

RUNIC AMULETS AND MAGIC OBJECTS. By MINDY MACLEOD and BERNARD MEES. *The Boydell Press*. Woodbridge, 2006. 278 pp. ISBN 1 84383 205 4.

The present book—somewhat misleadingly titled—is the first overall discussion of magical, or possibly magical, runic inscriptions. It supplements the annotated catalogue offered by John McKinnell and Rudolf Simek in *Runes, Magic and Religion* (2004). The authors aim at shedding new light on their topic partly through a broader and deeper discussion than has hitherto been seen, partly by comparison with magic legends from other epigraphical traditions, especially in the classical world. The book has nine chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion, a bibliography and an index. Both the earliest and the latest runic traditions are treated. The inscriptions discussed are sorted into categories related to mythology, love life, protective charms, fertility charms, healing charms, pagan rituals, Christian amulets, rune-stones, death and curses, and runic lore.

This book should be of interest to two groups of people: those interested in runes and those interested in the content of the inscriptions in question. I belong to the second group. Possessing only basic knowledge of runology, my background for reviewing this book is first and foremost my work on ancient Northern European magic. In order to judge the book's value to those with similar wider interests, however, I have consulted the runologist James Knirk on a few important questions.

In my opinion the book has both good and poor qualities, but unfortunately the latter predominate. The positives first: The book gives the most complete survey available of possibly magico-religious runic inscriptions and in this respect it is very useful. It treats many inscriptions not mentioned in other works on the same topic, and this is important to students of the subject who will want to know about even the 'maybes' (even if, as a result, several probably non-magical inscriptions are included). I appreciate the attempt to present a broad discussion of this topic, and the desire to see the inscriptions in a broader context, especially through the comparison with other epigraphical traditions. This has obviously shed new light on some of the scantiest early runic inscriptions, on the *laukar* inscriptions (pp. 102–08), on many Christian-influenced charms and on the many gibberish inscriptions. I also like the broad discussion of 'abracadabra', and seemingly corrupt legends generally. An outcome of the broad approach is also an analytical model for early runic amuletic inscriptions. The authors claim that such inscriptions fit into a scheme of five elements: 1. Letter sequences, 2. Naming expressions, 3. Charm words, 4. Symbols, 5. Item descriptions (p. 82). This seems a useful clarifying tool, although in some cases the authors stretch it too far. Although the model is open to criticism, it deserves support as a proposal that may generate better questions and new knowledge.

Then the objections: shortage of information is a general problem throughout the book. It is often difficult to distinguish the authors' contributions from the work of others. This is confusing, and sometimes gives McLeod and Mees too much credit; in other cases they may not get the credit they deserve. This may be the case with the Old English *ærcriu* inscriptions (pp. 140–41)—but I

am not sure, because of the problem of insufficient information. Old Norse literature is frequently referred to without the information needed to find the sources if one wishes to take a closer look at them. Editions are not specified in the bibliography, and page or stanza numbers are not given (see for example pp. 107–08 and Chapter 10). In the discussion of the different inscriptions the authors mention only some of the readings and interpretations that have been suggested in the past. Sometimes even widely accepted readings are omitted (see for example Stentofte, pp. 112–13). The interpretations presented are often supported with little discussion and argumentation, and implied to be obvious, even in cases which are highly uncertain (for example, p. 19, Norden-dorf fibula; pp. 19–20, Pforzen buckle; p. 78, Kragehul spear shaft; p. 76, Vimose plane; p. 217, Eggja inscription). The aim of this may be a more accessible presentation. But as a result, the authors' own suggestions appear more convincing than they should and the whole complex appears easier than it is. A popular book, on the other hand, would require far more simplification—and more balance.

The uncertainty of many of the interpretations is also a problem for the main subject of the book: the comparison with other epigraphical traditions. This problem, however, is not properly addressed. I also miss the discussion, promised on the book's inside jacket, of whether runic characters themselves were considered magical or not. The authors do take a stand (runes were not originally considered magical but came to be) but this is not really based upon a discussion of the problem.

The book has quite a number of formal errors, inaccuracies, inconsistencies and misunderstandings as well. The authors declare that their transcriptions use forms 'as similar as is reasonable to those of literary Norse' (p. 7). The result, however, is sometimes not transcriptions but normalisations that cover choices and interpretations made by the authors (pp. 118, 170). Sometimes such normalisations stop halfway: *kaltr eltr* for *kaldr eldr* (p. 60). Old Norse words are sometimes presented in strange ways. The genitive plural *ljóða*, for instance, is presented as the nominative (*ljóð*, n., p. 5), and the Óðinn names *Sigfǫðr* and *Alfǫðr* are spelled 'Sigfǫður' and 'Alfǫður', with a Classical Old Norse *ǫ* but a late Icelandic epenthetic *u* (p. 22). Old Norse names are sometimes given in fully anglicised forms: 'Arvak', 'Alsvin', 'Sigurd', (p. 244: Old Norse *Árvakr*, *Alsvinnr*, *Sigurðr*), sometimes in semi-anglicised forms: 'Glapsvið', 'Bárd' (pp. 22, 37: Old Norse *Glapsviðr*, *Bárðr*), without explanation or apparent reason. The authors understand *segldrar*, literally 'sail steeds', i.e. 'ships', in *Sigr-drífumál* 10 as 'waves' (p. 241). They do not realise that Old Norse *Alsvinnr* and *Alsviðr* (p. 244) are the same word in different evolutionary stages. The byname *grenski* 'from Grenland in south-eastern Norway' is misunderstood as 'from Greenland' (Old Norse *Grænland*, p. 230). There are enough such examples to undermine my confidence. Because of this and my other objections I will avoid referring to information from this book without confirming it with other sources.