

# Research Network of Urban Literacy (RUL)

## The use of writing in Scandinavian towns, c. 800-1500

**Applicant:** Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm

Scholars have previously assumed that people in Scandinavia in the Viking Age and the Middle Ages were generally illiterate. For instance, Danish historians have argued that the ability to read and write was limited to the clerical elite (Fenger 1989: 328; Damsholt 1996: 62f.; Gelting 1999: 344; Hybel 2003: 102, 231). However, during the last decades this traditional view has been challenged by new methodological and theoretical approaches, a growing number of archeological finds of objects with runic inscriptions, and by studies of common people's uses of the Roman alphabet. Apparently, both a simple kind and more advanced versions of literacy were relatively widespread, and this seems in particular to have been the case within urban populations (Kristensen & Poulsen 2016: 245f). If we look beyond Scandinavia, it is well established that across Europe many outside the clergy were a part of written culture, and especially a growing proportion of town dwellers could read and write (Clanchy 1993; Clark 2009: 185f; Mostert and Adamska 2014b). In this light, scholars seem to have underestimated the importance of literacy and the ability to read and write in Scandinavian towns, and also the apparently important role urbanity played in the transformation from societies based on orality to societies based on the written word.

Literacy has traditionally been defined as the ability to read and write. However, during the past fifty years or so it has become clear that literacy is a much more complex phenomenon. It is closely connected to cultural, social, technical, and material developments in a given society (Stock 1983; Ong 2002; Hermann 2005; Zilmer 2012). If we understand literacy as the ability to read and write, the phenomenon was already an integrated part of Scandinavian society at the transition from prehistoric to historic times, where the use of runes was relatively widespread in the upper strata of society, for instance illustrated by the rune stones (Williams 2013; Imer 2015; Imer 2016). Of course, the clergy, and the Latin writing it promoted, represent a new situation in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, runes were also used in a variety of ways after the Latin alphabet was introduced. Even in Christian contexts runes were used centuries after the introduction of Christianity. One example of this is the about 90 epigraphic runic wall inscriptions in churches in Denmark, and another example is the numerous runic amulets which reflect a Christian discourse (Olesen 2007; Andersen 2016). Furthermore, excavations in towns indicate that runes were used in different layers of society in urban contexts. A classic example is the 600 runic inscriptions from the old harbor in Bergen (Herteig 1969, Liestøl 1980; Schulte 2012), and similar findings have been made in other towns, for instance in Lund (Carelli 2001; Poulsen 2007). Therefore, medieval Scandinavian literacy should not be limited to the Roman alphabet (Spurkland 2005; Olesen 2007; Poulsen 2010). In Scandinavia, law texts written

with Roman letters in the vernacular were produced early in the Middle Ages in comparison to other parts of Europe (Brink 2002), and parallel to this, runes were used to write both in the vernacular and in Latin. Especially in the ecclesiastical towns, people began to carve runes (and Roman letters) on different kinds of objects and material. For instance, coins and artefacts made of bone, wood, and metal were inscribed (Carelli 2009). Also in agrarian societies the use of both runes and Roman letters among common people seem to have increased (Imer 2017). All this contributed to the general 'literarization' process in Scandinavia. Researchers have studied this process from different angles (Hermann 2005; Borsa, Høgel, Mortensen and Tyler 2015), but for instance the roles of the runes and urbanization have not received much attention.

Around 700 AD the first towns, or *emporiae*, appeared in Scandinavia. Places like Ribe and Haithabu in Viking Age Denmark, Birka in Sweden and Kaupang in Norway were well consolidated urban centers in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Towards the end of the Viking Age a new wave of towns were established, and most of these new towns were closely related to the institutionalization of the Church (Andrén 1985; Kristensen & Poulsen 2016). With the Church followed the Roman alphabet and this contributed to transforming towns like Lund, Uppsala and Trondheim (Nidaros) to the earliest Latin textual communities in Scandinavia (Stock 1983; Mortensen 2000). As the urbanization process continued, a growing proportion of people had access to the Roman alphabet, and a new tradition of writing developed. Apparently, major shifts occurred which facilitated the inclusion into the literate culture. For instance, the level of education among town dwellers, and the shift from Latin to the vernacular as the preferred language in administrative and commercial matters. The effects can be seen in the increase in charters, legal documents and accounts produced (or obtained) by common townspeople (Mostert 2005; Appel and Fink-Jensen 2013).

On this background, some of the key questions in RUL are: In what ways can we define medieval literacy in Scandinavia? How widespread was literacy in different social layers in the towns? What kind of roles did literacy play in the formation of urban identity? How did literacy and urbanity co-develop? And, what major developments can be traced during the period c. 800-1500? Similar questions have been asked by scholars around Europe (Mostert and Adamska 2014a and 2014b), but in Scandinavia urban literacy is a new field of research.

In the light of international research it appears to be clear, that these key questions can shed new light on literacy and urban history in Scandinavia, and simultaneously provide an exchange of methods between different fields of research. One example of the latter is contextual runology, which gives researchers a possibility to approach runic inscriptions on several analytical levels (Düwel 2008: 15-17; Imer 2011). RUL will methodologically discuss contextual runology, so that historians and archeologists can contribute to the study of runes in the future.

The expectation among the core group members of RUL is that the network will establish a foundation from which a much larger collective project can grow. Moreover, members of the core group plan to present relevant parts of the research in RUL at international conferences, such as The International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions in 2019 at Kiel University, and to publish the research results from RUL in an anthology. Additionally, some of the results of RUL will be published for a broader audience at the knowledge sharing website [www.danmarkshistorien.dk](http://www.danmarkshistorien.dk).

RUL represents new approaches that cross disciplinary and chronological boundaries, and will thereby contribute to various research fields by creating an environment in which questions related to urban literacy can be discussed from archeological, historical and philological points of view. Besides this, RUL will open up for new understandings of the medieval period in general. For instance, RUL will shed new light on subjects such as political and social developments and the transformation from a society based on orality to one based on the written word.

Currently, research centers, larger research projects and individual researchers conduct research in the relevant fields across Scandinavia, and the most relevant of these are included in RUL. Although existing environments are strong, the research remains scattered across disciplines and various institutions. With RUL, we will establish a common framework, where researchers can exchange results, concepts, and methodologies and thereby broaden the studies of urbanity and literacy to a wider analytical approach. Proceeding over three seminars, smaller workshops and steering group meetings we will eventually assess the results and perspectives in relation to the final publication plan and future research agendas and projects.

- The first seminar will be held at the National Museum during the fall of 2017. Approximately 20 participants will take part in a one-day seminar that will give the core members the possibility to meet and present their work related to RUL. Two keynote speakers will contribute to the seminar. One of these is probably going to be Professor Marco Mostert, Utrecht University, who is world leading scholar in the field of urban literacy. The ambition with this seminar is to establish a platform for the further work of RUL.
- The second seminar will be a two-day seminar during the spring of 2018 at Aarhus University. With an open call for papers, we will invite scholars from all the disciplines represented in RUL to contribute to the project. Again, two internationally acknowledged scholars will participate as keynotes. In this case one of the keynote speakers is going to be Professor Judith Jesch, Nottingham University.
- The third seminar is also planned as a two-day seminar by the end of 2018 or the beginning of 2019 at the Museum of Southwest Jutland. About 15 invited scholars will be asked to present first drafts of articles to the final publication of RUL, and the early drafts will be discussed collectively.

## **Partners in RUL:**

**The National Museum** of Denmark is currently involved in research projects, which is relevant to RUL. For instance, a project on the runic inscriptions connected to churches (wall inscriptions, grave stones etc.). The National Museum also holds the responsibility of runological counselling in Denmark, for instance the registration of new finds of runic inscriptions.

**Danish Centre for Urban History** is formed in cooperation between Aarhus University and Den Gamle By. The centre is doing research in urban history as well as participating in research and dissemination of urban history in Denmark and internationally. In relation to the centre's strategy to pursue urban historical research and stimulate new research agendas, the field of urban literacy is a very relevant new perspective. Beside this, the ongoing work in RUL will be communicated on the centre's blog [www.blog.byhistorie.dk](http://www.blog.byhistorie.dk).

**Museum of Southwest Jutland** is one of the leading research institutions in Denmark in the field of urban archaeology and is closely associated with UrbNet. The Museum hosts the annual Urban Archeology Conference in Ribe where some of the results from the work in RUL will be presented.

**Centre for Urban Network Evolutions** (UrbNet) is an archaeological research initiative exploring the evolution of urbanism and urban networks from the Hellenistic Period to the Middle Ages. The centre is based at Aarhus University, and is funded as a Centre of Excellence by the Danish National Research Foundation. UrbNet's focus on urban networks and broad geographical and historical perspectives are relevant to RUL.

**Centre for Medieval Literature** (CML) is a Centre of Excellence founded in 2012 by the Danish National Research Foundation and formed in cooperation between University of Southern Denmark and University of York. CML seeks to establish a cross-disciplinary theoretical framework for the study of medieval literature on a European scale. Hence, CML will provide RUL with a literary perspective in a European perspective.

**Medieval Europe Research Group** is an interdisciplinary forum at Aarhus University, which connects researchers from different parts of the University. At least one of the smaller workshops of RUL is going to be organized in cooperation with Medieval Europe Research Group.

**Script and Text in Space and Time** is an interdisciplinary project funded by Velux Fonden. The project is based at Copenhagen University, and one of its central ambitions is to create an entirely new empirical and methodological basis for the study of Danish texts from the Middle Ages. Many of these texts are from urban institutions, and this project is, in general, very relevant to RUL.

**Between runes and manuscripts** is a project funded by the Research Council of Norway. The project is the first comprehensive study of Roman-alphabet inscriptions and the role they played in the Norwegian Viking and Middle Ages and can be seen as a Norwegian counterpart to RUL.

**www.danmarkshistorien.dk** (Aarhus University) communicates research-based knowledge about Denmark's history online. Key members in RUL are working closely together with danmarkshistorien.dk, and some of the research results of RUL will be published on the website.

### **Steering committee (and group of applicants)**

Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm, Associate Professor, Aarhus University (main applicant)

Lisbeth Imer, Curator, the National Museum of Denmark (Second applicant)

Rikke Steenholt Olesen, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen (Secretary)

Kasper H. Andersen, Postdoc, Danish Centre for Urban History, (Secretary)

Bjørn Poulsen, Professor, Aarhus University

Morten Søvsø, Head of Department of Archeology, Museum of Southwest Jutland

### **Key researchers**

Anders Andrén, Professor, University of Stockholm

Charlotte Appel, Associate Professor, University of Aarhus

Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, Associate Professor, University of Aarhus

Peter Carelli, Regionschef, Statens Historiska Museer, Linköping

Michael Gelting, Researcher, the Danish National Archives & Professor, University of Aberdeen

Anne Mette Hansen, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen

Pernille Hermann, Associate Professor, University of Aarhus

Kirstine Haase, PhD student, UrbNet & Odense City Museums

Gitte T. Ingvarðson, PhD student, University of Copenhagen & Curator, Lund Historical Museum

Carsten Jahnke, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen

Judith Jesch, Professor, Nottingham University

Elise Kleivane, postdoc, University of Oslo

Magnus Källström, Associate professor, Swedish National Heritage Board

Lars Boje Mortensen, Professor, University of Southern Denmark

Kristel Zilmer, Associate Professor, Bergen University College

The balance of gender in the group has been considered. And with a distribution among the steering group members of four men to two women, and as more than half of the key researchers are female, we consider the group balanced, and at the same time, the most qualified researchers in the field are participating.

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