

Futhark

International Journal of Runic Studies

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Vol. 7 · 2016

Published with financial support from the
Nordic Publications Committee for Humanist
and Social Sciences Periodicals (NOP-HS)

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ISSN 1892-0950

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Heikki Oja. *Riimut: Viestejä viikingeiltä*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2015. 240 pp., numerous black and white illustrations. ISBN: 978-952-222-591-7. €33.00.

Reviewed by Kendra Willson

Riimut: Viestejä viikingeiltä (Runes: Messages from the Vikings) is the first general book on runes written in Finnish based on scholarly tradition. The author, Heikki Oja, Ph.D. and docent (adjunct associate professor) in astronomy at the University of Helsinki, was the head of the University Almanac in Helsinki from 1994 to 2012. Oja has made substantial contributions to popular science (cf. “Heikki Oja”). He was instrumental in founding the science museum Heureka and has written numerous general works on astronomy; he was long secretary for the periodical *Tähdet ja avaruus* (Stars and space). Oja became interested in runic calendar sticks (Finnish *riimusauva*, Swedish *runstav* or *primstav*) through his almanac work (p. 8), discovered the lack of popular books on runes in Finnish and, after retirement, decided to address this gap (Oja 2016).

Introductions to runes are generally national in orientation—hence Spurkland 2001 (trans. 2005) focuses on Norway, Jansson 1963 (trans. 1987) and Snædal, Åhlén and Lundberg 2004 on Sweden, Moltke 1976 (rev. trans. 1985) on Denmark, Page 1999 and (to a lesser extent) Elliott 1959 (rev. ed. 1989) on England. Broader overall treatments tend to come from outside Scandinavia: Barnes 2012, Findell 2014, Krause 1970, Musset and Mossé 1965, Page 1987 (still with a British emphasis); Düwel [1968] 2008 concentrates on early inscriptions. Oja represents a Finnish perspective. As Finland is outside the core runic areas but closely tied to Sweden, his introduction covers the lifespan of runes from invention to modern reception, with an emphasis on Scandinavia and on runic calendars.

In a way, Oja’s book is trying to do the work of three books. First, it is a brief general introduction to runes. Second, it provides a more thorough treatment of runic calendar sticks. Third, it assembles information about runic inscriptions in Finland. To a certain extent, these functions have different audiences and might have been separated into different publications. However, it is likely that Finnish readers will both want general background on runes and be particularly curious about runes in Finland. The issue of runes in Finland should be explored further in future works (by Oja and others). Assembling information on runes in Finland will help form a more cohesive picture of Finland’s relationship to runic culture and Scandinavian culture of the Viking Age more generally (various aspects of which are explored in Ahola and Frog with Tolley 2014 and Ahola, Frog and Lucenius 2014).

Willson, Kendra. Review of Heikki Oja. *Riimut: Viestejä viikingeiltä*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2015. 240 pp., numerous black and white illustrations. ISBN: 978-952-222-591-7.
Futhark: International Journal of Runic Studies 7 (2016, publ. 2017): 158–63.

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The question of runes and Finland is prominent in the book, starting from the first page (p. 7). Runes in Finland are notable for their near absence. The dearth of runic finds from Åland is particularly mysterious, given Åland's close ties to Uppland during the Viking Age (p. 228, cf. Sjöstrand 2014, 128). Although there was much contact between what is now Finland and central Sweden during the main periods of runic production, only a handful of runic inscriptions have been recovered in Finnish territory. All are in Old Scandinavian or Latin; no runic inscriptions have been established to be in a Finnic or Sámi language, although proposed interpretations involving those languages occur occasionally in the literature (see discussion in Willson 2012). Most of the inscriptions found in Finland are on loose objects such as coins and are thought to have originated elsewhere, e.g. in Sweden (Hiittinen/Hitis stone fragment) or Gotland (Tuukkala brooch), and been imported to Finland. The few inscriptions on landscape features (e.g. at Vöyri/Vörå and Naantali/Nådendal) are commonly regarded as modern. However, three medieval wooden vessels found in Turku with runic inscriptions in Latin point to runes being at least a limited part of medieval writing culture there (Harjula 2008, 16 f.; 2016).

Oja discusses each of the inscriptions from Finland (on artifacts pp. 72–78, runic calendars pp. 81–85, the Vörå inscriptions pp. 159–67, the Hitis stone pp. 213 f., Ålandic inscriptions pp. 215–20, modern ones p. 221), making the book a useful point of entry on runes in Finland. The final section of Oja's book (pp. 225–28) addresses the question of why there are so few runic inscriptions in Finland. The population density in what is now Finland was quite low at the start of the second millennium A.D., whereas runestones appeared mainly in more densely populated areas (p. 225). The principal directions of trade contacts from Finland in the tenth and eleventh centuries were east and south, as seen e.g. in the numismatic record (Talvio 2002), while Finland was of limited interest to the Vikings, less a destination than a way-station on the eastern route to Russia and Byzantium (p. 226). Swedish influence only started to become dominant in Finland in the twelfth century, by which time the use of runes in Sweden was fading in favor of the Latin alphabet (p. 228). Runic calendars, however, persisted in Sweden for centuries longer, and this tradition did take root in Finland (p. 228).

The volume is also distinctive among introductions to runes in its emphasis on runic calendar sticks. These are generally not considered by runologists to be “real runes”, but like ownership marks (Finnish *puumerkki*, Swedish *bomärke*) they have a connection to earlier runic traditions (Oja does not discuss the evolution of the symbols or the relationship to earlier runic traditions in any detail). Enoksen has a short section on runic calendars (1998, 156–60), but for the most part they fall outside the scope of runic introductions. In Oja's book, the section on runic calendars (pp. 79–156) is comparable in length to and precedes the section on runestones (pp. 157–228), and the treatment of the examples is much more extensive than in other parts of the book. The section includes detailed enumerations of holidays that appear in runic calendars (pp. 119–51) and other

information that is somewhat peripheral to discussion of runes *per se*. The section on calendars could almost have functioned as its own book.

The fact-checking is fairly good overall. There are some apparent oversights; for instance, Oja mentions the Roman and North Italic theories of the origins of the runes (pp. 12) but not the less popular Greek one (though still represented e.g. by Morris 1988). The statement that the original primary function of runes was “taikamerkkeinä ja koristeina” (as magical symbols and decorations; p. 7) may be a matter of definition and point of view. The characterization of **f** and **þ** as having respective voiced values *v* and *dh* (i.e. [ð]) “sanan tai tavun lopussa” (at the end of a word or syllable; pp. 18, 19) is not fully precise (see Williams 2016, 188, on a similar simplification in Enoksen 2015, 77). Some simplifications may reflect a desire to keep the treatment concise and accessible.

There is some ambiguity about the language forms represented, likely reflecting varied practices in the sources Oja used and a lack of standardized terminology in Finnish. In some places, the text does not make a clear distinction between language forms or futhark variants. For instance, the language of the third- or fourth-century Tune stone is called *muinaisnorja* ‘Old Norse’ (p. 13), rather than e.g. *kantaskandinaavi* ‘Proto-Scandinavian’ or *kantapohjoisgermaani* ‘Proto-North Germanic’. The box on runic inscriptions in the British Isles (pp. 192 f.) does not clearly specify that the St. Paul’s burial monument inscription is in Scandinavian language and runes, in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon one on the Ruthwell Cross discussed in the following paragraph. The brief presentation of Anglo-Saxon runes (pp. 11, 15–17) does not mention that the Frisian runic tradition is partly distinct. A statement that the oldest runic calendar must be from the eleventh or twelfth century as it contained some older futhark rune forms (p. 99) is reproduced from George Stephens (cf. 1866–1901, 2: 866–69); the older futhark had ceased to be used by A.D. c. 800. Many of these details may be due to a lack of clarity in the sources Oja used or an insufficiently critical reading of older references such as Stephens.

There are also inconsistencies in the treatment of names in transliterations and interpretations of inscriptions. Oja sometimes provides only transliterations (especially in cases where there is no established interpretation), sometimes only Finnish translations; contrary to general runological practice, he uses italics for both transliterations and normalized forms in interpretations. In general his transliterations are simplified for readability, replacing **þ** with <th> and word dividers with spaces, and not indicating bind-runes. The Latin text on the Turku stave vessel *auemâriagrakia* appears normalized to *Ave Maria Gratia* (p. 76). Names sometimes appear normalized to Old Scandinavian forms, e.g. *olafs* (gen.) is rendered *Olafrin* (in the translation including the Finnish genitive ending *-in*) in the Bro church inscription from fifteenth-century Gotland (p. 206). More often, names are adjusted to modern Swedish or other Scandinavian forms (**hulti** > *Hulte*, **fastkair** > *Fastger*, but *Rikr* is not modernized in U Fv1976;104, p. 180). The normalized Old Norse form with untranslated byname *Olafr Hattusveinn* appears in a translation of a Bryggen inscription (p. 70, correct *Hettusveinn*); on the same

page the name *Torstein Lang* appears in a modern Norwegian form; this contrasts with the treatment of names on the previous page, where *ð* and *þ* are indicated by digraphs <dh> and <th> in the name **gubormr** (normalized Old Norse *Guðþormr*), which thus appears as *Gudhthormr*, and where the byname **fupcllæikir** (*fuðsleikir*) is translated (as *Pillunnuolija* ‘cunt-licker’; p. 69). Sometimes confusing forms appear: (Proto/Early/Pre-)Germanic *harixasti* in the inscription in a North Italic alphabet on the Negau helmet B is “normalized” to the Old High German form *herigast* (p. 11, most likely after Elliott 1959, 9, corrected in 1989, 9). The names **kuñnar** (transliterated simply “kunar”) and **hlhi** in the twelfth-century Rike shield (p. 56) appear partially normalized to *Kunnar* and *Hilgi* rather than, say, Old West Norse *Gunnarr* and *Helgi*. Presumably Oja is following the practices of his diverse sources.

In most of the book, the amount of information provided about individual inscriptions or topics is generally appropriate—enough to give context without “bogging down”—and Oja does a good job of structuring information into engaging and easily digestible stories.

One implicit audience for the book are people interested in fantasy and reenactment of various sorts; references to Tolkien appear in several places (pp. 11, 40, 57). Those interested in carving their own runic calendars will also find plenty of models, as well as explicit advice (pp. 155 f.).

Oja’s book is extensively illustrated with black and white drawings and photographs, most reproduced from older works (p. 8) but some of his own taking. Every two-page opening has some kind of illustration. Care has been taken to make the pictures clear and the overall effect aesthetic and unified. Captions and short texts associated with the illustrations provide interesting additions to the text; I found it possible to read the short texts without losing the flow of the whole.

To maintain flow in the text, Oja does not use footnotes or parenthetical citations but frequently integrates mentions of his sources into the main text. The four-page bibliography (pp. 231–34) is divided into numerous small sections, evidently representing the sources used in preparing each chapter of the book. It includes both canonical works and some obscure references, as well as a limited number of online resources. The six-page index (pp. 235–40) focuses on proper names.

Riimut: Viestejä viikingeiltä is a visually attractive and clearly written book and enjoyable to read. It provides an approachable introduction to runes in a language that has not previously been represented in the literature. It is hoped that the book will help stimulate interest in runes among Finnish readers.

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