

Cecilia Ljung

Under runristad häll – Tidigkristna gravmonument i 1000-talets Sverige

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Review by Martin Rundkvist

The second volume of Cecilia Ljung's massive doctoral thesis is a lavishly illustrated catalogue. There is no theory chapter and hardly any fad jargon. Ljung argues clearly and economically throughout. On p. 28 she dismisses a convoluted previous interpretation with reference to Ockham's razor. I approve on all counts.

The title means "Under a rune-carved slab". The work deals with Sweden's early Christian burial monuments from the 11th century. This excludes the runestones, most of which are early Christian monuments, but which were not erected on graves in churchyards. The topic instead covers a few other classes of carved stone monument, notably the Eskilstuna type. They carry the same general kind of runic inscriptions and interlace decoration as the runestones, and they date from the same time span. But they performed a different function in a different context. Nevertheless, the runestones are present throughout as a backdrop to the discussion.

Ljung documents four major geographical clusters of these monuments: 1) around Skara in Västergötland, 2) in the western part of Östergötland's plains belt, 3) on either side of Lake Hjälmarens in Närke

and Södermanland, 4) on Öland. Between them are a few outliers. Using Ann-Sophie Gräslund's runestone typology as her point of departure, Ljung divides the material into three phases: early, mid and late 11th century. She shows that clusters 1–3 start at about the same time, but after the first phase Skara loses interest and instead Öland takes off in earnest. Öland also stands out typologically in that most of its monuments are little headstones rather than recumbent slabs or tall multipart Eskilstuna structures.

With a catalogue, a chronology and distribution maps, Ljung has put her field in order for the foreseeable future and made herself immortal to those who deal with 11th-century Scandinavia. She describes the establishment of the catalogue as a fundamental aim of the thesis (p. 249). On the part of a PhD candidate, this is heroic verging on the suicidal. But she made it. Feet thus planted on a solid base of her own construction, Ljung takes on the wider societal questions that the monuments can help answer. She wants to understand the emergence of Christian cemeteries. She wants to understand what roles the sites with these monuments played in society, and in the Church. She wants to investigate regional variation in the Christianization process and early Church organization.

For what I believe is a central result of Ljung's, let me quote p. 253 from her English summary.

There is a strong correlation between regions with early Christian grave monuments in the shape of cists or recumbent slabs and areas with a short runestone period ... together with swift and profound changes in burial customs. The traditional burial grounds seem to have been abandoned at an early stage, followed by the introduction of a more uniform Christian burial praxis. Thus early Christian grave monuments are found in areas where Christianity was already established.

Another main result is that Ljung's new chronological data allow her to side emphatically with Clas Tollin on the issue of the large early churchyards, like the one at Sverkersgården in Östergötland. There was no Scandinavian analogy to England's minster system of the 8th century onward. There, an early system of large ecclesiastical units with large central cemeteries had later been filled in with small parishes and small cemeteries. Ljung's earliest group of monuments has no particular affinity for the largest cemeteries, but are found at small ones as well. With Tollin, she believes that this is because the size of Scandinavian churchyards in the 11th century does not reflect any overarching territorial organization within the Church, but instead correlates with the size of the land estates they served. Big cemetery thus means big landowner more than anything else: at Sverkersgården, specifically, most likely the

ancestors of Old King Sverker. A uniform Christian burial rite may be more a question of people being unfree in relation to their lord rather than of the Church having a tight grip on ritual practice in the region. It is futile to seek a large-scale administrative rationality behind the pattern of early Scandinavian churches and churchyards.

Ljung emphasizes the great variability in the runic monument tradition. Few legitimate interregional generalizations can be made. It is crucial at all times to know what area and period we are talking about, and also whether we are discussing runestones or burial monuments. Things were rather organized in Västergötland and Östergötland from an early date. But “The varied burial rite with a continued use of the older cemeteries, and the fact that runic monuments are erected both in churchyards and in the open landscape on Öland, in the north and west Lake Mälaren area and on Gotland, ... speak of a more wilfully sprouting Christian landscape.” (p. 231, my transl.)

As for gender relations, runic monuments are a classic source material since the names inscribed on them are gender-coded. Ljung demonstrates that such studies must pay attention to the distinction between open-landscape runestones and churchyard burial monuments in order to produce meaningful results. Thus it is not true as Birgit Sawyer contended that Östergötland sees a mix between a male-dominated southwestern runestone tradition and a more gender-equal north-eastern one. Instead the province has male-dominated runestones in the early 11th century, and then more female-inclusive runic burial monuments in the mid to late part of the century. Ljung emphasizes though that the *sponsors* of the monuments are generally male throughout. Only the role of the commemorated is increasingly open to women on the burial monuments, which means that they cannot really tell us anything about changes in female agency, pro or contra.

I have only touched upon a few of the many issues that Ljung discusses and illuminates. Let me end with a few thoughts about the organizational context in which she has done this work. She published 18 years after a central reform of Swedish PhD programmes that seemed designed to keep anyone from doing what she has done. In 1998 we left a situation where Swedish PhD candidates in archaeology were many, were poorly funded if at all, were expendable, and wrote long, hefty theses. We entered today’s situation where they are few, well funded, well taken care of, and expected to spend strictly no more than four years in the programme. I did something similar to what Ljung has done back in my day, but now I tell students to aim for a 173-page octavo using only easily available data. If they must do a PhD in archaeology. Which I really cannot recommend.

Cecilia Ljung has done archaeology a great service with her stellar doctoral thesis. I wonder though if she has done herself a service. I hope she will be one of the few to whom archaeology repays its debt. She deserves it more than most.