

## *Frands Herschend*

# Kind hearts are more than cunning heirs and simple pride than property

After a number of articles on rune-stones, Professor Birgit Sawyer has written a book that can be read as a synthesis-for-the-time-being of her rune-stone studies (*The Viking-Age rune-stones. Custom and commemoration in Early Medieval Scandinavia*. Oxford 2000). That makes it an interesting book and promising one. It is also a book worth discussing. In spite of all its virtues I will present some critical points of view mainly on the author's use of rune-stone texts in the study of inheritance. The chapters on inheritance are central, but running through the table of contents, the fact that there is an excursus within the survey makes a reader curious. By definition, an excursus will digress and go beyond the scope of the investigation. For that reason it can be instructive to begin a book with the excursus in order to form an opinion about the kind of discussion and hypothesis that does not fit the main line of argument. In this case, reading the excursus first happens to be rewarding.

In an English book on the nature of history, in a passage about the scholarly historical text, a woman, no doubt the English Lady, is said to have expressed her surprise that these texts are so dull, given the fact that they are 90 percent pure fantasy. This anecdotal comment springs to mind when reading *The tug-of-war over Thyre*. This text demonstrates that if the fantasy level is allowed to rise above 90, the whole thing becomes fun. There is a risk, of course, that one or two among the poor in spirit will be enchanted, but I for one feel immune, having indulged in *Ungdommens Bog om vort Land* – 'The Youth's Book about our Country' (i.e. Denmark) already as a child. Since then, *Thyre*, *Gorm* and *Harald* are my friends – today, however, for the fact that so little can be known about them. They survive because they have exchanged limelight for obscurity and become *Röde Orm* material. Knowing so little about these figures ought to make it difficult to write an excursus arguing that it was Harald who set up Gorm's stone (p.166). To Birgit Sawyer, however, this is no problem at all. Her interpretation shows a flair for finding out plotting sponsors and their secret plans, but if one believes in that kind of revision, a whole range of equally hard-proven facts suggest themselves: neither Gorm nor Thyre were dead when Gorm's stone was put up. The monument commemorates Thyre as wife and Denmark's *bod*, not the dead Thyre. The

FRANDS HERSCHEND

whole picture of Gorm and Thyre is distorted by the fact that the two of them, although Christian in their homespun, why not, semi-Anglo-Saxon way, were probably trying to check Ottonian Christianity and its aggressive politics – and so on and why not? But in historical texts below the 90 percent gauge that kind of revision does not fit. Lacking new source material one should let the obscure remain obscure, the past dull and the late 10<sup>th</sup> century a period when royalty and the upper classes revived such Iron-Age notions as boat metaphors, burial mounds and rune-stone fashion for social and political reasons.

Nevertheless, the excursus is good and headstrong reading presumably included as a claim to interpretations that the author hopes will by and by prevail. Some readers may be looking for references to more recent work by Knud Krogh and to works by Harald Andersen or perhaps Else Roesdahl, just to get a feeling of the modern tug-of-war over Jelling. There are no such references and they are not lacking, because, in essence, Birgit Sawyer is defending specific theses and driving home a message. Therefore, rapidly departing from mainstream interpretation, she is right not to bother the reader with dutiful references or, as she puts it, ‘these various opinions will be referred to where they are relevant (p. 15). It seems there are 146 relevant works to refer to when it comes to rune-stones, custom and commemoration.

Reading the excursus alerts the reader and raises the question whether there is any foundation in the rune-stones for such revision as Birgit Sawyer argues for. One should bring along these doubts when turning to the two chapters dealing with rune-stone inscriptions as expressions of claims to inheritance of property. When the author states ‘that almost *all* inscriptions reflect inheritance and property rights’ (p. 47), she has taken on a difficult case to prove. To declare the (seemingly descriptive) inscriptions on rune-stones to be reflections of (cunning) claims to inheritance of property is to propose a general explanation that must immediately be modified. It is a gross misinterpretation e.g. to consider King Harald’s rune-stone primarily to be an announcement of his right to inheritance of property after his father and mother. It is equally odd to interpret phenomena such as self-commemoration and so-called nonsense as claims to inheritance. To Birgit Sawyer, such texts are probably the exception that proves the rule and goes without saying.

Here and there, Birgit Sawyer will of course modify her views and e.g. point out that some memorials belong to the world of men ‘where the honour and reputation of the deceased was an important element in the inheritance he passed on’ (p. 69). But several straightforward commemorative texts are none the less ‘probably’, ‘presumably’, ‘perhaps’, ‘fairly’, ‘likely’, ‘conceivable’ (pp. 47–69) as expressions of claims to inheritance. The text Sö203: *Östen had this stone raised in memory of Togerd, his sister, Hallbjorn in memory of his mother*, e.g., ‘seems to’ mean ‘that Hallbjorn was under age and therefore under his uncle’s tutelage. Östen also

signalled that he was closest to the inheritance, if something should happen to Hallbjorn' (p.55).

It is odd to think that a brother caring for his dead sister's infant son would need a rune-stone to 'signal' the obvious. Moreover, if a potential claim to inheritance after his sister governs his actions, there is no point in mentioning the boy and certainly no point in taking care of or protecting him when neglect is likely to do the trick – and why raise a stone in the first place? It is hard to imagine that in 11<sup>th</sup> century Södermanland, runes on a stone, *rað þu!* – 'rede them if you can', were more proof than actually bringing up Hallbjorn. Sponsoring the stone, Östen stands out as a man of virtue for what it is worth. Arguing what 'seems' to be the case in order to narrow down his signal to concern a claim for inheritance, in a text that has nothing explicitly to say about inheritance, 'seems' for no apparent reason to favour one interpretation above the other.

Rune-stones display family relations and we can always imagine a corresponding inheritance situation: Togerð is a single mother living at her parent's farm, now owned by Östen, and little is known about Hallbjorn's father. With his stone Östen tries to make both Togerð and her bastard respectable. Soon he will adopt Hallbjorn and rumours will have it that ... someone once remarked that such vague runic expressions as 'he disappeared with Ingvar' could cover the fact that the man in question met his death in the red-light district of Kiev. Anecdotally speaking, this Not-the-English-Lady had a point, inasmuch as there is more to life than honorable death or for that matter inheritance. And there is more to the inscribed bauta-stones of the Late Viking Age, the end of a three thousand year old stone-raising tradition, than cunning claims to property. Birgit Sawyer does little to qualify her thesis and much to drive home her gospel and there is hardly any discussion about the meaning of the concept of inheritance. The source critical problem concerns the intentions behind the inscriptions. Birgit Sawyer's critical position, favouring revision, is based on the conviction that the texts are indirect descriptions of great precision silently relating to inheritance. So great is her conviction that she finds it unnecessary to analyse texts using the word *arfi* – 'heir' – and related words as a sample of primary sources. That is a pity. They are well worth attention. The analysis should be a two step investigation: case studies followed by a systematic summary. Sawyer exemplifies case studies with a discussion about U29 and related stones, but there are other examples to look into. The four texts in memory of Öpir in Södermanland e.g. run as follows:

At Aspa thing:

(137a) *Tora raised the stone after Öpir her husband.*

(137b, a verse) *This stone stands after Öpir at the 'thing-place' after Tora's man. Westwards he armed the men ... [a badly preserved and obscure text probably stating that out there, Öpir's son saw his father die].*

(138, a verse) *Here stands the stone after good Öpir's and Torun's heir, Gylla's brother.*

FRANDS HERSCHEND

*God help the soul.*

On the burial ground in nearby Spelvik:

(FV:1982:235) *Öger and St...?* [I suggest a son] *They had the stone raised after their father Öpir.*

We can infer six relative time levels, events and family constellations from these texts assuming the likely, namely that Torun and Tora (unlike *Porunn/Poruðr*) are two different women (cf. nordiskt runnamnslexikon, <http://grimnir.dal.lu.se/runlex/lexikon.pdf>) and Öpir one man (Table 1). Birgit Sawyer is of an other opinion when it comes to Torun/Tora and she does not take FV:1982:235 into account (p. 120ff.).

Öpir's death has caused the erection of the monuments. The anonymous sponsor (Sö138) commemorates Öpir's first family, Tora and her children the second one. His eldest son figures anonymously in the two matching Aspa inscriptions, Sö137b & 138. This son, therefore, was recognised by both sides of the family. The odd stone is the one raised by the anonymous sponsor who commemorates the anonymous son and heir. He uses the word *arfi* to describe a dead person as a technical phenomenon rather than a family member. Formally the text commemorates the son, but it is easy to see that in effect it points out the sister and daughter. The way she is introduced is perhaps not as odd as it seems because in Södermanland the deceased is now and then related to other family members in the end of the inscriptions without making these relatives sponsors. On Sö8 it says: *Gylla and Ragntrud they raised this stone after their father Vred, Olvev's husband, Bjorn's brother. God help his soul.* Still one may wonder why Gylla at Aspa did not sponsor a stone herself or why Tora and all three children did not join in one inscription – the children commemorating their father, the wife her husband. In Uppland such texts are common: *Skalle and Sibbe and Lifsten had the stone raised after Andvett their father and Gillög after her husband.* (U173).

As the stones stand we can imagine a tension or indeed a dispute about inheritance between two sides of a family. In the anonymous sponsor we suspect someone related to the original side indirectly speaking for Gylla. In the end the stones could well have been raised to mark the reconciliation of the two sides, because we

Table 1 An analysis of the inscriptions Sö137–8 and Sö:FV:1982:235

Time level	Event	Family constellation
$t_1$	1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	Torun ←————→ pir
$t_2$	Children 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	Torun    Son    Gylla    pir
$t_3$	Death of wife; 2 <sup>nd</sup> marriage	Son    Gylla    pir ←————→ Tora
$t_4$	Children 2 <sup>nd</sup> marriage	Son    Gylla    pir    ger    St..?    Tora
$t_5$	pir's death	Son    Gylla    ger    St..?    Tora
$t_6$	Death of pir's eldest son	Gylla    ger    St..?    Tora

can argue that the two versified texts make up a pair on the *thing* place where, rather than conflict, agreement should be commemorated. It meets the eye that none of the surviving children are pointed out as heirs. Nevertheless, there is a possible case of inheritance at hand. Should Gylla inherit her brother, Öpir's eldest son, and thus Öpir as well as his first wife, her mother, before her two half brothers, who were Öpir's sons but not his heirs? Who knows! The silence (or lack of 'signal') makes it obvious that *arfi* is used as a factual description related to the passed. There are no clues to as to who will inherit Öpir's son.

There is an equally interesting example in the texts on U72, U73a and U73b (an addition and a free-standing, text outside the rune-serpent):

(U72) *Gærdar and Iorund had these stones raised after their sister's sons Ærnmund and Ingimund.* (U73a) *These signs are made in memory of Inga's sons. She came to inheritance after them, but the brothers came to inheritance after her.* (U73b, addition) *Gærdar and his brother they died in Greece.*

Again 'inheritance' is used in a descriptive way to pinpoint a set of events that has already taken place. The two brothers commemorate their nephews not, as it were, for the fact that they had any inheritance from them, but for the fact that their death created a peculiar reverse situation. In the event the brothers, having both inherited their sister, died in Greece and somebody made it known in the addition to the original text. So it goes. We do not know who is going to inherit the brothers. There is time depth in the monument and Fate rather than luck in the story about the family. Again the *arf*-related words are used to point out facts belonging to the passed.

If we turn to all texts containing *arf*-related words some are badly preserved and others do not tell us why inheritance must be pointed out, but still, a number of cases can be understood. We can summarise and infer some general patterns (Table 2).

The characteristics of Table 2 are in line with Sawyers summary of customs and laws (p. 71f.). Inheritance is between relatives by blood. We do not hear of women who inherit before men, nor of a father being his son's heir or a brother his brother's heir and only once about someone being the heir of a mother. Such cases, however, cannot have been uncommon. When mothers or brothers inherit, or when a son inherits his mother (A:4; C:1–2; D:1) cases are exceptional involving among other things reverse inheritance. Except in the two A:3-cases and the C:2-case, which are not clear, inheritance belongs to a time level prior to the present situation. The main reason why heirs and inheritance are mentioned is to point out sons in relation to themselves and their fathers. This is not surprising, since inheritance from a father in rune-stone circles must often have been an estate. The exception is Kar's father Horse, who 'earned property in Greece for his heir' (U792). All things being equal, land rather than property in general is what makes the hints to inheritance worthwhile. By and large this kind of inheritance is

FRANDS HERSCHEND

Table 2. Inheritance patterns in texts containing *arf*-related words.

Code	Description of inheritance	No. of cases
A:1	One son can inherit his father while his brothers do not: Sö137–38; Sö206+208; U524; U579; U590; U862	6; >20 sons
A:2	One son can inherit his father while his sister(s) do not: Sö137–38; Sö206+208; U354	3; 5 sisters
A:3	One son can inherit his father: Sö287; U792.	2; 2 sons
A:4	One son can inherit his mother while his sister does not: Sö137–38	1; 1 sister
A:1–3	A single son can inherit his father	9; >22 sons
B:1	Sons can inherit their father: G200; G319M; U130; U595; U676; U889.	6; >15 sons
B:2	Sons can inherit their father, while their mother will not inherit her husband: U236–238	1; 6 sons
B:1–2	Two or more sons can inherit their father:	7; >21 sons
C:1	A mother can inherit her sons: U29; U72–73; U332.	3; 4 sons
C:2	A mother can inherit her daughters: U2	1; 1 daughter
D:1	Two brothers can inherit their sister: U332	1; 1 sister
E:1	A man is called another man's heir (i.e. son): DR365; G64M G133M; G244M; G255M; U60; U259; U308; U494; G:FV 1983: 225; G:FV1983:225;	11 cases

a small problem in a peasant society and the reason why so few texts refer to inheritance. Therefore, we can conclude that rune-stones when it comes to inheritance do not comment on the obvious. On the contrary, they are related to the ambiguous, the odd, or the need for a synonym, i.e. 'heir' for 'son'.

The analysis of the usage of the *arf*-related words ought to have been carried out by Birgit Sawyer. It would have supported several of her interpretations, but also questioned the general idea that rune-stones as such were primarily meant to reflect inheritance of property rather than family relations and status, significant in a variety of social situation. Inheritance, when pointed out, is not a major concern of a rune-stone sponsor. Nevertheless, the sample shows that the dominating inheritance problem concerns the position of sons and whether their inheritance should be shared or unshared. Sawyer discusses this well-known dilemma

KIND HEARTS ARE MORE THAN CUNNING HEIRS AND SIMPLE PRIDE THAN PROPERTY

(p. 72ff.), but she refers to Icelandic sagas instead of rune-stone inscriptions to point out preferred sons and to a rune-stone (U130) to give us an example only of a shared inheritance. It is as if she had not noticed that her corpus reflects the very problem, shared/unshared inheritance, in a part of Scandinavia where older habits can be expected to live on. As soon as we understand that there are two ways of defining a son when it comes to inheritance, we would like a text, if it is primarily concerned with inheritance and sons, to tell us about their status as heirs. Rune-stones seldom do. Therefore, when we read the first of the following almost parallel expressions, we cannot say whether there are one or more heirs among the sons:

Sö70: Ketilhofði and Stenketil, they raised this stone after their brother Sigketil, Olaf's nimble sons.

because we do not know whether this text is the equivalent of:

U676: Biart and Byse and Kylfe they had this stone raised after their brother Assur. They were Vigulf's heirs.

with four heirs or rather the equivalent of:

U579: Vidbjorn Gudbjorn's heir raised the stone after his brothers Orm and ...(?) Geir(?) Gude(?) Love after their brothers.

in which Vidbjorn has a special position.

If rune-stone inscriptions were intended to be statements reflecting inheritance, we would have expected more texts to solve this problem. Since the inscriptions make it clear that normally the question of inheritance was settled prior to the erection of the rune-stone, it would have been easy to point out the heir/heirs if pointing them out had been important. Instead, the ambiguity is striking. If we base our knowledge on rune-stones only, we are at loss knowing whether E:1-texts refer to a son as a single heir, one of many, or any son. Consequently, there is a possible inheritance conflict that does not show in a number of very common texts namely those in which one or more sons commemorate their brother or father. Moreover, the above example and Table 2 (Code A:1 compared with B:1–2)<sup>1</sup> suffice to show that when it comes to sons, one cannot draw the conclusion drawn by Sawyer that 'multiple sponsorship reflects the division of an inheritance into individual shares' (p.74).

Rune-stones are not meant to answer questions about sons and heirs, but indirectly they tell us that in some parts of Scandinavia, such questions could be posed. It is not difficult to see that in the outskirts of the Viking Age world, in the Mälär Region and on Gotland, when pillage economy and peasant-based trade, i.e. Viking Age economy, came to an end, the number of peasant sons surviving their fathers was apt to grow. When farmers' sons cannot so easily be engaged in secondary economies in foreign land, making a fortune or getting killed, estates run the risk of being split and families of losing their social position. Therefore, with the growing number of surviving sons conflicts in connection with shared/unshared inheritance will grow before the family structure adapts to the new situ-

FRANDS HERSCHEND

ation. Rune-stones mediate and reflect change also when it comes to inheritance and that is sufficient conclusion, not least while it allows the obscure in the rune-stones to remain obscure and their message, now and then, a little dull and commonplace.

## Noter

- 1 Based on Samnordisk Rundatabas (<http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>) the A:1 texts are: (137a) Tora raised the stone after Öpir her husband. (137b) This stone stands after Öpir on the thing place after Tora's man. Westwards he armed the men ... [a badly preserved and obscure text probably stating that out there, Öpir's son saw his father die] (138) Here stands the stone after good Öpir's heir and Torun's, Gylla's brother. God help the soul (FV:1982:235) Öger and S? They had the stone raised after their father Öpir. **Comment: Anon., Öger and S...? were Öpir's sons but only Anon. was heir.** (Sö206) Here shall stand these stones with red runes Gudlög raised them after her sons, Helmlög after her brothers. (Sö208) Gudlög and Helmlög the [two of them?] raised [after?] -bjorn and Torsten, a good master who lived in Fröslunda, Fullug's heir, he who is Erinband's sister's son. **Comment: Torsten and -bjorn were Fulluge's sons only Torsten was heir.** (U524) Gulle and Stodkel raised the stone after Vidbjorn Krum's good heir. Vidbjorn cut. **Comment: Vidbjorn, Gulle and Stodkel were (probably) Krum's sons, only Vidbjorn was heir.** (U579) Vidbjorn Gudbjorn's heir raised the stone after his brothers Orm and ...? Geir? Gude? Love after their brothers **Comment: Vidbjorn is the only heir but they are all brothers.** (U590) Ragnbjorn had the stone raised after his brother-in-law Vighelm and Fulluge, Fröger's heir [and] Östen. **Comment: Vighelm, Fulluge and Östen are Fröger's sons, only Fulluge was heir.** (U862) Asger and Gerd had this stone raised after the brother Forsel. He was Gudbjorns heir. Visete cut. **Comment:: Asger, Gerd and Forsel are brothers only Forsel was heir.**  
The B:1–2 texts are: (G200) Uni and Hagnved Ragner's heirs they ... Germod may Christ's sinner light help the soul ... Audvald cut the runes. **Comment: Uni and Hagnved are brothers and both are heirs.** (G319) Sigtryg's heirs had the stone made over Audvald their brother. Died in Finland. **Comment: There are a number of brothers who are all Sigtryg's heirs.** (U130) Bjorn Finved's son had these slabs cut after his brother Olev. He was deceived at Finhed. God help his soul. And this farm is their property and family inheritance, Finved's sons at Älgesta. **Comment: Bjorn and Olev are both Finved's heirs.** (U236–8) Ulf's heirs in Lindö had these stones raised after their father Ulf and brother Sven and made a bridge. Visete cut. (U237) Gerder and Fulluge and Sigräv and Sibbe and Sigvad the brothers had this stone raised after their father Ulf and their brother Sven. God help ... (U238) Astrid had this stone raised after her son Sven and the husband Ulf. **Comment: All the six sons were heirs but not their mother.** (U595) Gudleif and Sigvid Aldulf's heirs had the stone cut after their father and Sigborg his mother. **Comment: Both Gudleif and Sigvid are heirs.** (U676) Biart and Byse and Kylfe they had this stone raised after Assur their brother. They were all Vigulf's heirs. **Comment: All the brothers were heirs.** (U889) Asulf and Geir Fast-'s heirs had the stone raised ... They .. for the soul ... **Comment: Asulf and Geir are both heirs.**