

# RUNESTONES AND GRAVESTONES OF ÖSTERGÖTLAND: DESCRIBING THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL AND SYMBOLIC COMMEMORATIVE TRADITIONS IN THE VIKING AGE

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## ABSTRACT

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The author of the article considers the expressions of practiced commemorative traditions in the region of Östergötland in Central Sweden during the Viking Age. The commemorative traditions are characterized by runestones that stem from the pre-Christian tradition, and gravestones that were introduced along with Christianity. These stone monuments evince similarities and differences, yet their features seem to change within the Viking Age. This points to transformations that can be expressed through social and symbolic aspects within the commemorative traditions of the period.

**Keywords:** Östergötland, Viking Age, runestones, gravestones, commemoration.

## INTRODUCTION

The Viking Age (approx. 800–1050) left a substantial impact on the history of Europe, whereas in Scandinavia it gave rise to social, political, and religious changes. The beginning of the consolidation and Christianization of the emerging kingdom of Sweden was closely connected to the regions of Central Sweden. One of these regions is Östergötland, where these changes are reflected in the runestones and gravestones of the time.

The runestone tradition dated back to pre-Christian times, yet it became more standardized in the Viking Age. The runestone in Jelling, erected by Harald Blåtand, is believed to be a sort of precedent that started the typical runestone custom or trend (Crocker 2000, 183). The Middle Ages, however, dissolved the tradition, as the runic alphabet became obsolete (Spurkland 2004, 342). The gravestones, also dubbed as early Christian grave monuments (for discussion, see Ljung 2016a, 13), are introduced alongside Christianity and linked to the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Hedvall 2003, 103). Although they reached into the first decades of the 12<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>1</sup> as Romanesque art expanded, the Viking Age traditions ceased (Gardell 1937, 88, 156).

Both runestones and gravestones are memorial monuments that commemorate the dead. Therefore, they are the expressions of practiced commemorative traditions. Östergötland has one of the highest numbers of known runestone finds (225 monuments) and the largest number of known gravestone fragments in all of Sweden (346 fragments) (Timermane 2023, 216–220). The gravestones are a phenomenon of central Sweden, not found elsewhere during the Viking Age. The shared, as well as differing characteristics among runestones and gravestones reflect a complex landscape of relations between people and their views.

So far, research has avoided exploring both monument types together. The focus has largely been on runestones, and earlier sources did not even distinguish gravestones as a separate runic monument category (for example, Brate 1911–1918). Despite the abundance of runestone research, the monument qualities frequently are not considered as a whole, whereas gravestone research is still concerned with identifying and categorizing the known monuments (Ljung 2016b; Hedvall, Menander 2009). The relationship between runestones and gravestones has not been explored deeply in a social sense, therefore many questions still remain obscure.

It is unclear why two monument traditions existed in Viking Age Östergötland and how they coexisted. Through the interaction of social and symbolic aspects, this article aims to describe how runestones and gravestones reflect commemorative practices and the changes these practices have gone through in the Viking Age. Social commemoration relates to status, achievements and other qualities gained throughout lifetime, whereas symbolic commemoration is concerned with mental values and beliefs of the afterlife. The relation of social and symbolic traits differs amongst the groups, and can therefore provide an insight into the commemorative practices, the mentality, and the transformation thereof.

To describe this transformation and changes, the monuments need to be evaluated and compared according to their main characteristics – their placement in time and space, their texts, and their decorative ornamentation. The information about the aforementioned 225 runestones and

346 gravestone fragments is acquired from the available sources (Rundata; Runor; Ljung 2016a; Brate 1911–1918) and certain conclusions can be drawn from this material. The numerical data in this article is based on the author's master's thesis, defended in 2023, for a detailed data analysis, see Timermåne 2023.

## DISTRIBUTION IN TIME AND SPACE

In Östergötland, runestones and gravestones were mostly contemporary and existed within the same space, although in different environments. The monuments can mainly be dated according to stylistic qualities. The stylistic groups (RAK-Pr4) were advanced by A. S. Gräslund and are based on traits in the zoomorphic ornament and their changes (Gräslund 2006). The runestone prevalence was relatively short, which is common for the Swedish regions (Sawyer 2000, 10). They predominantly appear at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and during the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 1), subsiding soon after. The gravestones appeared around the same time (Fig. 2), but the large number of undatable monuments precludes

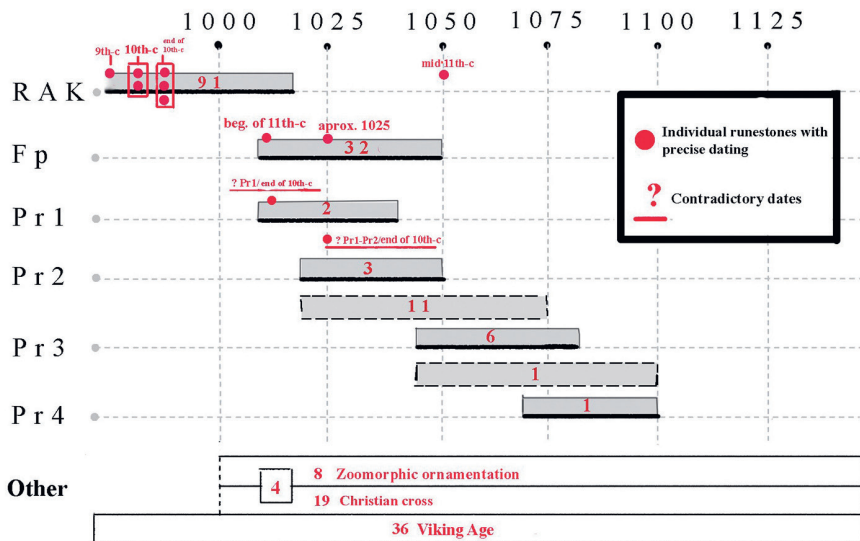


Figure 1. The chronological distribution of runestones based on the stylistic groups by Gräslund 2006 (developed by J. Timermåne, based on Timermåne 2023, 140)

1. attēls. Rūnakmeņu hronoloģiskais izvietojums, balstoties uz Gräslund 2006 stilistikajām grupām (Timermåne 2023, 140)

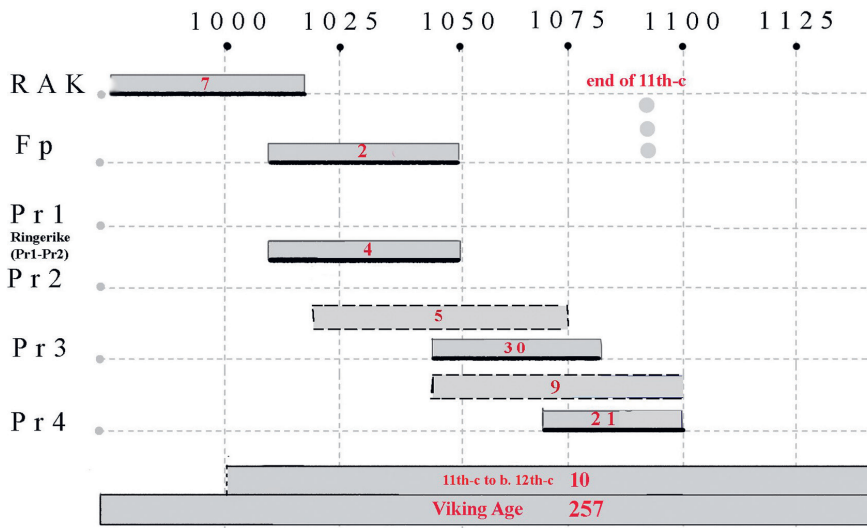


Figure 2. The chronological distribution of gravestones based on the stylistic groups RAK-Pr4 (developed by J. Timermāne, based on Timermāne, 2023, 149) 2. attēls. Kapakmeņu hronoloģiskais izvietojums, balstoties uz stilistiskajām grupām RAK-Pr4 (izstrādājusi Justine Timermāne, balstoties uz Timermāne 2023, 149)

a clearer conclusion. Nevertheless, this does not prove that the gravestones succeeded the runestones, apparently, they existed simultaneously.

The monument placement is a challenging task, since most runestones and gravestones have been moved. B. Sawyer believes that the stones were not moved across great distances and their distribution principally is still valid (Sawyer 2000, 14). According to this principle, the monuments seem to exist in the same area (Fig. 3), which has been the main area of habitation then and now (Rundkvist 2011). The findspots for runestones and gravestones rarely overlap, suggesting that, even if located in the same area, they were used in different environments.

The gravestones are connected to churches and early Christian burial sites, where they served as grave markers (Andrén 2000a, 8). Even though only a few monuments have been found *in-situ* over graves (6 monuments), the remaining (94.3%) have been located within a church or cemetery, or can be connected to one (4%) (Timermāne 2023, 151). Meanwhile, the runestones have been found in diverse locations. The findspots do not claim to be the original positions, although they might indicate the initial sites.

53% of the runestones in Östergötland have been found around the churches or walled therein. Whether this has been due to practical or symbolic reasons, is still up to debate. There is no sufficient proof that

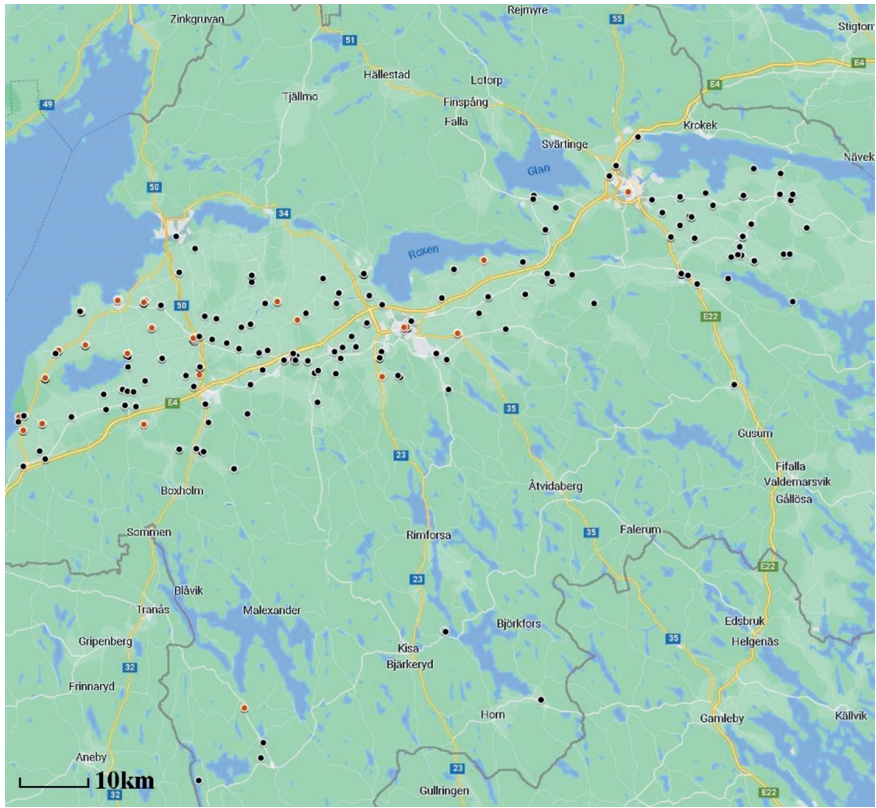


Figure 3. Distribution of runestones (black) and gravestones (red) in Östergötland (Timermāne 2023, 154)

3. attēls. Rūnakmeņu (melnā krāsā) un kapakmeņu (sarkanā krāsā) izvietojums Esterjētlandē (Timermāne 2023, 154)

runestones have been placed near churches purposely. In Östergötland and nearby regions, the random placement in the church walls excludes an idea of a deeper purpose (Wilson 1994, 137–138). If there is a meaning to it, that is, nonetheless, connected to the secondary use of the monument.

Many runestones (32%) were found in diverse natural areas – near streams, rivers, roads, bridges, on fields, and near pre-Christian burials (Timermāne 2023, 141). They might be connected to pre-Christian cult sites (Hultgård 2008, 217), or to property boundaries (Zachrisson 2020, 85–86). Before Christianity, the cult could be practiced at home (Brink 2013, 38–39). That makes the runestones not only part of the family's cult and commemoration, but also a communication tool with a wider audience – to point at a sacred site, declare a change of ownership, or mark a family's property (Price 2019, 26). This multifunctionality fits well with the Scandinavian

pre-Christian belief tradition known as *forn siðr* (ancient custom), which integrated beliefs into daily life, blurring the border between the profane and sacred (Hultgård 2008, 212).

Such placement could point out that runestones had many social functions alongside commemoration. The gravestones functioned only within the church, showing that the cult has now shifted to a communal and public holy place. The connection with graves also implies a reduction in functions, suggesting that the choice to commemorate became less practical and more symbolic.

## THE RUNIC TEXTS AND THEIR MEANING

The runic text is the main uniting characteristic for both monument groups. The texts are based on a memorial formula that could be expressed as “X raised this stone in memory of Y, his relative”, X being the sponsor of the monument and Y being the deceased. The presence of this formula allows us to speak of a fashion (Sawyer 2000, 10). The runestones in Östergötland hold to this formula, but a change occurs with the gravestones. The fully transformed formula can be expressed as “X laid this stone over Y, his relative”. Nevertheless, the use of the new wording is inconsistent and the traditional runestone formula still prevails (Timermane 2023, 88).

The specified relations between the sponsor and the deceased might represent inheritance customs (Sawyer 2000). If that is taken to be true, then behind the runestones and gravestones stands a society with common social customs; property was inherited along the male line, undivided, and kept within the nuclear family. The inheritance function may not completely apply to the gravestones, since they commemorate more women who could inherit only if they had no male relatives (Sawyer 2000, 39). 27% of cases commemorate women in comparison to 3.6% in runestones (Timermane 2023, 161–161, 174). It is doubtful that a woman’s social status changed so quickly in the early stages of Christianization, hence, the increase in commemorations of women might indicate the dominance of memorial functions.

Alongside the standard commemorative formula, different sorts of information can be added about the involved parties. Notably, the runestones and gravestones in Östergötland are quite uncommunicative, and it was uncommon to include additional information purposefully. The runestones have additional references, but not in abundance. The gravestones, on the other hand, completely lack mentions of any sort of deeds, achievements, or status.

The stones bear inscriptions of uninvolved people (10 runestones), places of origin and owned property (7 runestones), causes of death (14 runestones),

occupation (3 runestones), titles of social or honourable status (28 runestones, 4 gravestones), and epithets (28 runestones, 8 gravestones) (Timermane 2023, 164–167, 174). Most of these inscriptions can be related to status, deeds, and property, but some are obscure. Whether the titles reflect social status or simply display personality traits is unclear (Goetting 2006) and it is the same concerning epithets. The lack of additional information indicates that any mentions of worldly connections were not deemed relevant.

A different case is the display of beliefs. There are only two runestones that have texts that relate to pre-Christian beliefs (the Rök runestone Ög 136 and the Ledberg runestone Ög 181). The Ledberg stone has a spell, although its use is unclear (MacLeod, Mees 2006, 145–146). The Rök runestone is a wondrous example of pre-Christian knowledge and literary skill (Andrén 2006, 11). Meanwhile, both stones are exceptions and form no tendency.

Some runestone and gravestone texts convey Christian prayers. They are uncommon but indicate Christian faith. The prayers among runestones (13 cases) and gravestones (28 cases) are the same and can be expressed, as follows: “May God/God’s mother help his/her soul/spirit” (Timermane 2023, 170, 176). They exhibit an early understanding of Christianity that is revealed in the use of the term “God’s Mother” and the interchangeability of “soul/spirit”. “God’s Mother” is a reference to Virgin Mary and reflects her gradual incorporation into the pre-Christian cult (Sawyer 2000, 140). The prayers display a common understanding of Christianity, also making them Christian monuments. In addition, unlike deeds, property and status that are social factors of the living, prayers show a clear concern with intangible values and are connected to the beliefs of the afterlife.

## VISUAL ASPECTS

The visual motifs could have a language of their own, but visually the runestones and gravestones differ. Firstly, most monuments were purposefully made from different materials. Runestones were made mostly of granite,<sup>2</sup> but the gravestones – of limestone (98.6%) which also proved to be more fragile (Timermane 2023, 177). The reasons prompting this choice remain unclear (Ljung 2016b, 17).

Secondly, the physical forms differed. The runestones were adjusted to the natural form of the selected stone. Meanwhile, the gravestones could range from lying slabs to intricate coffins (see Fig. 4). The fragile nature of the limestone gravestones has made it impossible to determine which fragments form a single monument, however, the fragment proportions point to the conclusion that lying slabs and slabs with headstones were most common, whereas chests were rarely made (Ljung 2019, 156).



Figure 4. Runestone Ög 81 (left) and reconstruction of a grave chest at Örberga stensmuseum (right) (photos by J. Timermane)

4. attēls. Rūnakmens Ög 81 (pa kreisi) un kapakmens zārka rekonstrukcija Ērberjas akmens muzejā (pa labi) (Timermane 2023, 143, 190)

The runestones in Östergötland (see Fig. 4) lack both decorative and symbolic ornament. Pictorial motifs occur only on 5 stones and establish no tendency. Most commonly, the text bands were converted into snakes (25% of monuments) (Timermane 2023, 179). In Norse myths, the snake has an ambiguous nature, but it becomes a protective symbol in the material culture (Lasota 2021, 2–3). The snakes produce a zoomorphic ornamentation that is part of the zoomorphic art styles of the Viking Age.

The layout can also have a meaning, and it has been suggested that multiple snakes can separate the living and the dead visually (Andrén 2000b, 13). All runestones in Östergötland that have two snakes with an identifiable text comply with this principle. Likewise, a cross adorns 46.6% of the known runestones (Timermane 2023, 179), which is a clear marker of faith even to the illiterate. The cross could also substitute a prayer (Andrén 2000b, 21), hence the lack of written prayers, and it might also invoke protection or consecrate the monument.



Likewise, the gravestones are decorated in the same style as the runestones, and zoomorphic ornamentation prevails. The snake motif seems to represent no contradiction with the Christian beliefs, showing a slow, gradual adaptation of views. The visual message of multiple snakes is partially found on the gravestones, indicating the abandonment of previous practices. Out of the 14 fragments with multiple snake bands, the division of the living and dead can be found on 8 stones, whereas for another 6 this logic fails (Timermane 2023, 209).

Only one gravestone (How 31) seems to have a picturesque ornament that might represent the legend of Gunnar in the snake pit. Even though the story is from the pre-Christian tradition, its Christian interpretation was common in early medieval times (Guðmundsdóttir, Cosser 2012, 1015–1017, 1023). Besides that, only crosses are added to the ornament. The crosses were placed mainly on headstones, sometimes also on lying slabs, whereas zoomorphic ornamentation mostly decorated the lying or side slabs (Timermane 2023, 202–208).

Symmetry and richness characterize the gravestone ornament, where layout meanings become secondary if not excluded entirely. The ornament is rich and dense but lacks a variety in motifs. Perhaps the lack of social references in the text is compensated by the intricate visual display that could demonstrate the wealth and status to the visitors of the church.

Other visual meanings of the placement of text and ornament are practically non-existent in both runestones and gravestones. Some runestones might have additional meanings, but it is impossible to determine whether it has been an intention or an accident. The runestones of Östergötland have rare artistic or symbolic visual mediums that would signal the status of the sponsors or the deceased, leaving the message in the text. The gravestone ornament attempts to part with the traits and motifs of the runestones, meanwhile still relying on the same styles, though with a different visual impression created by the lying slabs and coffins.

## CONCLUSIONS

The runestones and gravestones have similarities and differences in their text, placement, and ornament. The similarities point out that the runestones do not succeed the gravestones, and are not a contradictory phenomenon. Thus, they do not reflect a transition from pre-Christian to Christian beliefs. However, the differences indicate that a shift is taking place with the symbolical elements becoming more relevant than the social ones.

The possible placements of the runestones and their textual content show that they possess social functions that intertwine with commemoration.

The incorporation of Christian content indicates that the symbolic and intangible principles are gradually gaining relevance, while not being dominant yet. The gravestones still borrow much from the runestone tradition, but they gradually become distanced from the runestone practices.

The commemoration incorporates Christian principles to a much greater extent, serving as an impetus to abandon old customs and places of worship. The social aspect still remains present in the gravestones, but similarly to the runestones, it slowly decreases throughout the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Observation of the runestones and gravestones suggests that different groups of society perceived change differently, developing two understandings about commemoration and early Christianity. Runestones would represent those who placed considerable emphasis on social commemoration with the symbolic becoming more relevant, and the gravestones could represent those who had given symbolic aspects the major meaning, although still relying on common social values. The commemorative traditions had transformed into two expressions that had a different emphasis on social and symbolic meanings, and held different beliefs about what mattered in a person's life and what mattered in death.

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- <sup>1</sup> Despite conventional periodization, the characteristics of the Viking Age endured and did not disappear at once. When considering the specifics of the runestone and gravestone chronology, the whole 11<sup>th</sup> century will be taken into the analysis.
- <sup>2</sup> The material has been determined only for 64 runestones. Out of those, 50 are granite and 14 of other materials.

# ESTERJĒTLANDES RŪNAKMEŅI UN KAPAKMEŅI: RAKSTUROJUMS SOCIĀLO UN SIMBOLISKO PIEMIŅAS TRADĪCIJU TRANSFORMĀCIJĀM VIKINGU LAIKMETĀ

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## ANOTĀCIJA

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Rakstā tiek aplūkotas Centrālvidrijas reģionā Esterjētlاندē praktizētās piemiņas tradīcijas vikingu laikmetā. Šīs piemiņas tradīcijas raksturo rūnakmeņi, kas sakņojas pirmskristīgajos uzskatos, un kapakmeņi, kas ieviesās līdz ar kristietību. Šiem akmens pieminekļiem ir gan līdzības, gan atšķirības, bet to īpašības mainās vikingu laikmetā. Tas norāda uz pārmaiņām, kuras var raksturot ar sociālo un simbolisko aspektu klātbūtni laika posma piemiņas tradīcijās.

**Atslēgvārdi:** Esterjētlande, vikingu laikmets, rūnakmeņi, kapakmeņi, piemiņa.

## Kopsavilkums

Rakstā “Esterjētlandes rūnakmeņi un kapakmeņi: raksturojums sociālo un simbolisko piemiņas tradīciju transformācijām vikingu laikmetā” tiek aplūkotas vikingu laikmeta Centrālvidrijas reģionā Esterjētlاندē pastāvošās piemiņas tradīciju izteiksmes. Šīs izteiksmes raksturo rūnakmeņi un kapakmeņi. Lai gan tie balstās atšķirīgās uzskatu tradīcijās, tie pastāv Esterjētlاندē vienā laikā un telpā. Tiem ir gan līdzības, gan atšķirības, kuras var aplūkot caur pieminekļu novietojumu, piemiņas tekstu un ornamentu.

Darba mērķis ir caur sociālo un simbolisko aspektu mijiedarbību raksturot, kā rūnakmeņi un kapakmeņi atspoguļo piemiņas tradīcijas un kādas pārmaiņas tās piedzīvo vikingu laikmetā. Sociālie aspekti saistās ar dzīves faktiem, bet simboliskie – ar nemateriālām vērtībām un pēcnāves uzskatiem.

Pieminekļu raksturojums liek domāt, ka sabiedrībā pastāvēja grupas, kas atšķirīgi uztvēra gan piemiņu, gan agro kristietību. Rūnakmeņi varētu pārstāvēt tos, kam joprojām piemiņas sociālie aspekti bija nozīmīgi, bet kas palēnām pievērsās arī dziļākai simboliskai nozīmei. Kapakmeņi savukārt – tās grupas, kas deva priekšroku simboliskai piemiņai, lai gan joprojām daudz balstījās zināmajā praksē.

Piemiņa bija attīstījusies divās izteiksmēs ar atšķirīgām izpildes niansēm un uzsvāriem uz sociālajiem un simboliskajiem vēstījumiem. Rūnakmeņus un kapakmeņus nevar pozicionēt kā kontrastējošu piemiņas tradīciju pieminekļus, bet var uztvert kā sarežģītās un neviendabīgās vikingu laikmeta mentalitātes atspoguļojumu.