

In the shadow of the son: contextualising the Jelling rune stones

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Introduction

Today we can see two rune stones in the churchyard of Jelling, near Vejle, a modern city situated in the midst of Jutlandic peninsula in Denmark. The smaller stone was erected by a Danish king, Gorm the Old (-958), while the larger one was erected by his son and successor, King Harald Bluetooth (-987). These two rune stones are among the most famous of more than 2500 examples of rune stones in all Scandinavia, and are at least among the most impressive of all the Danish examples in two ways. One way in which Harald's stone impresses the onlooker is because of the magnificent images drawn on two faces of the stone: the "Jelling beast" and the crucified Christ. The other reason is that these two stones are among the very few examples that can be testified by their inscriptions to have been raised by kings of the Danes.

Historiography has been accumulating on these two Jelling stones since the time of the 16th-century antiquarians Henrik Rantzau, in Holstein, Ole Worm in Denmark and Johannes Bureus in Sweden, amongst others (Jaffé 1937). The 19th century saw the foundation of modern scholarship on the rune stones, and a significant number of scholars emerged who were interested in the Danish Viking Age, including runologists, historians and archaeologists. Such scholars were, and continue to be, interested in expressing their ideas about the Jelling stones in articles and books. The bibliography of scholarship on the Jelling stones, which is accessible on the website of the Danish archaeological periodical *Skalk*, confirms the breadth and depth of the scholarly interest in the study of the Jelling stones. In light of the sheer volume of this historiography, do any problems remain to be solved? In this article I would like to add to the accumulated wealth of the previous historiography of the Jelling stones by posing a simple question: Why did Harald Bluetooth create a larger stone than his father's?

How rune stones created a political landscape

A rune stone is a stone on whose surface runes have been inscribed. The oldest example dates back to the 4th century CE, but we know that a massive increase in the number of rune stones took place around 1000 CE. Examining this phenomenon, we notice one important point: almost all of the rune stones raised around 1000 had a formulaic inscription, i.e.: "X raised the stone in memory of Y." In this formulation, X was typically a sponsor who could afford to invest in making a rune stone, while Y was the deceased who had had some familial or social connection with X.

Most previous studies concerned with rune stones have been concentrated on the philological analysis of the text inscribed on the surface of stones (textual analysis). Such an approach bore rich fruits in revealing the nature of Scandinavian society in the 10th to 11th centuries because rune stones are the only contemporary written sources produced in Scandinavia. It is crucial to remember that a rune stone is not a natural stone, but a fabrication intended to convey some information. Rune stones played an important role in the society to which the sponsor X and the deceased Y belonged, so that the rune stone functioned as a kind of medium. If we bear this in mind, we will be more inclined to analyze rune stones not only for the inscriptions they bear but also to connect them with the society in which they functioned, i.e., establishing them within their social context. One of the arguments at the heart of this paper is that we must change our analytical approach to rune stones from the traditional method to the new one: a contextual approach (Ozawa 2007-20).

Then we must ask: what role did Danish rune stones play in the 10th and 11th century? First of all, of course, the rune stone was a commemorative symbol in memory of the dead. A sponsor of a stone did not only intend to express mourning for the death of the one commemorated, but also, through inscribing the name of the dead, to honor him/her publicly within the society to which he had belonged in life. We will take DR1 as an example. This inscription reads: "Thorulfr raised this stone, Sveinn's retainer, in memory of Eirikt, his part-

ner, who died when valiant men besieged Hedeby; and he was a captain, a very good valiant man.” Here the sponsor Thorulfr honors the dead Eirikr to those witnessing the stone by presenting information on Eirikr, proclaiming that “he was a captain, a very good valiant man, and died when valiant men besieged Hedeby.”

Second, as Birgit Sawyer has claimed (2000), it may be that rune stones were intended to put on display the inheritance rights of a landed property so that they could be understood by the wider community, by presenting information about the relationship between the sponsor and the dead man to all who witnessed it. According to Sawyer, these stones emerged at a time of social fluctuation caused by the increase in movement of the landed magnates all over Scandinavia, set against the background of social change in the late Viking Age.

However, I would like to claim that rune stones had yet another function other than the aforesaid two roles. In order to understand my claim, we have to consider how a rune stone was made. The process of the fabrication of rune stones consisted of the following stages. (1) drafting of the text by the sponsor; (2) acquiring the stone; (3) carving the inscription; (4) drawing or painting the ornamentation. The complexity of this process reminds us that raising a rune stone required a significant investment of resources. And I would point out one important but easily overlooked fact: a rune stone is not a uniform artifact of mass production but something “made to order.” In general, the greater the sponsor’s investment, the more impressive his sponsored stone would be in text, size, and ornamentation. If a sponsor wanted to make a superior stone, he would organize it so that sufficient time and money was available to raise such a stone. The variable degree of investment resulted in the textual and visual differences between rune stones. Moreover, in order to intensify the impact on the onlookers of the rune stone, some sponsors created an entire monument consisting of some rune stones and other non-inscribed stones, such as the Bække monument and the Västra Strö monument.

There are differences between inscriptions, types of stone, and sites where the stones are erected, and, of course, differences in the social contexts in which the stones were erected. These differences hardly occurred by chance. On the contrary, it seems to me that the sponsors of each rune stone made an effort to emphasize the differences between their own stones and those of others. Of course, one of the assumptions of this argument is that the distinctions between the stones depended, to some degree, on how much the sponsors invested; by extension this means that a contemporary Danish witness would have recognized how much investment had gone into the making of a stone that he saw at a crossroads or on the sponsor’s farm.

Why did sponsors want to distinguish their own from other rune stones? In the late Viking Age there were a lot of landed magnates throughout Scandinavia. They wanted to extend their power over the land in the vicinity of their territories. Rune stones were very popular and accessible ways of communicating with other Danes, and in particular the large, colorfully painted stones would have appealed even to those magnates who could not read the runes themselves (Brink 2005). Richer magnates could invest their resources in more conspicuous stones, and arrange rune stones along with unadorned stones to form a monument. Rune stones were thus a form of political expression for Scandinavian magnates, reflecting the available resources – and, by extension – the power and influence of the sponsor.

Textual and contextual analysis of the Jelling rune stones

In this section I will reconsider basic information about the two Jelling rune stones in order to apply the above-mentioned approach to analysing them. As is well known, there are two Jelling rune stones, a smaller one (DR41), and a larger one (DR42). The smaller one was made under the sponsorship of Gorm the Old in memory of his wife Thyre before 958. Gorm is believed to have been the founder of the Jelling dynasty, which is the first Danish dynasty to appear in historical sources. This stone is 139 cm high in rectangular form, consisting of side A and side B, and its runic inscription reads:

King Gorm made this monument in memory of his wife Thyre, Denmark’s adornment.

The larger stone, on the other hand, was sponsored by Harald Bluetooth in memory of his parents Gorm the Old and Thyre after his baptism, probably in the 960s. According to traditional historiography Harald is famous for having brought Roman-Catholic Christianity into

pagan Denmark (Roesdahl 2002). This stone is 243 cm high, in prism form, consisting of side A, side B and side C, and its runic inscription reads:

King Harald commanded this monument to be made in memory of his father Gorm and his mother Thyre. That Harald won the whole of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian.

The text impresses the reader because the testimony of the three political deeds accomplished by Harald: the unification of Denmark, his reign over (a part of) Norway, and the Christianization of the Danes. These achievements were all clearly inscribed using runic text. In addition to this characteristic text are two images drawn on side B and side C respectively: drawings that have made the larger stone all the more famous. On the surface of side B is drawn the image of the so-called “Jelling beast,” while on the surface of side C can be seen an image of the crucified Christ (Wamers 2000).

These two stones form part of the so-called “Jelling monument,” which was registered as the first Danish World Heritage Site in 1993. The World Heritage website informs us that the Jelling monument consists of two huge mounds and a wooden church in addition to the two rune stones. The North Mound, which is 50m in diameter, contains a burial chamber, while the South Mound, which is also 50m in diameter, is empty. The grave found in the wooden church of the North Mound contained the bones of man who is thought to have been Gorm the Old. The two rune stones are situated between the North Mound and the South Mound.

Recent archaeological excavation is shedding new light on the composition of the Jelling monument. According to a report published in 2008 by P. M. Christensen and S. W. Anderson, more elements should be added to the three constituents elements registered as forming the World Heritage Site when the monument is analyzed properly, in its entirety: these additional elements include ship-setting, fencing and house building (Christensen and Anderson 2008). Ship-setting, that is stone-setting which is arranged like form of ship, is said to be pagan custom. As the catalogues prepared by T. Capelle and M. Müller-Wille show, the custom was performed in scattered locales around Scandinavia and related places until the Viking Age (Capelle 1986). The ship-setting discovered under the Jelling monument, which may well be more than 300m in length, is one of the biggest examples in Scandinavia.

The Jelling monument was supposedly situated on one of the royal domains. However, here we have to emphasize that the Jelling monument was not created at one time. As S. Hvass notes (1998), Jelling had had a long history of settlement since Roman times. When Jelling became a royal domain is unknown, but it can readily be imagined that Gorm’s choice of Jelling as a central locale for his government of Denmark provided one of the important opportunities for its development. Recently, Klaus Randsborg (2008) has even claimed that the Jelling monument was developed by three successive kings: Gorm the Old, Harald Bluetooth, and Swein Forkbeard.

The new direction of these recent studies on the Jelling monument inclines us to investigate the way in which the monument was created and attempt to foster a “long view” of its changing role (Roesdahl 1997). The problem we face, however, comes from the differences between Gorm’s monument and Harald’s one. It is clear that both Gorm and Harald intended to make a monument when they raised their stones because both DR 41 and DR42 are inscribed with the word **kubl** (monument) rather than *sten* (stone), where the latter is formulaic expression used on most rune stones (Nielsen 1977). Given this discrepancy, we ideally should discuss the differences between Gorm’s entire monument and Harald’s, but, because the making process of the monument is unknown, here I will limit our discussion to the rune stones themselves, which expressed the central ideas of the sponsor kings. In the following sections, then, I will compare each of the elements constituting the Jelling rune stones by dividing our analytical approach into (1) textual comparison and (2) contextual comparison.

I have already examined the text inscribed both on DR41 and DR42, and compared it with the standard formula – X (sponsor) raised the stone in memory of Y (the deceased) – found on other rune stones. The variety of texts found on rune stones depends mainly on what elements are added to the formula text. We can divide the elements into three categories: (a) the relationship between X and Y, (b) the titles and epithets of X and Y, (c) the deeds of X or Y. The

plain formula text of DR41 and DR42, to which no elements are added, is as follows.

(DR41) Gorm made this monument in memory of Thyre.

(DR42) Harald commanded this monument to be made in memory of Gorm and Thyre.

In turn, when all the extra elements are added to the above-mentioned plain formula, DR41 and DR42 read as follows (added elements underlined).

(DR41) King Gorm made this monument in memory of his wife Thyre, Denmark's adornment.

(DR42) King Harald commanded this monument to be made in memory of his father Gorm and his mother Thyre. That Harald won the whole of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian.

All the elements are put in order as in the following table.

DR41

	X: Gorm	Y: Thyre
(a)		Wife
(b)	King	
(c)		Denmark's adornment

DR42

	X: Harald	Y: Gorm and Thyre
(a)		father and mother
(b)	King	
(c)	won the whole of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian	

In DR41 and DR42 both of the sponsors Gorm and Harald have the title “king,” while the dead are indicated by way of the relationship between the sponsor and the dead. Here our attention should be drawn to element (c): that is, the deeds either of the sponsor or of the dead. The points to be discussed in the following are twofold: (1) the expression “Denmark” inscribed on both of the stones and (2) to whom element (c) was appended.

First we will consider the expression “Denmark.” DR41 refers to “Denmark’s adornment,” whereas DR42 has “the unification of Denmark” as one of the three deeds accomplished by Harald. In these two expressions “Denmark” (**tanmaurk**) is the word referring to the particular space distinguished from other neighboring Scandinavian realms like Norway and Sweden. The significance of the fact that Gorm and Harald adapted these expressions on their rune stones must be stressed, because this represents one of the earliest examples of the use of “Denmark” as the name of a nation. Before the appearance of the Jelling stones, the term “the Danes” (*Dani*), rather than Denmark, was the expression that designated those who lived in Danish territory as a nation. The term “Danes” dates back to the history of Franks written by Gregory of Tours in the 6th century, and it is later attested to in several Carolingian chronicles and annals.

The earliest extant use of the expression “Denmark,” on the other hand, appeared in 10th-century sources written outside Denmark. The first instance appears in the additional part of the Old English Orosius’s *World History* (Old English Orosius 1980: 16). This history was originally written in Latin in 6th-century Spain, and it was translated in the late 9th century, probably in the court of King Alfred. The next mention is in the *Chronicle* of Æthelweard, which was written in late 9th-century England (*Chronicon Æthelweard* 1962: 6-7), and the third is in the *Chronicle* of Regino of Prüm, written in early 10th-century Germany.¹ What

¹ *Eodem anno Nortmanni, qui in Chinheim ex Denimarca venerant, adsentiente Godefrido Rhenum ascendunt et Diusburh oppido occupato, munitionem en eodom loco solito construunt et in eo tota heime resident.* (“Regino von Prüm” 1960: 266)

happened between the earlier part of the 10th century, when the term “Denmark” first appeared outside Denmark, and the latter half of the 10th century, when the Danish kings raised the rune stones in Jelling? We have found only two other rune stones on which “Denmark” is inscribed. Nils Hybel (2008) has claimed that the expression “Denmark,” which was used to designate “the march of the Danes into surrounding countries,” was gradually imported to the territory of the Danes as the name of a nation. The importance here is that the expression “Denmark” only became recognized in Denmark in the middle of the 10th century.

The most important textual difference between DR41 and DR42 lies in element (c), the deeds of X or Y. On DR41, Y (Thyre) has a special epithet: “Denmark’s adornment.” This epithet is unique to the DR41 among all of the Scandinavian rune stones, so it is probable that the sponsor Gorm made a substantial statement by decorating his wife Thyre in this way. Although few facts are known to us about the historical Thyre, the epithet “Denmark’s adornment” implies that Thyre played an important role in the reign of Gorm (Sawyer and Sawyer 2003). By contrast, DR42 has, in its representation of the deeds done by Harald, one of the longest texts of all Scandinavian rune stones. More importantly, the line of historical deeds is concerned with Harald, the sponsor of the stone, rather than with Gorm nor Thyre, both of whom are commemorated on the stone. This is striking because it was normal for historical deeds to be inscribed on rune stones by the sponsor in commemoration of the dead. Few sponsors adverted to their own historical deeds. What does it mean? I would like to emphasize that DR42 was expressly made by Harald to celebrate his own deeds rather than to commemorate his parents. Harald’s rune stone was a self-praising landmark rather than a commemoration of the dead, and this makes it unique amongst all of the Danish rune stones.

And when we turn our attention to the contextual elements of DR41 and DR42, the differences between the two stones will become much clearer. DR41, which has three lines of text on A side and 1 line on side B, is 139 cm high in rectangular form. This stone does not have any ornamentation on its surface. DR42, by comparison, has four lines on side A and one line on each of sides B and C, and stands 243 cm high in prism form. What arrests our attention, though, is of course the ornamentation: DR42 is one of the most impressive examples of ornamentation of all the rune stones in Scandinavia. As I have already mentioned, on the surface of side B there is the image of the so-called “Jelling beast,” while on the surface of side C can be seen the image of the crucified Christ. All three sides are linked with a grass ribbon. To the complexity and richness of the tapestry must be added the fact that we can readily imagine that the images on the surface of the DR42 would have been painted colorfully at the time.

Most rune stones found in the territory of medieval Denmark, which formed the main part of the Jutlandic peninsula that also comprised Funen, Zealand and South Sweden (Scania, Halland and Blekinge), are less than 200 cm high. The number of examples standing more than 200 cm is only six. If we take this information into consideration, then, DR41 is not a particularly massive stone, even though it was raised by King Gorm. By comparison, DR42 is one of the tallest and largest stones in Denmark. When we remember that the rune stone functioned as a political representation of the sponsor in the late Viking Age, the contextual differences between DR41 and DR42 may reflect the differences between the resources available to Gorm and those to Harald.

Who witnessed the Jelling rune stones?

In the first section I suggested that a rune stone functioned as a medium in the community to which the sponsor of the stone belonged. This medium presupposed an interaction between the producer of the information impressed upon the artifact and the receiver of that information. However, few studies have dealt with the problem of the reception of the message conveyed through the medium. Here, then, I would like to concentrate on the problem of determining who might well have borne witness to the Jelling rune stones. To whom did Harald show the Jelling monument?

First of all, the monument was designed to transmit the memory of Harald to later generations of the royal families of the Jelling dynasty. The three deeds accomplished by Harald and celebrated on the stone, namely the “unification of Denmark, reign over Norway and Christianisation of the Danes,” would have most likely have been the most important

accomplishments that the Danes had ever experienced. During the reign of Harald Bluetooth the political center of Denmark was moving from Jelling to eastern Denmark. However, Jelling remained one of the most important sites, which reminded the descendants of Harald of the memory of the greatness of Harald himself.

The second group of observers would have been the landed magnates. As we know, the landed magnates settled in all parts of Denmark and raised rune stones. They would have gathered in Jelling in order to communicate with the king for a number of reasons, such as to settle disputes, demand their rights, undertake transactions and so on.

The third group we assume to have been other Scandinavian kings and magnates. In his Deeds of the Archbishops of Hamburg, Adam of Bremen tells us that Harald allied himself with King Edmund of Svea (Adam of Bremen, *Gesta*, I, 25). Moreover, according to Icelandic sources Harald supported Bjørn of Birka against King Eric of Svea, culminating in the battle of Fyrisvallarna, probably near Uppsala, in 980 (*Knýtlinga saga*, ch. 2). In particular, Harald allied with Jarl of Lade, one of the most powerful magnates in northwestern Norway. When Jarl Hakon of Lade stood in opposition to King Harald Greycloak of Norway, the Danish king supported the party of Hakon, which at led to the expression “reign of Norway” inscribed on the DR42.

The fourth set of observers would most likely have been legates of neighboring polities. Because of the emergence of Ottonian Germany, Denmark was becoming conscious of changing political situations in northeastern Europe, and began to make contact with other states from the reign of Gorm to that of Harald (Bolin 1931). The arrival of this fourth category to Denmark seems to have intensified only after the official Christianization of the Danes. Jelling was at the political centre of the dynasty, and so attracted foreign magnates and kings for the purpose of transacting with the Jelling kings. For example, Adam of Bremen relates that Archbishop Unni entered Denmark to meet Gorm the Old (Adam of Bremen, *Gesta*, I, 59) and that Archbishop Liaviso of Hamburg-Bremen sent legates to Swein Forkbeard (Adam of Bremen, *Gesta*, II, 29). In 963 Harald allied with Duke Wichmann of Saxony, and in 973 he dispatched a legate to Quedlinburg (Widukind of Corvey, *Res gesta*, III, 64). More importantly, Harald’s wife Tove was a daughter of Duke Mistivoj of the Abo-drites, one of the most powerful Slavonic polities at that time *(DR55). These cases remind us that the Danes under the rulership of Harald Bluetooth were not shut off from Europe, but rather that they made contact with foreign polities. Those who were dispatched to the Jelling kings would have seen the Jelling rune stones for themselves, and may even have been told of the deeds of Harald during the celebration rites conducted when receiving foreign legates. When they returned to their own courts they would have conveyed to their bishops or kings what they had seen and heard at Jelling.

Conclusion: Why did Harald raise a larger stone than that of his father’s?

Here I would like to sum up the arguments of the previous three sections. In the first section I made clear that landed magnates tried to create different rune stones from each other. The erected stone provided a physical representation of the status of the sponsor of the stone, according to the degree of investment of resources. The raising of rune stones around Danish territory created a political landscape.

In the second section I concentrated on the analysis of two of the Jelling rune stones. By pursuing both a textual and a contextual approach to the stones I reached the conclusion that Gorm’s stone, which was moderate for that of a king, and Harald’s, which was much more magnificent and impressive than any other Danish rune stone, represented the resources at the disposal of and thus the power exercised by the two Danish kings.

In the third section I shed light on the problem of the contemporary reception of the Jelling rune stones. Gorm and Harald situated the court in Jelling, so that we can imagine that all visitors to the Danish court would have looked on the Jelling stones. According to historical sources, we can suppose that the visitors consisted of four categories: descendants of the dynasty, Danish magnates, Scandinavian kings, and magnates and foreign legates to Denmark.

And yet, when these contextual conditions are taken into consideration, we still must return to the central problem: Why did Harald raise a larger rune stone than that of his father? Harald Bluetooth was aware that visitors would come to Jelling when he had managed to “unify

Denmark, reign over Norway and make the Danes Christian.” To them the new Christian king would like to demonstrate that he had become a powerful Christian king who had distinguished himself from his pagan father. As we saw in the first section, the rune stone functioned as the kind of medium which reflected the power of the sponsor. The Danes and Scandinavians who looked on the Jelling stones would have realized Harald’s power in Denmark.

However, Harald’s stone and the monument that contained it would also have appealed to those legates from foreign countries who did not share the social values that lay behind the erection of the rune stones. Even non-Scandinavians who could not understand the runes would understand the meaning of the imagery of DR42, which reflected Harald’s historical deeds and ideology. Why did Harald show DR42 to foreigners? I imagine that Harald would have liked to show that he had become a Christian king who reigned over the new state: “Denmark.” Being Christian was an indispensable condition for any state wishing to participate in international politics around 1000. The Jelling monument created by Harald was thus a symbol designed to eclipse the pagan monument erected by Gorm and advertise the emergence of a new Christian state.

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