

Viking Society Research Support Fund

Fieldwork Report: Runestones and Burial Sites of Viking Age Sweden

From the 22nd of May to the 30th of May 2026, with the support of a Viking Society Research Support Fund grant, I undertook a week-long fieldwork trip across Sweden to examine runestones, burial sites and museum collections for my independent research project on women's roles and status in Viking Age society. The purpose of the trip was to see the primary evidence for this project in person, rather than relying solely on published materials and photographs, and to examine how far the archaeological and epigraphic record supports or complicates the picture of female status found in the sagas.



Figure 1 Overview of sites visited across Sweden

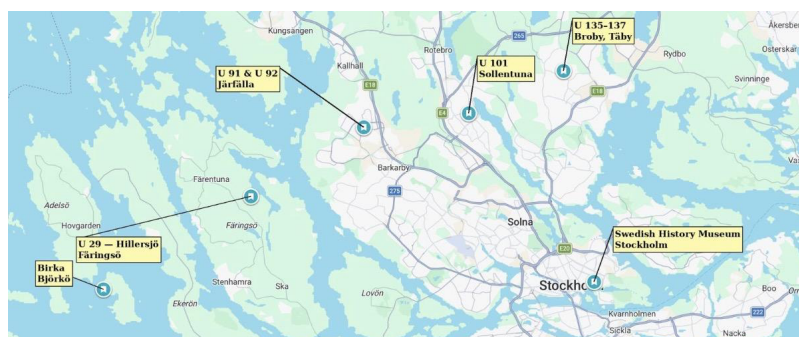


Figure 2 Detail of sites visited in and around Stockholm

The first stop was Jättendal Kyrka in Hälsingland, to see Hs21, Gunnborga's runestone, the only confirmed inscription in Scandinavia to name a female runemaster. The stone had recently been moved inside the church and information about public access was not available online

when I was planning the trip, so this proved to be an unanticipated challenge on the day. I eventually tracked down the head of the church at a garden party some distance away, who kindly agreed to let me in, about three hours after I had first arrived. Seeing Gunnborga's own carving in person, rather than in photographs, was one of the highlights of the week.



Figure 3 Hs21, Gunnborga's runestone, Jättendal Kyrka

From Hälsingland I travelled south to Torsåkers Kyrka in Gästrikland to see Gs7, whose inscription is conventional and male dominated but includes a carved female figure standing to the left of the inscription, balanced opposite the word “druknadī” (‘drowned’).

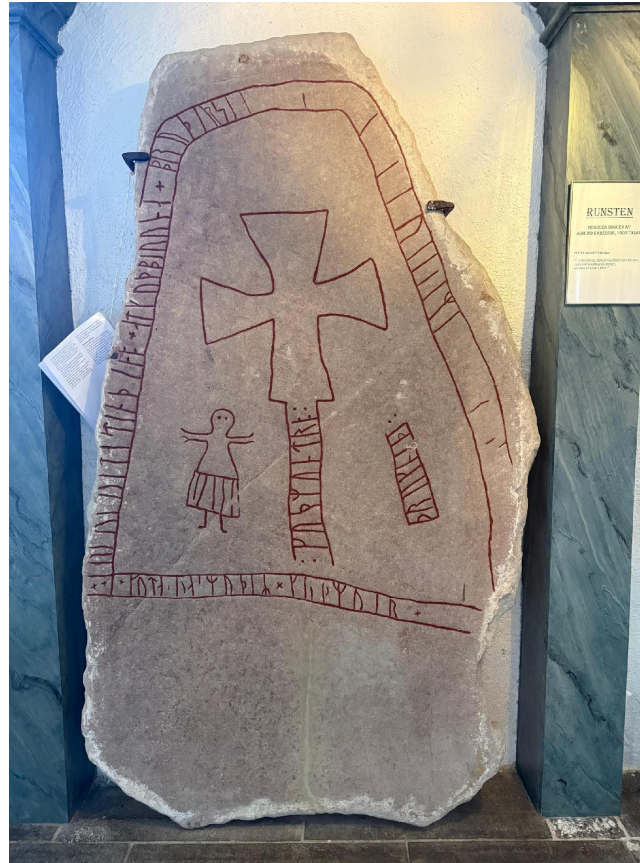


Figure 4 Gs7, Torsåkers Kyrka

In the following days, I went to see Vs24 (Odendisastenen) at Hassmyra, Fläckebo, which includes an inscription praising Óðindísa's household authority; I later also went to the excavation site at Hagebyhöga, Vadstena, where the Aska grave of a high-status woman was found and the recently revealed fifty-metre mead hall. Standing at the findspot itself, rather than reading about it, gave a much clearer sense of the relationship between the monument, the burial and the wider settlement than the published excavation reports alone.



Figure 5 Vs24, Hassmyra



Figure 6 U29, Färingsö

At Färingsö I examined U29, the Hillersjö stone, whose long inscription records Gerlög's inheritance through three marriages and the deaths of her children, and functions in effect as a legal document proving her right to inherit her daughter's estate.

I also visited U135, U136, and U137 at Broby and Täby, which together commemorate Estrid, matriarch of the Jarlabanke clan, whose sustained dynastic authority is documented across all three stones; as well as this, I saw slightly less directly significant, but still insightful runestones U91 and U92 at Järfälla.

A day was spent at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, where I was able to see, among other objects, U613, Unna's memorial stone raised for her son on her own initiative, the remains associated with the Birka chamber grave Bj581, an iron staff from Köpingsvik on Öland linked to the völva tradition, the Aska situla from Hagebyhöga, an iron weaving sword from Gualöv in Skåne, and the weapons and remains of the so-called Woman of Barum. Taken together, these objects form the core comparative material for the archaeological side of my project, alongside the runic evidence.

I followed this with a day trip to Birka itself, to see the site of the Bj581 grave, and to explore the excavation site and museum, as well as with a short visit to U101 at Sollentuna, where a boulder inscription lies close to a site locally known as the "warrior woman's grave".



Figure 7 Bj581 burial site, Birka, Björkö



Figure 8 U101, Sollentuna

Across the ten sites visited, the runic and archaeological record repeatedly produced evidence of female authority, commemoration and public presence that is largely absent from, or marginal to, legendary literature: as runemaster (Gunnborga), as household authority (Óðindísa), as legal claimant (Gerlög), as dynastic matriarch (Estrid), and as the subject of high-status and weapon burials (Bj 581, the Woman of Barum). This fieldwork has substantially strengthened the evidentiary base of my research and will directly inform the comparative chapter of my project.

I am very grateful to the Viking Society for Northern Research for the grant that helped to make this fieldwork possible, and to the church wardens, museum curators and site staff who gave their time and assistance along the way.

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