

# A Runic Inscription from Tuquoy, Westray, Orkney

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*A RUNE-INScribed STONE was found built into the partition wall of a substantial 'hall-like' structure. It is translated 'Porsteinn Einarsson carved these runes'.*

The archaeological site at Tuquoy, Westray (N.G.R. HY 454 431) was discovered in 1981 by the Orkney archaeologist, Dr Raymond Lamb, after which trial excavations, survey, examination and recording of the eroding cliff section were carried out over two seasons in 1982–83 as part of a rescue project financed by the Scottish Development Department (then Ancient Monuments Branch, now Historic Buildings and Monuments).

Westray is one of the northernmost isles in the Orkney group (Fig. 1) and the site at Tuquoy is located in the south-west of the island, on the S. shore of the Ness of Tuquoy. The ruined 12th-century church of Cross Kirk lies immediately east of the settlement site, with which it is associated. A stretch of at least 75 m of midden-site material and eroding masonry comprising complex structures of differing phases is revealed in the low cliff west of Cross Kirk; finds made during section cleaning indicate that most of the settlement derives from the late Norse period. Excavation centred on four substantial walls of dressed masonry, set immediately adjacent to each other and standing to a maximum height of 1.10 m, which were visible in the cliff section. A trial trench of some 95 sq. m was opened in the vicinity of these walls.

The earliest phase of stone building within the trial trench was represented by a long, massively constructed, rectangular, 'hall-like' building, which survived untouched by the sea (Fig. 2). Its full extent was not revealed, but it has minimum internal dimensions of 6.65 m × 3.75 m. Extensive traces of lime plastering were found on one external wall face. Nowhere were the walls less than 1.0 m thick, and the exceptionally broad, truncated end of one wall (1.42 m) may have served as a reinforced entrance to the building. Analogies with Kolbein Hruga's (Cubby Roo's) documented 12th-century castle on the Orkney island of Wyre,<sup>2</sup> which is also massive in structure and has externally plastered walls, prompted the suggestion that the Tuquoy building was defensive in character. However, since there was no evidence among the excavation finds to suggest that the Tuquoy construction was ever defended from attackers, the monumental nature of the edifice may well indicate the high status of the patron of the builders, rather than a serious defensive intention.

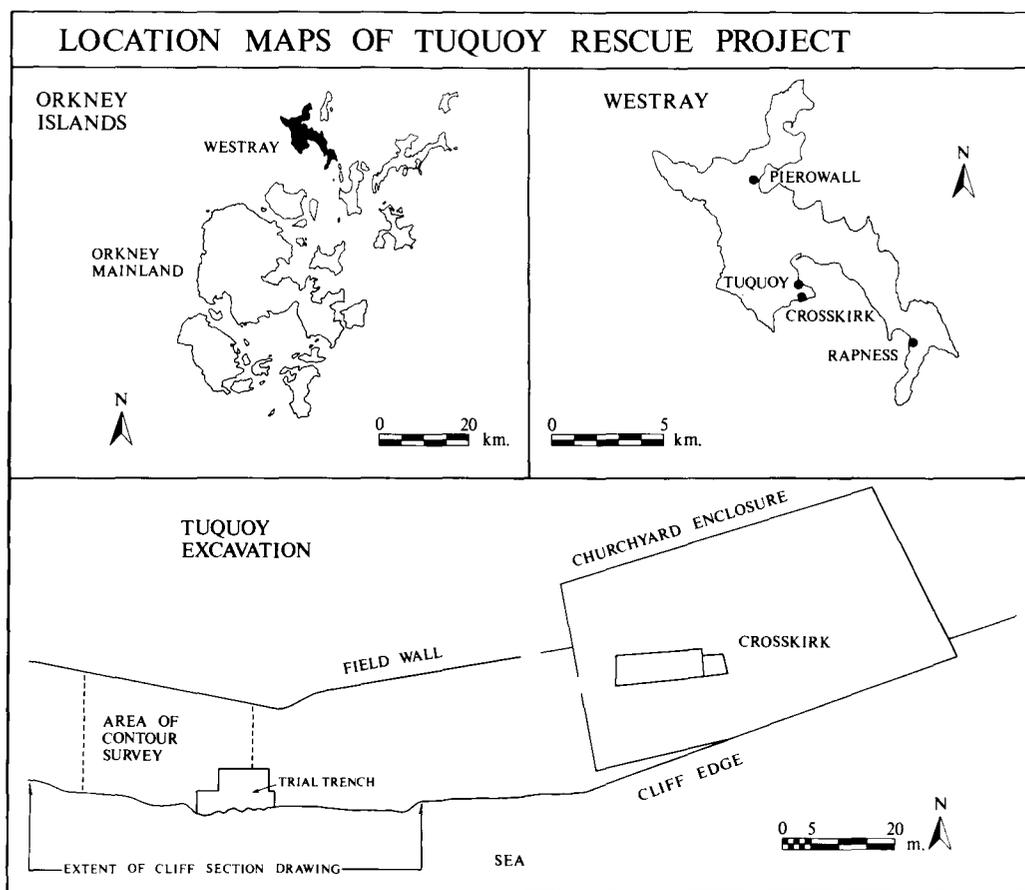


FIG. 1  
Location of the Tuquoy site

The interior of the building was paved over at least three times with large, well-cut flagstones; otherwise, internal features were rare, although finds were of a high quality. The structure was partitioned on at least three different occasions. It is conjectured that the original large size of the building was subsequently found to be impractical and that as the building evolved, it served different functions.

A large slab, incorporated into the latest partition wall (wall 163 on Fig. 2) bears a complete runic inscription. It had obviously been reused in this location, since the inscription was built into the partition wall upside-down. It is conceivable that the stone was originally part of the earlier 'hall-like' structure (1a), where such large slabs were a more common feature. Wall 163 abutted wall 99 and, incorporating the corner of walls 1 and 99 (see Fig. 2), considerably reduced the internal area of the earlier 'hall'; it was, in general, an inferior structure. The flagged floor of the 'hall' was removed within the area of this structure, although its remains provided a stable base for wall 163 itself.

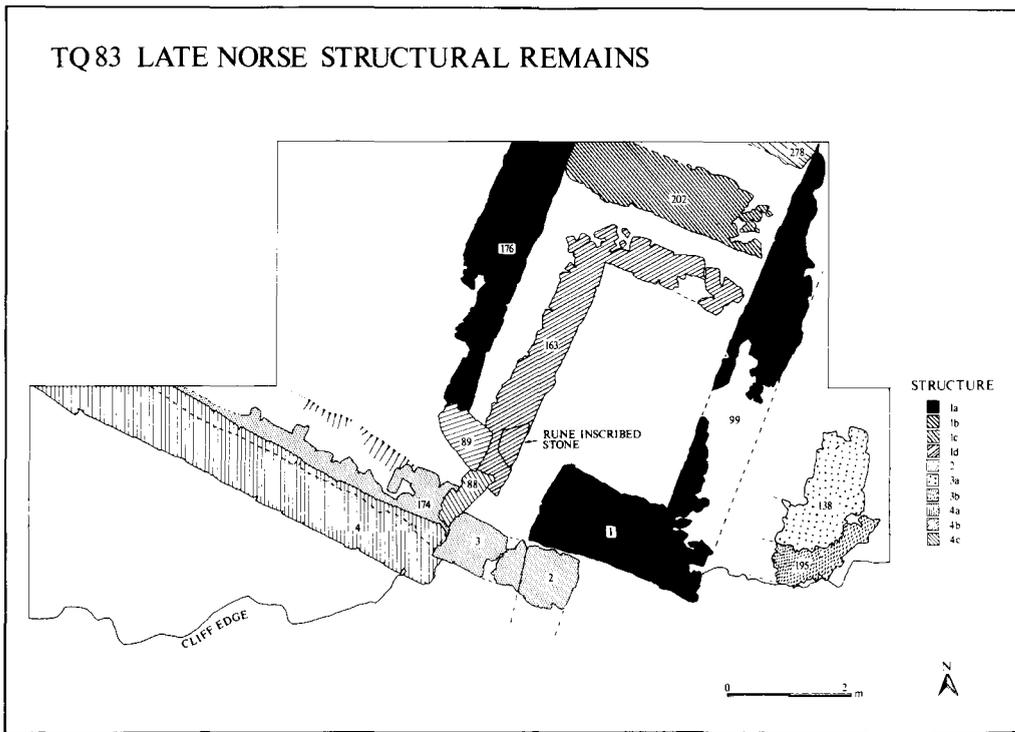


FIG. 2

Late Norse structural remains, showing the location of the rune-inscribed stone

The inscribed slab is a flagstone of the Devonian Period from the Orcadian Basin, formed of a slightly calcareous, dolomitized and interlaminated silt or mudstone. Such flags fracture to produce good, smooth surfaces and almost 90° corners, which facilitate their use as building material. The slab is subtriangular in shape. Its maximum measurements are 0.77 m long × 0.40 m wide, and it is approximately 0.10 m thick. The inscription occurs on the longest side face, i.e. the only face which would have been visible inside a building when the stone was in use as a building block. This face measures 0.77 m wide × 0.10 m high and the inscription extends almost from end to end.

The inscription is difficult to read, partly because of wear and small natural cracks in the stone and partly because of the presence of a number of random



FIG. 3

The inscription



a prominent scratch running diagonally upwards from here through rune 23. Of these, the second could be significant, since the bottom of the **s** rune is not clearly visible, but the reading may be made with reasonable confidence.

RUNES 24–28: **runar** is fairly clear. After rune 26 there is a vertical half-length stave, probably scratched by the runesmith (and therefore included in the transcription), which looks like a scribal mistake. The runesmith apparently realized after carving part of a stave that he was too close to rune 26 to complete the next rune comfortably; he therefore abandoned this stave and began the rune again a little further to the right. This mark may thus be ignored in transliteration.

RUNES 29–33: **þesar** is clear. A rising diagonal double scratch to the left of rune 29 may be ignored.

### *Interpretation*

The inscription is interpreted as: **þorstæin æinarssunr ræist runar þesar**; and translated as ‘Þorsteinn Einarsson carved these runes’. The form of **ræist** (for the normalized Old Icelandic *reist*) is the original strong past tense of *rísta* ‘to carve’.<sup>3</sup> Thus the grammar is completely regular, allowing for the common runic spellings **sunr** (for later *sonr*)<sup>4</sup> and **þorstæin** and **þesar**, where **n** and **s** stand for *nn* and *ss*.

### *Discussion*

The name *Þorstæin* appears in a number of Norwegian inscriptions (for instance, one at Atrå Church 1, Telemark, from about 1180; and another, undated, at Tornby, Jutland),<sup>5</sup> but it has not proved possible to identify this particular Þorsteinn Einarsson elsewhere. No man of this name and patronymic appears in *Orkneyinga Saga* or in *Diplomatarium Oracadense et Hialtlandense 1*,<sup>6</sup> and the only bearer of both in *Landámabók* and *Sturlunga saga* is a north-Icelandic chieftain, nicknamed *ranglátr* — ‘the unjust’, with whom there is no reason to connect this inscription.<sup>7</sup> A number of 12th-century men bearing the name Þorsteinn appear in *Íslandske Annaler indtil 1578*, but none of them has the patronymic Einarsson and Lind notes no other 12th-century instances of the name apart from the inscription from Atrå Church noted above.<sup>8</sup>

The spelling of the inscription is perfectly consistent, but the variation of forms of the same rune, though possibly due in part to the uneven surface, also suggests a runesmith who was not very practised. The first two examples of the rune **r** (runes 3 and 13) are written very open, while the next two (18 and 19) have a tiny top bow with a bottom descender beginning some distance below it. Runes 14 and 15 show a wide difference in the length of the runes; the two instances of the rune **u** (16 and 25) also show difference of form. The aborted stave after rune 26 is another indication of inexperience or carelessness. There is no other carving on the stone and the inscription must be regarded as a casual graffito.

The inscription is in the usual Norwegian variant of the younger *futhork*, but there are two late forms; **þ** for **e** makes its first appearance in Denmark *c.* 1000,<sup>9</sup> but

is not found in West Norse until it appears on Norwegian coins of c. 1068;<sup>10</sup> the appearance of † for æ, though not exactly datable, seems to belong to the 12th rather than the 11th century.<sup>11</sup> The formula and spelling here are exactly paralleled in Orkney itself at Maeshowe, inscription XXII: **tryhr ræist runar þesar**, which probably dates from the mid 12th century and may have been carved by one of the men who set out on crusade from Orkney in 1151 and returned in 1153–54.<sup>12</sup> A similar date would fit the Tuquoy inscription well enough, but the runological evidence only allows a dating to the 12th century or later.

Nothing in the archaeological context would conflict with this dating. A copper-alloy ringed pin, found outside the building at the same stratigraphic level as the original large ‘hall’, is likely to date to the late 11th or 12th century on typological grounds;<sup>13</sup> the remainder of the associated artefactual assemblage is consistent with a 12th-century date. The adjacent and associated building of Cross Kirk is also considered to be 12th century,<sup>14</sup> as is Kolbein Hruga’s castle on Wyre, which is closely related to the Tuquoy ‘hall’ in structural type.<sup>15</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The archaeological part of this article is by Olwyn Owen, Field Archaeologist, Archaeological Operation and Conservation, Historic Buildings and Monuments (Scotland), Fleming House, 28–31 Kinnaird Park, Newcraighall, Edinburgh, the runological section by John McKinnell, Senior Lecturer, School of English, University of Durham. Interim accounts of the excavation have been published in *Universities of Durham and Newcastle Archaeological Reports for 1982 and 1983* (Durham, 1984), 45–50 and 49–54; and in *Central Excavation Unit and Ancient Monuments Laboratory Annual Report 1988* (Edinburgh, 1989), 4–8. The conventions of transcription used here are derived from M. Olsen (ed.), *Norges Innskrifter med de Yngre Runer* (6 vols. so far, Oslo, 1941–).

<sup>2</sup> Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, *Inventory of Monuments in Orkney* (Edinburgh, 1946), 235–39; H. Marwick, ‘Kolbein Hruga’s Castle, Wyre’, *Proc. Orkney Antiq. Soc.*, vi (1927–28), 9–11; F. Guðmundsson (ed.), *Orkneyinga Saga* (Íslenzk fornrit XXXIV, Reykjavík, 1965), ch. 84, 192.

<sup>3</sup> R. Cleasby and G. Vigfusson, *An Icelandic—English Dictionary* (2nd edn with supplement by Sir William Craigie, Oxford, 1957), 500.

<sup>4</sup> E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse* (2nd edn rev. A. R. Taylor, Oxford, 1957), 271, explains the change as due to reduced stress when the word occurred at the end of patronymics. It may be preferable to see it as caused by analogy with the genitive *sonar*, where the change is produced by *a*-mutation, but this remains uncertain — see D. A. Seip, *Norwegische Sprachgeschichte* (2nd edn rev. L. Saltveit, Berlin, 1971), 125 and ref. In this case, **sunr** may be merely a traditional runic spelling, and cannot be taken to indicate the pronunciation used by the runesmith.

<sup>5</sup> M. Olsen (ed.), *Norges Innskrifter med de Yngre Runer*, vol. II, 195 and vol. V, 234.

<sup>6</sup> Guðmundsson (ed.), op. cit. in note 2; A. W. and A. Johnston (eds), *Diplomatarium Orcadense et Hiattlandense I* (Viking Society, London, 1907–13).

<sup>7</sup> J. Benediktsson (ed.), *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók* (Íslenzk fornrit I, Reykjavík, 1968), 241, 253, 255, 269 note 4; J. Jóhannesson, M. Finnbogason and K. Eldjárn (eds), *Sturlunga Saga* (2 vols., Reykjavík, 1946), vol. I, 49, 55, 160; according to the editors of *Sturlunga Saga*, he died in 1149.

<sup>8</sup> G. Storm (ed.), *Islandske Annaler indtil 1578* (Christiania, 1888), see IV, 1128, 1190, V, 1190, and for the name Einarr, IV, 1196, V, 1185; E. H. Lind, *Norsk-Ísländska Dopnamn ock Fingerade Namn från Medeltiden* (Uppsala, 1905–15), cols. 1207–11 (on *Porsteinn*), 216–18 (on *Einarr*).

<sup>9</sup> L. Jacobsen and E. Moltke, *Danmarks Runeindskrifter, Text* (Copenhagen, 1942), cols. 951, 1024.

<sup>10</sup> M. Olsen (ed.), *Norges Innskrifter med de Yngre Runer*, vol. v, 243-44.

<sup>11</sup> M. Olsen (ed.), *Norges Innskrifter med de Yngre Runer*, vol. v, 244-45; cf. also A. O. Curle, M. Olsen and H. Shetelig, *The Civilisation of the Viking Settlers in relation to their Old and New Countries* (vol. vi of *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, Bergen, 1954), 161, where the use of the rune for **a** rather than that for **æ** in *reisti* - 'raised', is taken as evidence of 11th- rather than 12th-century date. The reverse conclusion may be drawn here.

<sup>12</sup> L. Musset, *Introduction à la Runologie* (Paris, 1965), 440-41; Gordon, op. cit. in note 4, 259-60; B. Dickins, 'The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe', *Proc. Orkney Antig. Soc.*, viii (1930), 27-30 (he reads the last word as **bisar**). All these scholars assume that the Maeshowe inscriptions were carved before the crusaders set off, but Aslak Liestøl argues that they were made after they returned, during the winter of 1153-54: see A. Fenton and H. Pálsson, *The Northern and Western Isles in the Viking World* (Edinburgh, 1984), 232-33.

<sup>13</sup> T. Fanning, pers. comm.

<sup>14</sup> R.C.H.M., op. cit. in note 2, 344-45; D. MacGibbon and T. Ross, *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland from the Earliest Christian Times to the Seventeenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1896), vol. 1, 124-26.

<sup>15</sup> See note 2.

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