Healing Runes

Judith Jesch and Christina Lee

Introduction

Ill health is an experience shared by all humans, whether as sufferers or as carers. Among the corpus of runic inscriptions, a small but varied number refer explicitly to disease and health. A connection between runes and medical spells or charms is supported by a number of rune-inscribed objects that seem to be just such charms aimed at healing or other medical effects. In this paper we will examine six runic inscriptions, from the 9th to the 14th century, which have been associated with illness or healing. We will explore what such runic texts tell us about how people envisaged healing and medicine in the Viking Age and after, as well as what role runes played in them, and we will suggest a framework for understanding these texts.

Any examination of Medieval concepts of illness and health is complicated by a number of considerations. Past societies with fewer options for curing disease and impairment may have had more elastic concepts of what it means to be sick. Health is a cultural construct: depending on the options available, certain conditions today regarded as illnesses, such as back pain, may not have been counted as such, since there was little anyone could do about them. In the Viking mass grave on the Ridgeway in Dorset, some of the executed men exhibit a range of painful and visible conditions. For example, one individual suffered from osteomyelitis (chronic bone infection), which made his thigh swell up to double the size (Boyle 2016, 115). There has been some speculation about the background of these men, who were young and, according to stable isotope analysis, came from very different parts of the Viking world; they may have been mercenaries or a raiding party (Boyle 2016, 114), meaning the evidence suggests that people lived (and potentially fought) with chronic pain.

In addition to a varying tolerance for physical, and presumably also mental, difference, there may have been healing methods that either remain undetected by scholars or would be regarded as so unorthodox today as to escape notice. The causes of ill health may have been

sought in areas we no longer understand. Instead of blaming microbes, texts may refer to supernatural causation as a reason for illness. The principle is the same, though: a malign entity affects the body from the outside and the body or mind is not equipped to deal with it. In the past, Medieval responses to disease were often thought to be irrational and devoid of scientific knowledge (Grattan & Singer 1952; for a critique see Van Arsdall 2005). Even later, more sympathetic views distinguished between 'rational' and 'non-rational' medicine (Cameron 1991), the latter sometimes is labelled 'pagan' or 'religio-magical Christian '. This separation is not helpful, since both pagan and Christian medicine are based on traditions from outside religion, both native and foreign. The Medieval Church was a provider of health: spiritual, but often also practical, and injunctions may have been aimed at competition from other healthcare providers rather than indicating pockets of stubborn pagan survival.

Early Medieval societies tried to find explanations for the causes of sickness and to influence its course; some of these ideas came from Classical sources such as Galen and Hippocrates. These authorities operate in a system in which observation and prediction (Greek *prognosis*) are key. In Antiquity such procedures were often undertaken with auguries, lapidaries or other forms of divination, and it appears that Medieval medicine either retained these practices or had its own indigenous tradition. The idea that natural phenomena may give indications about the course of an illness was incorporated into Christian ideas of health care (Crislip 2005, 18-22).

Thus, the methods of disease identification in Medieval medical texts, as well as the causes of illness, may appear alien to contemporary understanding, but they have an inherent logic. Generally, the root cause of illness is an outside entity that invades the body and therefore needs to be forced out of it. Spells and charms in medical texts focus on the dislocation of hostile elements or the transformation of the diseased body. There has been much debate about the nature of 'charms' (summarized in Arthur 2018, 8-17). Recently Ciaran Arthur has explored the many Christian contexts in which the Old English noun *galdor* ('charm, spell') is used, especially in the context of healing, and has noted that ten out of twelve rituals occur in medical texts (2018, 65-97). *Galdr*, the Old Norse cognate of *galdor*, and the verb *galdra* have both been associated with pagan magic (Price 2002, 93-94) on the basis of Snorri's chapter seven of *Ynglinga saga*, where Óðinn is shown as the master of *rúnum ok ljóðum*

þeim, er galdrar heita, 'runes and those spells which are called *galdrar*' (*Hkr* I, 19). Spells are about transformation, and they underline the importance of the spoken word in such processes. The runic inscriptions presented in this paper all contain either a direct address to a hostile entity or the invocation of a higher power to drive out such entities.

Runic inscriptions fall within the larger category of inscribed objects and there is a long tradition of using such items as protection or healing devices. The early 6th-century Merovingian church father Caesarius of Arles bemoans the Germanic tribes' habit of hanging demonic inscribed (?runic) amulets on themselves (*fylacteria sibi diabolica et caracteres adpendunt*) in Homily 50 on seeking health *(Sermones,* 225). While Christian scribes are not always sympathetic to such ideas (especially when they are executed by pagans), medical manuscripts, which are after all products of the cloister, often require writing as part of healing. For example, in an Anglo-Saxon charm against a 'dwarf', which seems to be a kind of fever, in the 11th-century medical manuscript *Lacnunga*, the healer is asked to write the names of saints on seven wafers which are then hung around a person's neck (*Lacnunga* I, 72).

Becoming a doctor in the Viking Age

Invocation of some sort of healing entity was also part of the repertoire of the Medieval Scandinavian doctor. According to stanza 147 of *Hávamál* (*Edda* I, 352), those who 'wish to live as a healer' need to know the appropriate spell. Unfortunately the speaker of the stanza does not specify what it was: *Þat kann ek annat / er þurfu ýta synir, / þeir er vilja læknir lifa* 'I know a second [spell] / which the sons of men need, / those who wish to live as a healer'.[1] This comes in a list of eighteen spells (*ljóð*) that the speaker claims can counteract a variety of crises caused by natural or supernatural forces, or human relationships, including love and war.

The heroic poem *Sigrdrífumál* has a similar list, but this time of runes, not spells, knowledge of which is needed by those who want victory or loyalty or wisdom. Stanza 12 gives advice to the would-be doctor: *Limrúnar skaltu kunna / ef þú vilt læknir vera / ok kunna sár at sjá* 'Limb-runes you must know if you want to be a healer and be able to inspect wounds' (*Edda*

II, 315-316).[2] Stanza 6 refers, obscurely, to *líknstafir*, 'healing letters' (interestingly in the context of *góðra galdra / ok gamarúna*, 'good charms and pleasure-runes'), while stanza 10 refers to *bjargrúnar* 'helping-runes', which you must know *ef þú bjarga vilt / ok leysa kind frá konum*, 'if you wish to help and loosen children from women' (*Edda* II, 314-315). Stanza 20 concludes the runic section with the instruction to the rune-user to *njóttu, ef þú namt*, 'make good use [of the runes] when you have learned [them]' (*Edda* II, 317-318).

It is not clear from *Sigrdrífumál* whether these runes are imagined as individual runes with symbolic, apotropaic or prophylactic functions, or whether the word *rúnar* refers to the texts of charms or spells written in runes. The latter seems most likely, not least because a close connection between charms and runes is suggested in *Hávamál*, where the charm and spell stanzas (146-163) follow on from a series of stanzas (142-145) about runes, including their divine origins and their power, as well as the role of the rune-carver (*Edda* I, 351-352). This association can still be seen in the late 14th century, when the statutes of Archbishop Páll urged people to shun *lyfrúnir ok galdra*, 'remedy-runes and charms', because of their associations with the devil (*DI* II, 750).

The inscriptions discussed below seem to be just such runic charms, mainly in the Old Norse vernacular, and with more or less clear reference to disease or health, using some of the same vocabulary as the poetic extracts above. The inscriptions are from both the Viking Age and the Medieval period. In the case of the latter, we have concentrated on those that can be related to Viking-Age vernacular traditions, as it is clear that the coming of Christianity brought great changes to amulet use, not least the extensive use of Latin (Steenholt Olesen 2010, 174). The inscriptions we discuss can be found on metal, wood, bone and parchment, and thus on objects that have no discernible function other than to bear the inscriptions.[3] However, the differing materials suggest that the items may have had differing functions and uses. Several are rune-inscribed metal plates (Swedish *runbleck*), generally made of copper or copper alloy. These have been discussed recently by Pereswetoff-Morath (2017), who draws a clear distinction between them and the inscribed lead plates, which belong to the Christian period and which often have inscriptions in Latin (we do not discuss these here; see, for example, Steenholt Olesen 2010, 171-174). Discussions of the *runbleck* in this paper rely on

the interpretations of Pereswetoff-Morath, but we also include wooden sticks and bones which bear comparable inscriptions using the same vocabulary.

Gustavson (2010, 63) suggested that the more expensive metal plates were to be worn as protection (though not all of them have a surviving means of suspension), whereas the sticks and bones would be thrown away as part of the process of casting out the disease. Either or both (not to mention the manuscript) could also be *aides-mémoires* for formulae to be recited in a medical context, or teaching devices; this potential performance aspect will be discussed below.

Healing runes

Like *Sigrdrífumál*, there are some inscriptions which refer specifically to runes that have a medical effect. The copper-alloy *runbleck* from Skänninge in Östergötland, Sweden (Ög NOR2001;32, 11th/12th-century, found in a domestic context), refers to the inscribing of both *lyfrúnar*, 'remedy-runes', and *bótrúnar*, 'improvement-runes'.[4] The element *lyf* also occurs on a Medieval amulet from Roskilde (DR 246) in an unclear context, and more certainly in the inscription on the 11th/12th-century copper plate from Sigtuna (also most likely from a domestic context, U Fv1933;134). This urges an unspecified addressee to *Njót lyfja*, 'Make good use of the remedies', using the same verb as in *Sigrdrífumál*. These remedies presumably include the preceding text of the inscription (to be discussed further below). *Lyf* is not necessarily a medical term, but could also refer to a more generalized magical effect (Pereswetoff-Morath 2017, 98-99). This overlap between 'magical' and medical terminology is quite typical for these inscriptions.

That the word *bót* could refer specifically to a medical cure is clear from the wooden stick from Ribe (c. 1300), which mentions *læknishǫnd*, 'healer's hands', and *lyftunga*, 'remedy-tongue', which will *lyfja ... er bóta þarf*, 'heal ... when a cure is needed' (DR EM85;493, also discussed below). This inscription links both the spoken and the written word to the healing process: *þú þessa bót bíðir, þar ek orð at kveða rúnti*, 'you experience this improvement (i.e. remedy), for which I have written in runes words to be recited'. The Ribe stick has a section

of runes that have been scraped away, which are clearly an attempt at the following text (Moltke 1985, 493-494), suggesting the importance of getting the runes right.

Both *bótrúnar* and *bjargrúnar* are also mentioned on a rune-stick from Bergen dated to c. 1335 (N B257). There is no obvious medical connection in this inscription as both types of runes seem to involve protection against supernatural beings (elves, trolls and ogres), rather than providing medical assistance. However, we cannot rule out a medical connection. As shown in the work of Stefanie Künzel (2018), in the Early Middle Ages disease was often conceptualized as a monster, and it can also be imagined that women in childbirth would need protection from the invasive 'monsters' of, for example, infection. This brings us to the question of what kinds of diseases and injuries runic charms and spells were meant to help. The examples discussed below are those we think most likely refer to infections of various kinds.

Runic inscriptions mentioning disease and injuries

Here we present six runic inscriptions (A-F), in roughly chronological order, with transliterated, normalized and translated versions of their inscriptions, as recorded in the *Samnordisk runtextdatabas*. Their significance is discussed further in a separate section below.

A. <u>'wound' from a sword – Haddeby stick (DR EM85;371B)</u>

§A **raþi ' ut lfR ' ut ufR ' sati ' auriki ' i tarku ' in ' aurik ' salti ' ut lfi ' utur**
§B **auþikR ' bion ' fur ' uk ' þat ' fu : suiarþ : -lt ' ul- --li : kafi þu:at : ualR ' okiu:likR ÷**
§C **... : nu : suiarþ : ilt**

§A *Ráði und Ulfr und Ulfr setti Auðríki í tôrgu, en Auðríkr seldi und Ulfi út-ór;*
§B *úþekkr ben fyr hôgg þat fyr sverð [i]lt oll[i] [eð]li. Gefi þó-at vôlr engjuligr*
§C *... nú sverð ilt.*

§A May Ulfr overcome the wound! Ulfr placed a wound in Auðríkr's shield, but (for that) Auðríkr gave to Ulfr a wound right through (his body); §B (The) unbearable evidenced (its) character (after the) sore because of that cut from (a) wretched sword. Let the staff of oppression nevertheless effect §C ... now (a) wretched sword.

This object is archaeologically dated to the 9th century. The inscription is fragmentary and very difficult to interpret – at least three wildly different interpretations have been suggested, only one of which reads it as having medical significance (which is the one we cite above). However, given that there are other inscriptions referring to wounds and the resulting infections (see B-D, below), we think this interpretation is possible, but have nothing further to offer on this at the moment.

B. <u>'wound-causer'/'abnormal stomach-ache', 'fever', 'abcess', 'pus' – Sigtuna bone (U NOR1998;25)</u>

§A **iorils × ouriþ × uaksna ur : kroke × bat han × riþu × bar-...**
§B **han : riþu × aok × siþa × sarþ × sararan × uara × hafir × fult ¶ fekit × fly : braot riþa**
§A **????????**

§A *Jórils vrið!/óvrið vaksna ur Króki! Bant hann riðu, bar[ði](?)*
§B *hann riðu. Ok síða(?) sarð sára-rann. Vara hefir (hann) fullt fengit. Flý braut riða!*
§A ...

§A Jórill's woundcauser / Jórill's abnormal stomach-ache disappear from Krókr! He bound the fever, he fought(?) §B the fever. And did away with the abscess. (He) has fully cought [*sic*; should be 'caught'] the pus. Flee away, fever! §A ...

This inscription has been much discussed because of its similarities to the Canterbury manuscript charm and the Sigtuna amulet (C and D, below) – together they form a fairly close-knit group, all dating from the mid-11th to the early 12th century. Little discussion, however, has focused specifically on the extensive medical terminology in these inscriptions and its implications; there is still much to be gathered from them.

This cattle-rib was found in 1997 in the material from a 1996 archaeological investigation of a domestic context in Sigtuna dated to the late 11th or early 12th century. According to Gustavson (2010) the text is a healing formula, a charm aimed against an illness demon denoted as *riða*, a word that appears three times in the text and refers to the shivering caused by fever. Gustavson points out (2010, 67) that this word appears only in the Germanic languages, and has been replaced in some of the modern languages by the Latin *febris*. He

sees this, the Sigtuna amulet (D) and the Canterbury manuscript (C) as three variants of a healing charm of heathen origin, or at least reflecting a heathen concept. In each case some sort of sickness demon is named and addressed, and then caught and bound before it is cast out. The fever, according to Gustavson, is caused by the *sára-rann* (literally 'house of wounds'), which he translates as '*blodförgiftning*', i.e. blood-poisoning from an infected wound, and compares with the use of *sár-riða*, 'wound-fever', on the Sigtuna amulet.

An alternative interpretation, proposed by Källström (2012), of the second word as 'abnormal stomach-ache' seems at first sight less likely than something to do with wounds, given that all the other medical terminology in the inscription suggests infection, but it is suggested that this is appendicitis because of the association with fever. We find this less likely because *sár* implies a visible wound and appendicitis is not normally visible as a wound.

C. 'wound-causer', 'blood-vessel pus' – Canterbury manuscript (E DR419)

kuril sarþuara far þu nu funtin istu þur uigi þik þorsa trutin iuril sarþuara uiþr aþra uari ·

Gyrill sárþvara, far þú nú, fundinn ertu; Þórr vígi þik, þursa dróttinn, Gyrill sárþvara. Viðr aðra vari.

Gyril wound-causer,[5] go now, you are found. Thor hallow you (to perdition), lord of giants (demons), Gyril wound-causer. Against blood-poison (literally: blood-vessel pus).

The manuscript context of this suggests that the last phrase (*Viðr aðra vari* 'Against blood-vessel pus') should actually be the title of the charm, based on the format of many Old English charms, which start by announcing the disease they counter. The Canterbury runic charm is only one of several charms in this manuscript, many with such headings. However, these are Latin charms with Old English headings, whereas the Old English charms in this manuscript lack any such headings. The Old Norse runic charm thus represents a further variant of this form of presentation.

Many scholars have pointed out the similarities with the 11th-century copper amulet from Sigtuna (D), and a number of parallels can also be drawn with the more recently found Sigtuna cattle-rib inscription (B). These suggest that the manuscript text was copied from a runic object, probably brought from Sweden, possibly even Sigtuna, given its English connections in that period (Nordahl 1982, 10, 26). It can also be noted that there are other manuscripts in which runes are associated with medical and other useful texts, as shown in recent work by Aya Van Renterghem (2018).

D. <u>'wound-fever' – Sigtuna amulet (U Fv1933;134)</u>

§A **þur/þurs| × |sarriþu × þursa trutin fliu þu nu^| |^funtin is**
§B **af þiR þriaR þraR ulf × ¶ af þiR niu noþiR ulfr iii ¶ isiR þis isiR auk is uniR ulfr niut lu¶¶fia**

§A *Þór/Þurs sárriðu, þursa dróttinn! Fljú þú nú! Fundinn er[tu]*.
§B *Haf þér þrjár þrár, Ulfr! Haf þér níu nauðir, Ulfr! <iii isiR þis isiR auk is uniR>, Ulfr. Njót lyfja!*

§A Boil/Spectre of the wound-fever, lord of the giants! Flee now! You are found. §B Have for yourself three pangs, Wolf! Have for yourself nine needs, Wolf! <iii isiR þis isiR auk is uniR>, Wolf. Make good use of the healing(-charm)!

The amulet was found in 1931, and at the time the objects with it (worked stones, pottery shards, bone combs) suggested a grave, but the current view is that the site is domestic. The inscription can be dated to the 11th century; Pereswetoff-Morath (2017, 104-106) suggests the first half of that century rather than the second.

Discussion of this inscription is summarized by Pereswetoff-Morath (2017, 68-82), who points out that much of this relied heavily on drawing comparisons with the Canterbury formula. However, while the invocation of Þórr is certain there, here she suggests that if the first word is **þur**, it refers to a boil or swelling of some kind, rather than the god. However, she prefers an alternative reading of **þurs sarriþu** (with the **s**-rune doing double duty), meaning a 'demon of the wound-fever' (including the word *riða*, as in the Sigtuna rib inscription), and this seems likely (2017, 83-87). In her lengthy discussion of §B, Pereswetoff-Morath concludes (2017, 88-104) that its purpose is to call down the three

'pangs' and nine 'needs' (i.e. some kind of punishment) on a 'wolf'. There are various suggestions as to what exactly this wolf is, but according to Pereswetoff-Morath it is most likely a synonym for the demon being cast out in §A.

E. 'fever' – Bryggen stick (N 632)

§A ÷ **in nomne (p)at^ric æ^þ fi(l)i æ^þ cprit^uc| |ca^nti am^en : surraa**
§B **pia sruc æ^þ pasio sricte ??i m(a) pacmauit æ^þ casrobat**
§C **?(a)^l(r) ?i?(e) (d)(e)i cin medisina cin medisina mii o**
§D **cagine la^uit febrac (a)(d)(i)(k)oui(a)(d) fu(i) (m)(a) uecca^re lr**

§A *In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti, amen. Currat(?)*
§B *pia crux et passio Christe, qui me plasmavit et sacrabat*
§C *Vulnera quinque Dei sint medicina. Sint medicina mei ...*
§D *sangvine lavit. Febres depellat qui me vexare laborant.*

§A In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen <currat> §C May God's Five Wounds be (my) medicine. May my medicine be §B Holy Cross and Christ's passion. He who moulded and washed me §D with Holy Blood. May he expel the fever which strives to torment me.

This 14th-century stick from Bergen also has the aim of expelling fever from the sufferer. It is not stated what caused the fever, but the reference to the Five Wounds of Christ suggests once again some kind of infection caused by a wound. Though this is in Latin and much later than the three inscriptions just discussed, the invocation of supernatural beings (compare Þórr in the Canterbury charm) is analogous. Here, however, the inscription does not seem to be the work of a healer, but rather a prayer by the sufferer.

F. 'the trembler' (malaria?) – Ribe stick (DR EM85;493)

§A **+ io^rþ ÷ biþ a^k ÷ ua^rþæ ÷ o^k ÷ uphimæn ÷ so^l ÷ o^k ÷ sa^nt^æ maria ÷ o^k ÷ salfæn ÷ gud| |drotæn ÷ þæt han ÷ læ mik ÷ læknæs÷ha^nd ÷ o^k lif÷tuggæ ÷ at^ ^liuæ**
§B **uiuindnæ ÷ þær ÷ botæ ÷ þa^rf ÷ or ÷ ba^k ÷ o^k or brRst ÷ or lækæ ÷ o^k or lim ÷ or øuæn ÷ o^k or øræn ÷ or ÷ a^llæ þe ÷ þær ÷ ilt ÷ kan i at**
§C **kumæ ÷ suart ÷ hetær ÷ sten ÷ ha^n ÷ stær ÷ i ÷ hafæ ÷ utæ ÷ þær ÷ ligær ÷ a ÷ þe ÷ ni ÷ no^uþær ÷ þæ¶r ÷ l---r(a) ÷ (þ)en-nþþæþeskulhuærki**
§D **skulæ ÷ huærki ÷ søtæn ÷ sofæ ÷ æþ ÷ uarmnæn ÷ uakæ ÷ førr æn ÷ þu ÷ þæssa ÷ bot ÷ biþær ÷ þær ÷ a^k o^rþ ÷ at kæþæ ÷ ro^nti ÷ amæn ÷ o^k þæt ÷ se +**

§A *Jôrð bið ek varða ok upphimin, sól ok sankta Maríu ok sjalfan Guð dróttin, þet hann lé mik læknishônd ok lyf-tungu at lyfja*
§B *bifanda er bóta þarf ór bak[i] ok ór brjóst[i], ór líki ok ór lim, ór augum ok ór eyrum, ór ôllu því er ilt kann í at*
§C *koma. Svartr heitir steinn, hann stendr í hafi úti, þar liggr á þær níu nauðir, þær ... ...*
§D *skulu huárki sætan sofa eða varman vaka fyrr en þú þessa bót bíðir, þar ek orð at kveða rúnti. Amen ok þat sé.*

§A I pray Earth to guard and High Heaven, the sun and Saint Mary and Lord God himself, that he grant me medicinal hands and healing tongue to heal §B the Trembler when a cure is needed. From back and from breast, from body and from limb, from eyes and from ears, from wherever evil can §C enter. A stone is called Svartr (black), it stands out in the sea, there lie upon it nine needs, who ... ... §D shall neither sleep sweetly nor wake warmly until you pray this cure which I have proclaimed in runic words.[6] Amen and so be it.

The much-discussed Ribe stick is also from the 14th century. Despite the date, it is not in Latin, and in many ways it harks back to Viking Age inscriptions, both in its vocabulary of healer and healing, as already discussed, and in its reference to the 'nine needs', as on the Sigtuna amulet. All discussions have assumed that *bifandi* 'the trembler' refers to malaria, though it should be noted that this reading depends on an emendation of the first word in §B.

Discussion of the inscriptions

Diagnosing historical illnesses is difficult because Medieval concepts of illness and its causes can differ radically from modern views, as noted above. We can, however, speculate what kinds of illnesses were treated and thus which conditions required medical attention. Several of the inscriptions seem directed at fever as one of the symptoms of a disease. Fever is the body's natural defence against infection, since most bacteria can only tolerate a certain temperature range (Evans et al. 2015). Bacteria need a biofilm – a sticky matrix – to grow, generally torn skin or the soft parts of the body, such as the nose and mouth.

In the absence of microscopes, fever was misunderstood as the cause behind infection. Still, the inscriptions sometimes reveal empirical observation, as, for example, in the Canterbury charm (C): there is a clear causation between the infection in the wound and the resulting blood poisoning. Similarly, the Sigtuna cattle-rib charm (B) makes a connection between the abating of fever and the curing of the abscess, which means that the body's defences have worked, and have also led to a diminishing of the source of infection, the *sára-rann*.

The explanation of *bifandi* as malaria on the Ribe stick (F) is an interesting suggestion, since its usual symptoms are fever, chills, nausea and muscle pains, but fever and shivers could be caused by any kind of infection. Although the existence of malaria in Early Medieval Northern Europe is now generally accepted – we know that it was endemic in low-lying areas, such as the fens of Eastern England, during the Anglo-Saxon period (Gowland & Western 2012) – the association with the Medieval North is less well established. The 'black' stone is possibly the most intriguing part of the Ribe inscription. Stones have been used for healing from Antiquity onwards and Iceland has a long tradition of *lyfsteinar*, 'healing stones' (Jón Steffensen 1969, 193). Whether these are prophylactic or meant as a cure is not clear, but in Classical sources, such as Dioscorides, black stone is used to drive out epilepsy (Meaney 1981, 72). The Medieval laws of Iceland penalize the tying of stones on people or livestock for healing, and it is noteworthy that this passage follows one about magic utterances, including *galdrar* (*Grágás*, 19).

The charms in these inscriptions are not unlike a range of Anglo-Saxon protective and healing charms. The Bryggen stick (E) can be compared with a similar religious charm from the Late Anglo-Saxon medical text *Lacnunga*, which is against *fleogendan attre*, 'flying poison', and which requires four incisions in an oaken stick and a lengthy prayer (*Lacnunga* I, 92-93); however, it is not specified that the incisions are runes. Much clearer are the instructions in a remedy against *lencten adl* (possibly tertian or endemic malaria) from the 10th-century *Bald's Leechbook*, which requires not just the making of a complex drink and the singing of masses and prayers to the evangelists and Veronica, but also a mixed runic-Latin and Greek inscription of Hebrew names (Cockayne II 1865, 140). The deciphering of the runes is controversial (Arthur 2018, 71), but we may compare the remedy with one against fever and *ælcre leodrunan and ælfsidene*, 'each sorcery and "elf-sickness"', from the same manuscript (Cockayne II, 138), which requires the writing of Greek letters. In common with the inscriptions from the Ribe stick (F) and the Canterbury manuscript (C), they use prayer and invocation, but the inscriptions are only part of the overall process. What it suggests is that the such charms may be instructions for the healer on how to apply the cure, since they show several steps in which the remedy is made and applied – in the case of the first example on the right breast.

The Canterbury charm (C) is similar to the copper-plate inscription from Sigtuna (D), where the disease is described as a wolf. A careful linguistic study of the conceptualizations behind such rather puzzling descriptions, instead of recourse to a 'magical/supernatural' agent, may at some point give us a clearer idea about Medieval diagnoses and understandings, but for now we note that the group of charms which includes the Sigtuna amulet (D), the Bryggen *bótrúnar* stick (N B257) and the Ribe stick (F) all give instructions on how to do something. Anne Van Arsdall has claimed that the surviving corpus of medical remedies is only a part of the medical knowledge healers possessed (2007, 202). Perhaps these objects were used, not in isolation as the only part of the healing process, but to aid the administration or creation of remedies. Many of the 'charms' on these objects read like instructions. It is thus perfectly possible that the inscriptions acted as mnemonic aids: do this, say this (which gives a time frame for the making of the remedy and its application) and administer on these parts of the body. We do not know how healers were trained, but it is entirely conceivable that tapping into existing memory – prayers, rhymes or ditties – was intended not to release the 'magic' of the object, but rather to remind the doctor of how to make and administer a remedy.

The runic inscription is thus part of a more complex procedure which includes the making of the remedy and the performance of healing. The reciting of charms and prayers also provides a time span in which the remedy is created and applied, which may be significant for the potency of any accompanying medicine. Lee's work with microbiologists on a tenth-century eye-salve remedy from the so-called *Bald's Leechbook* shows that chemical processes in the compound elements of this remedy occur at a specific time and that the instruction to leave it for nine nights is a necessary step towards its efficacy (Harrison et al. 2015). A charm may thus be a way of measuring time in a period when no doctor or herbalist had a watch.

We should also note that modern research into patient behaviour shows that a consideration of the patient's understanding of the disease and treatment can have major impact on the success of the treatment (Thompson et al. 2011). Aside from the so-called 'placebo effect' (Brown 2012), the fact that in some cases the healer pointed to the affected body parts may have given comfort and shown how/where a remedy works. Research into music and healing has shown a remarkable efficacy in conditions ranging from aphasia to mental illness, and we

are slowly but surely learning that literature, metaphor and chant can have positive influences (Horden 2000).

It is not surprising to find that wound infection figures prominently among charms. Cuts and bruises from agricultural work, childbirth and battle wounds provided ample opportunities for bacterial infection. While we know in theory that Medieval people had effective remedies against infection, as the work on 'Bald's eyesalve' shows (Harrison et al. 2015*),* prior to the advent of modern antibiotics such instances could be lethal. In the Middle Ages there were as many microbes as there are today, and there may not have been effective treatments for all of them. Incantations, charms or prayers, as acts of care, may have been the last line of defence in a battle against a formidable enemy.

Conclusion

Too often Medieval health and healing is seen in terms of binaries: superstition and magic versus modern rationality; pagan versus Christian; native versus 'imported'. We hope to have shown that such binaries are not particularly helpful, and many of the inscriptions we discuss transcend them. The Viking world was a connected one, and ideas travelled freely along trade routes; it is very possible that Varangian Guards brought some Byzantine (Greek) medical knowledge back to Scandinavia, that living in the Danelaw may have introduced people to Anglo-Saxon (and by extension Classical and Carolingian) traditions – but it is debatable if by the time it was transmitted to Scandinavia via various intermediate renditions it was seen as 'foreign' or 'different'. Secondly, the way that illness and ill health was communicated may have been very different to today. Formulas containing apparently 'supernatural' entities, such as pagan deities, should not be taken as evidence for pagan survival, but should be seen a way of describing causation: the various wound-causers of the runic inscriptions may be different forms of infection. Today's staphylococcus may have been yesterday's Gyrill. Thirdly, healing is a performance, even today. The doctor with his stethoscope and the surgery setting are parts of a ritual which signals to the patient that they can trust the person in charge of the healing process. It is likely that certain aspects of healing in the past were also rituals to assure the patient that they were in good hands. Just as today, Medieval people had choices. A 'doctor' had to be seen as efficient and effective. Given that the range of

conditions which could be healed was smaller than today, more elaborate performances may have substituted for the fact that in many cases the healer really did not have a lot of options.

As to how these runic objects were used in the healing process, the account in chapter 72 of *Egils saga* gives an idea of how this might have worked in practice (*Egils saga*, 227-230). In Sweden, Egill comes across a family with a sick daughter. It is not clear what her affliction is, but it has been caused by some badly-written runes. Egill brings her back to health by making sure she gets clean bedclothes, and scraping off the maleficent runes from a piece of whalebone – reminiscent of the Ribe stick discussed above (F). He burns the scrapings and declaims a stanza, after which he writes new runes, which he places under her pillow. Interestingly, a very similar stanza is known from a runic inscription from Trondheim (N A142; Knirk 1994). While Egill is not particularly known as a healer, the episode suggests the kinds of things that healers could do: practical things like giving the patient clean bedclothes, while also placing a rune-inscribed object in the bed – who was to say which of these actions made her better?

In this paper we have explored what runic texts tell us about how people envisaged healing and medicine in the Viking Age and after, and what role runes played in them. The texts we have looked at either date from the Viking Age or belong to a tradition that can be traced back to the Viking Age. While what modern scholars might call 'religion' and 'magic' are undoubtedly a part of healing in all ages, we have avoided those frameworks for the moment, and tried to focus on what Viking-Age and Medieval Scandinavians actually wrote in runes about, or as part of, the healing process.

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, translations from Old Norse in this paper are by Judith Jesch, from the editions cited.
[2] There is scholarly disagreement as to whether *limrúnar* refer to the fact that the runes are carved on a piece of wood (from a branch or limb of the tree) or whether they refer to a human limb needing treatment. These and further possibilities are discussed in von See (2006, 568-569), where the second interpretation is preferred. Compare also the use of *lim* on the Ribe stick (inscription F).
[3] The classification of some of them as amulets often depends on the presence of runic (or non-runic) writing, rather than on any other characteristic (Steenholt Olesen 2010, 161). The rather broad definition of amulets in Imer 2010, 63-68 is not especially helpful in understanding the more restricted corpus we are considering here.
[4] All runic inscriptions discussed in this paper (most of which have not yet received full scholarly publication) are referred to by their signum in the *Samnordisk runtextdatabas*, which should be consulted for information on publication and discussion.
[5] An alternative translation for *sárþvara* is 'core of a boil'.
[6] A suggested improvement to the translation of *þú þessa bót bíðir, þar ek orð at kveða rúnti* is 'you experience this improvement (i.e. remedy), for which I have written in runes words to be recited', as cited above.