

MICHAEL P. BARNES. *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe, Orkney. Runrön 8.* Uppsala: Institutionen för nordiska språk, Uppsala universitet, 1994. Pp. 298.

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The neolithic chambered cairn of Maeshowe contains the largest body of Norse runic inscriptions in the British Isles. They were discovered in 1861 and privately published by James Farrer (F) with independent interpretations by C.C. Rafn, P.A. Munch and George Stephens. F has always been rare and is now badly outdated, and there has been no other scholarly edition of all the inscriptions; those who wanted (almost) complete texts had to rely on Bruce Dickins' four-page article, itself now a rarity, and this had no space for photographs or discussion. A new edition of the inscriptions was therefore much needed.

Barnes provides a good deal more than the edition (B) which forms the last of the book's four chapters (and is followed by an exhaustive bibliography). The inscriptions are fully illustrated in photographs which are, very properly, not touched up – where they are unclear, line-drawings are also included. In the case of B17, where most of the stone's surface has peeled away and some fragments are now in the Royal Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh (Plates 38-41), the lost portions are drawn in from F's lithograph. Photographs and diagrams of the inside of the mound are also provided, and a photograph of the mound from the outside. The Ordnance Survey National Grid reference is given, but a map would also have been useful, as would an *index verborum* for the inscriptions.

Barnes has supplied the reader with as much objective evidence as possible, but what one can read in photographs often depends on the exact angle of lighting used. This becomes clear when more than one photograph of the same inscription is provided; for example, my reading of B19 from Plate 45 (the whole inscription) was significantly corrected by studying Plate 47 (a detailed picture of one part of it). Barnes has sometimes been able to see minor details on the stones themselves that I cannot pick up from the photographs, and there is no reason to doubt that these are present; but they do suggest that absolute objectivity is probably an impossible goal.

Micro-photography was not available to Barnes, and he does not say whether he used photographic negatives enlarged on a microfilm

reader. Even without micro-photography, however, he gathers an astonishing amount of detail about how inscriptions were made, often including the direction of carving of staves and the type of implement used. He also compares his own observations carefully with F's lithographs, and thus guards against the danger of being deceived by any modern tampering with inscriptions; in particular, he proves elegantly that the rune-like marks at the bottom of B3 were added in this century, probably at the beginning of the Second World War (pp. 69-70).

Chapter 1 lays out the criteria used in defining, numbering and transliterating the inscriptions. Barnes defines an inscription as including at least two 'plausibly runic characters' (p. 16); he therefore excludes the two drawings in FXXXII, though he illustrates and briefly discusses them (Plates 65-6, p. 215); similarly, he rejects FXXVII, which consists of the rune þ followed by a crudely incised cross (Plate 61 and pp. 215-6). Conversely, B33 consists of the two runes \* | [hi or ih] and is accepted (Plate 60 and pp. 210-4, not noticed in F); I would suggest reading this from right to left as i(esus) h(ristus). FXXX (Plate 64 and pp. 217-8), not counted by Barnes, may be an unfinished inscription in which the vertical staves have been carved but most of the twigs were never added; alternatively, it might be an illiterate imitation of runes, though Barnes does not suggest this.

Barnes distinguishes clearly between transliteration and text, defining the former as a rendering into the Latin alphabet of the graphemes intended by the carver (p. 12); this requires the consistent representation of each rune by the same Latin equivalent every time it appears (so that ʀ, for example, is always transliterated as t, even where it would normally be represented as d in the Latin alphabet). Text is defined as 'a piece of writing that has been edited into a shape suitable for the non-specialist' (p. 17); in his texts, standardised word-division, punctuation and spelling are therefore added. He indicates transliteration by bold type and text by italics (as I shall do here).

It is also necessary to replace F's numbering. Farrer gives no definition of an inscription; his numbering generally goes round the chamber from the entrance in a clockwise direction and from top to bottom, but not consistently; and in several cases, his classification either separates parts of a single inscription or lumps a number of

distinct inscriptions together. There are three instances where B amalgamates two of F's numbers:

B4 = FXIII, III (pp. 71-7); FXIII reads vertically upwards and from right to left, while III, which completes its text, is horizontal and reads left to right; the carver has run out of a suitable surface on the original stone and turned the inscription through a right angle.

B8 = FVII, VI (pp. 84-95); FVII went undeciphered until Liestøl interpreted it as: *..ga er mér sagt at fê er hér folgit ærit vel. Segia fáir sem Oddr*; this leads on into the line above (FVI): *Orkasonr sagði á rúnnum þeim er hann reist* (or perhaps *rístr*) *'..[adverb?] is told to me that treasure is hidden here well enough. Few say as Oddr / Orkasonr said in those runes which he carved/carves'*.

B20 = FXVIII, XVI (pp. 144-158); these have long been recognised as belonging together. FXVI consists only of an instrumental phrase including a relative clause, so cannot stand alone, but makes perfect sense as describing the axe with which the inscription was carved.

There are two cases where Barnes distinguishes inscriptions amalgamated in F:

FXIV becomes B11-14 (Plates 30-35, pp. 105-118); commentators before Liestøl ignored B11-13. B11 cannot be deciphered, but is undoubtedly present; B12, 13 are very faint, but have been interpreted by Liestøl and probably name two different carvers; and B14: *Jórsalamenn brutu haug þenna* 'Crusaders broke open this mound', reads, like B4 but unlike B11-13, vertically upwards and from right to left.

FXIX, XX become B23-32 (Plates 57-59, pp. 170-210); Farrer simply labelled the runes on each of two large square blocks as a single inscription. Several carvers are obviously involved here. Barnes sorts them out with admirable clarity, finding three signatures (B29, 30, 32); four inscriptions discussing a supposed treasure in the mound (B25-28); one which asserts that the mound is older than Loðbrók's and adds a remark about 'her' sons (B23); one by a woman called Hlíf, the earl's housekeeper, saying that crusaders broke into the mound (B24); and one which is unintelligible (B31).

Chapter 2 begins with an entertaining history of Maeshowe scholarship (pp. 21-37). In the nineteenth century, Rafn, Munch, Dasent, Bugge and (occasionally) Stephens are beacons of sanity in an age of cranks and charlatans, but common-sense views slowly emerge

on the age of the mound, the date of the inscriptions, and the identification of Maeshowe with the *Orkahaugr* of *Orkneyinga saga* (O ch. 93, p. 247) and the *Orkhaugr* of B24.

The first runologists to visit Maeshowe themselves were Magnus Olsen and Bruce Dickins. Olsen decoded the cryptic runes of B15 and contributed to the interpretation of B20, but Barnes sensibly demurs from his attempt to attribute both to a single carver named Tryggr, and from his numerological arguments. Dickins was the first to read the word *matselja* 'housekeeper' in B24, and provided almost complete texts. More recently, Hermann Pálsson has suggested that B20 was carved by Þórhallr Ásgrímsson, who transported Earl Rögnvaldr kali back to Orkney in 1153 after the Second Crusade (see O ch. 90, p. 238), and may have inherited Gaukr Trandilsson's axe, ultimately from Gaukr's slayer Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, who was his ancestor; Barnes finds this theory too speculative, and I agree. Aslak Liestøl sorted out B4, 8 and 11-13 (see above), and suggested the wordplay *sléttvörumenn* 'smooth-hide men' as a contrast to the name *Loðbrók*, 'shaggy breeches' in B23; this is an appealing suggestion, but I agree with Barnes that *slíkt vóru menn* 'such were men' seems more likely. Chapter 2 finishes with Barnes' own overall view of the inscriptions (see below).

Chapter 3 deals with orthography and language. There is a meticulous discussion of the rune-forms, in which the table of rune – sound correlations (p. 54) is particularly useful. My one reservation here is that since the stones are pitted with small holes, many of which have probably arisen naturally, it is not possible without micro-photography to be sure how many runes are dotted. Plate 24 shows that in B9, Barnes' reading  $\text{†} * \text{†} | \text{†} (\text{æh}k\text{ia})$  could be  $\text{†} * \text{†} | \text{†} (\text{æh}g\text{ia})$ , (ON *ekkja*). Barnes (p. 96) thinks that the dot here is natural and should be ignored, and the photograph suggests that this may be right, but that one cannot be sure. *hg* would be an odd rendering of ON *kk*, but the probable *mihgil* for *mikill* in the same inscription shows that it is not impossible.

Barnes meticulously surveys the arguments about whether the orthography and phonology of the inscriptions are Norwegian, Icelandic or Orcadian (pp. 53-60), but without coming to a clear result; he notes that we have little direct evidence for early Orcadian. I would add two other notes of caution: first, the surviving evidence suggests that runic literacy was commoner in 12th century Norway (e.g. in Bergen) than in Orkney or Iceland (see p. 41), and people

from west of the sea may therefore have learned their runes complete with some spelling conventions that now look Norwegian. Second, the crusaders who set out from Orkney in 1151 were certainly drawn from all three countries, and if *any* of the inscriptions are their work, each must be regarded as a separate text; dialectal evidence from one cannot be used to define the provenance of any other.

Spellings showing Norwegian influence are *man* (for Ice. *mun*, B4), *som* (for Ice. *sem*, B8), *laþin* (for Ice. *hlaðinn*, B23), *lif* (for Ice. *Hlif*, B24); less certainly, B9, 20 may show vowel harmony, and B8, 20 may have monophthongisation of the vowel in the verb *rist* (for Ice. *reist*; the usual form at Maeshowe is *ræist*). Possible indications of Icelandic influence are the form *yr* (= *úr*), B28; apparent absence of vowel harmony in B4, 26; possible indication of pre-aspiration in B9; and the phrase *fyrir sunnan land* in B20, which refers to the geography of Iceland (though this could have become a fossilised poetic phrase). Possibly Orcadian are the confusion of /ɔ:/ with /au/ in the forms *haut* (= *hátt*, B2), *hoh* (= *haug*, B4); the form *trænisonr* for *Trandilssonr* (B20, though this could be Norwegian); and the general mixture of 'Norwegian' and 'Icelandic' forms. Dialectal indications are therefore mixed, and a single inscription can show apparently conflicting features (e.g. B20).

The inscriptions clearly date from the mid 12th century, but Barnes seems non-committal about their more exact date. When it comes to why they were carved at all, he inclines to the view that they are frivolous graffiti (pp. 38-9). For some, this seems obviously correct, notably the obscene B10; the more romantic B21; and the probably sexually suggestive B9: 'Ingibjörg the fair widow. Many a woman has gone stooping in here. A great show-off. Erlingr'. Modern equivalents of these can be found on any lavatory wall. There are also a large number of signatures (mostly variants of the formula *x reist (rúnar þessar)* 'x carved (these runes)' – see B2, 5, 7, 12 (?), 13, 15 (?), 16-19; B3, 29, 30, 32 consist only of a personal name; but the motivation here may be more serious than the personal vanity assumed by Barnes.

In Norse popular belief, mounds and caves were fearsome places inhabited by *draugar*, and it was a feat of great personal courage to invade one; Clouston (p. 10) records an Orcadian tradition of a terrifying 'hogboy' (ON *haugbúi* 'mound-dweller'), though he does not make it clear whether this concerns mounds in general or a supposed inhabitant of Maeshowe itself. O (ch. 61, pp. 132-3) tells

how Rögnvaldr kali, later the leader of the Orkney crusaders, goes with one companion into a cave in the hope of finding treasure; before they turn back, they build a cairn to mark their achievement and Rögnvaldr composes a verse in which the *draugr* is mentioned. The men (and at least two women) who first broke into Maeshowe may have thought they had earned the right to boast of a brave deed, and some apparently felt the need for religious backup even as they did so (see B22: 'Benedikt made this cross'; the crosses associated with B3, 17; and the possibly religious B33, see above).

This is significant for the two inscriptions which claim that crusaders broke into the mound (B14, 24). These have sometimes been seen as accusations made by others, but I think they are more probably boasts made by the crusaders themselves. In that case, the break-in was presumably in the spring of 1151, when the crusaders were slowly gathering before setting off (*O* chs. 85-6, p. 208). The force under Earl Haraldr Maddaðarson which sheltered in Maeshowe in January 1153 did not apparently have to break in (*O* ch. 103, p. 247), but the mound still inspired such fear that two men are said to have gone mad. Liestøl and Barnes argue convincingly that B24 is the latest in the series B23-28 (Barnes pp. 171-5), so most or all of the inscriptions which discuss treasure may also be attributed to the crusaders (perhaps also including B4, 8), as must B23. As Barnes points out (pp. 34-5), the claims about treasure need not be taken seriously – and the carver of B8 also seems sceptical about them; but Barnes could have cited the same fantasy of buried treasure in four inscriptions from western Norway (*NIYR* nos. 422 [Hennøy III], 430 [Hjelmset I], 521 [Ystines III], 524 [Ystines VI], see vol. 4, pp. 231, 247; vol. 5, pp. 94-5).

The remaining inscriptions could have been made by the crusaders, by Haraldr's force, or at some later date. I can see no evidence that any inscriptions were carved by the returning crusaders; Rögnvaldr returned home separately from the main force (*O* ch. 89, p. 236), and there is no obvious reason why either Orcadian or non-Orcadian crusaders should have returned to Maeshowe rather than going home. If Hermann Pálsson is right about the carver of B23, that inscription must have been made after the return, probably late in 1153; but B23 seems to be one of the earliest inscriptions in the group B23-28, of which B24 is the latest (Barnes pp. 172-3 and see above).

Barnes' study will not be the last word about the Maeshowe inscriptions – in fact, it has made further discussion easier than it was before. It is thorough, clear-headed, meticulously careful in argument and presentation, and in many ways establishes new standards and methods for future books on runology. If it has a flaw, it is excessive caution in considering the context of the inscriptions as a whole; but caution is a necessary virtue in this kind of work, and all students of Old Norse have reason to be grateful for this excellent and much needed book.

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