is the parallel. The following stanza — the first line of the runic inscription — is quoted from the Florentine manuscript:

*Virginis egregiae ignibus calesco
Et eius cotidie in amorem cresco.
Sol est in meridie nec ego tepesco.*

(I burn with love for the beautiful girl
And daily my love for her grows.
The sun is in the south, nor do I grow cool.)

To find this kind of song in Bergen is not too surprising. The city was a center not only of commerce but also of administration, ecclesiastical and secular. And this inscription was written about 1300, when brisk traffic to and fro was keeping Bergen constantly in touch with the rest of Europe. Another stick, fifty years or so older, has a well-known quotation from Virgil's *Eclogae*: "*Omnia vincit amor, et nos cedamus amori.*" (Love conquers all, let us yield to love.)"

The beautifully carved stick on which this appears also has a Norwegian poem in the

strict and complicated meter favored by the scalds, the bards of Viking and medieval Norway. This particular meter was mostly used in poems of praise for kings and chieftains, but we learn from the sagas that those who mastered the difficult art would often write snatches about special events. This bit of verse is incredibly involved, and the reading is not certain as yet. It is, however, clearly a verse written by a man in honor of his beloved.

AT LEAST FIVE such verses have come to light in Bergen, and those interpreted are mainly love poems. One of them, however, is very different from the rest. It is a verse written on a piece of wood rounded almost like an oar, the runes cut with great precision. It was written by a member of the king's household. Apparently a man called Svein Dynta had boasted of finding a treasure in silver. The writer felt that this should have been handed over to the king, but he was not sure that Svein might not have been lying, and he called down the wrath of God upon the scoundrel.

Because of this inscription, which dates from the 1330s, the accepted lower chronological limit of alliterative poetry in Norway must be moved more than a hundred years closer to our own times. The "chieftain poems," an Icelandic specialty, went out of fashion at the end of the thirteenth century. It has usually been thought that this was because Norwegian chieftains and their men could not understand the complicated language of the poems. This theory has now been disproved, and it is evident that scaldic meters and forms remained in use for quite a while longer.

The king in this poem must be Magnus Eriksson, who reigned in Norway from 1319 to 1355. Finding an inscription from fairly exalted circles may not be so great a surprise, but nobody dared hope to find one written by a member of the royal family. Yet that is what happened. We have a letter written by Sigurd, a great-great-great-great-uncle of King Magnus Eriksson. He was a

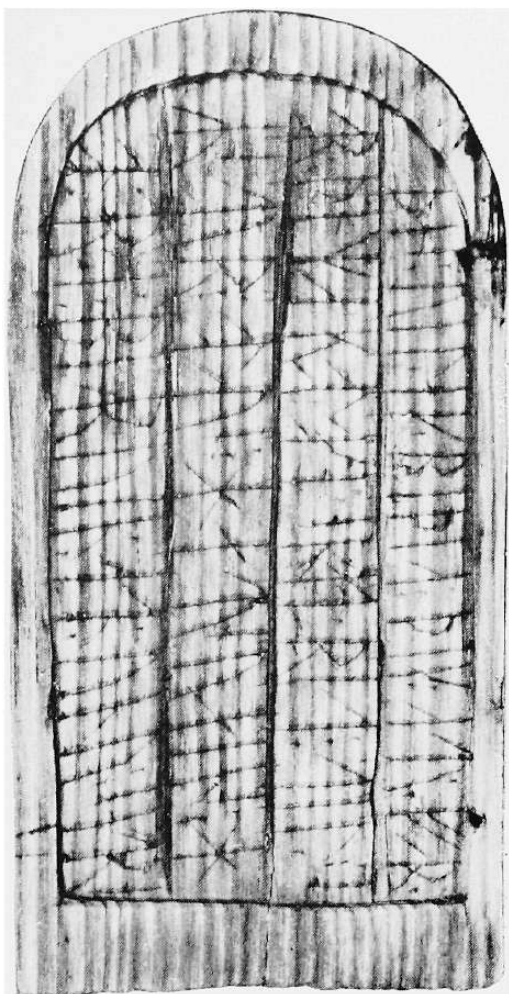
crown prince, the eldest son of King Sverre Sigurdsson, and known as Lavard (Lord). He died in the year 1200.

The stick is broken in many pieces, and the wood is damaged in two places, so we do not know to whom his letter was addressed — a great pity. The text reads as follows: "Sigurd Lavard sends God's and his greetings to The King would like the use of your long ship. To equip it with arms spears worth eighteen ells of russet.⁴ The iron I send with John Øre. I pray you that you will do as I ask in this matter, and if you do as I say, you shall receive our true friendship now and forever."

It is, in fact, a very polite form of mobilization order. At this time, in the 1190s, Norway was in the throes of a frightful civil war, and it appears clearly that King Sverre and his son Sigurd were gathering a navy. Most of the important battles of this war were fought at sea, and whoever had the mastery of the sea controlled the land. Sverre's saga tells us that the king gathered ships and men every spring in preparation for the summer's battles; but the year 1194 was rather different from the rest of the decade. The king's enemies had held Bergen that winter and ruled the entire southwest of Norway. King Sverre had stayed in Trondheim.

The saga says that at that time he had but a few small boats; nevertheless, he went south to attack the enemy in Bergen. When rumor of his approach reached them, they boarded their ships and went out to an island just off the coast by the city. The king ordered his navy to sail to a harbor south of Bergen, and he himself rowed into the city in a small boat, making for a castle just outside the town, where some of his men had held out through the whole of that winter. He arranged for the men from the castle to help him in the battle, and at dawn next day he attacked the hostile fleet. According to the saga, when, by the end of the battle, Sverre was winning, the men from the castle came rowing from the town in a long ship.

⁴ Russet, a reddish-brown homespun cloth, was used as a unit of value at that time.



This wooden frame was filled with wax to form a tablet upon which messages could be written and erased. The runes carved in the wood run lengthwise on the frame. A translation of them appears on page 58.

How they were able to get hold of a long ship in a few hours in a district which had been occupied by the enemy all winter, the saga does not say. Perhaps this is where the letter comes into the picture. It was found in Bergen, and so it was presumably addressed to someone living there. Might it be that the king and Sigurd had managed to enlist the help of an adversary?

Changing sides was no uncommon thing in the civil wars. In fact, another letter from that time contains a straight appeal to do so. This is not written on one of the normal

runes cut into the wood of a wax tablet, the usual form of notebook in the past, several tablets being joined together bookwise. This letter was a top-secret document. The runes are written inside the frame; colored molten wax was then poured on, and probably some quite trivial message was written with a stylus. It would have been disastrous if the following runic text had fallen into enemy hands:

"I would ask you this, that you leave your party. Cut a letter in runes to Olav Hettusvein's sister. She is in the convent in Bergen. Ask her and your kin for advice when you want to come to terms. You, surely, are less stubborn than the Earl." The end of the text has not been read yet, and in any case, it probably continued on the companion tablet. Olav Hettusvein was probably a pretender who died in 1170, and his sister may have been King Sverre's second cousin. Who the earl might be we do not know. There are several possibilities, most of whom might well be called stubborn.

THESE TWO LETTERS from the civil wars might have been taken straight from the sagas, and they provide dramatic proof of the importance of runes in Norway at

that time. Letters written in runes, of which seven in all have been found at Bryggen, occur far into the fourteenth century. It is clear that runes were not simply a game, some additional knowledge or skill to boast of, or something mystic by which one might work magic. They were a practical device, employed in normal communication between people, and it seems that this use continued down into the late Middle Ages.

Toward the end of the fourteenth century the inscriptions from Bryggen grow more sparse, partly because fewer Norwegians were then living there. Bryggen was, in fact, becoming German Bryggen. But there were also other reasons, not local. A cultural decline showed in many parts of Europe. The Black Death and the plagues that followed it later in the century created conditions under which the cultural heritage could not have been carried on. Nevertheless, a very few runic inscriptions continue into the fifteenth century.

THE PHOTOGRAPH below is by Eugene D. Becker. All other illustrations used with this article are from the University Museum of National Antiquities in Oslo and the historical museum in Bergen. They were furnished through the courtesy of Mr. Liestøl and Mr. Asbjørn E. Herteig.

Mr. Liestøl (right) and Henry Moen, curator of the Runestone Museum in Alexandria, examine the Kensington stone and its inscription.





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