

Lisbeth M. Imer

## Lumps of Lead – New Types of Written Sources from Medieval Denmark

So let me get this right, you are also interested in those with Roman-letter writing?

This question was posed to me after a paper given at the National Museum of Denmark in 2014, at an event where we opened one of the first of our recurring exhibitions on ‘danefæ’ (treasure finds). I had been talking about medieval lead amulets to an audience of metal detectorists on the basis of a recently discovered find from Ærø with minuscule writing (Imer & Uldum 2015; Imer & Steenholt Olesen 2018). In Denmark, metal detecting is legal, as the treasure law ensures that all finds of cultural-historical importance are handed over to the National Museum. The “sport” is increasingly popular, and among the Danish detectorists there is a large group of skilled and historically interested people. Collaboration between museums and the detectorists is vital for research and for ensuring the correct handling of finds before they are handed over to the museum. The National Museum, for instance, has initiated a ‘Treasure Day’ at the end of January every year since 2013, where more than 150 detectorists are invited to the opening of an exhibition on the past year’s treasure finds. On that occasion, researchers will give talks on various subjects. It was during one of these events that I had the opportunity to enlighten a large group of detectorists about the highly interesting theme of lead amulets.

Up until around 2013, researchers were under the impression that the inscriptions on lead amulets were mainly carved with runes. Approximately eighty-five lead amulets had been found in Denmark, and most of those – almost sixty – were carved with runes. In the runic archives of the Scandinavian countries, the tradition had been that all finds with runic inscriptions were meticulously recorded, whereas finds with Roman letters – although carved on the exact same types of artefacts – had led a life in the shadows. Then the above-mentioned amulet from Ærø was found, gaining much attention in the press as well as among detectorists. When I had finally given my talk and stressed the fact that Roman-letter inscriptions were quite as interesting as the runic ones – and quite as old – new finds immediately came to light. The day after the exhibition event, a very experienced detectorist sent an e-mail with a photo of an old find of a lead amulet with minuscule writing, asking if this was what I was looking for. The impression among the detectorists in general had simply been that runes are old, Roman letters are modern.

---

Lisbeth M. Imer, National Museum of Denmark

In the years since then, more finds of lead amulets than ever before have come to light in Denmark. Almost fifty new finds have been picked up from ploughed fields by metal detectorists in the years 2014–2018, that is, an average of almost one new find each month. Most of these newly discovered amulets have been carved with Roman letters. Although a dozen have been carved with runes, almost twice as many present minuscule writing (a large group have no visible writing on the outside and await further investigation to see what kind of writing they contain). So, where earlier researchers may have thought that most lead amulets were carved with runes, the present, and presumably also future, finds will probably tell exactly the opposite story. This implies that the tradition in Denmark – as well as probably in the rest of Scandinavia – of producing and wearing Christian amulets made of lead, and presumably also other materials, was more closely linked with the European tradition of Roman-letter writing than we have been aware of before.

Because of the extent of the use of metal detectors, more than 130 finds have turned up in Denmark, and the number is increasing at a steady pace. Norway holds around seventy to eighty finds, whereas Sweden has only twenty finds (information kindly provided by Prof. emeritus James Knirk, Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, and Senior Researcher Magnus Källström, Swedish National Heritage Board). In none of the Scandinavian countries has there been a tradition of registering amulets with Roman-letter writing until recently, which implies that future finds will probably reveal more of this type. In The British Isles, a few lead amulets are known containing runes and Roman letters (Barnes 2011; Hines 2012; Jackson 2006), whereas textual amulets of other varieties, for example parchment amulets, are more common (Skemer 2006: 185–186). Magical texts may also have been written on sacramental wafers, bread, or other provisions in order to be eaten or swallowed. The effect would have been the same as having physical contact with a textual amulet (Hindley 2019: 368). During archaeological excavations in Sachsen-Anhalt, around ten lead amulets have been found, and a number of finds have been retrieved from all over Europe (Muhl & Gutjahr 2013; Vavřík et al. 2020). Such finds show us that the wearing of lead amulets was practised all over Europe. The relatively large amount of finds in Scandinavia, particularly in Denmark, probably reflects the meticulous administrative work with runic amulets, which has no counterpart in the rest of Europe. Hence, we must assume that the tradition was just as common in other parts of Europe as in the Scandinavian countries.

## The amulets and their inscriptions

Lead amulets look like lumps of lead, but on closer inspection, each lump is made of different types of thin lead sheets. Some are very large square sheets, some are long strips of lead, and some are just small pieces of lead. The lead sheet is furnished

with a text, and of course the inscriptions differ considerably in length according to the size of the lead strip or sheet. After the production of the text, the sheet is folded a number of times and squeezed tightly. In some instances, an impression of teeth is visible on the outside (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** The Åhave amulet was found on the Danish island of Lolland in 2011/2012, and the text still remains to be deciphered. The amulet clearly has marks of teeth used to press the lead sheets tightly together. Photo: Søren Greve, National Museum of Denmark.

In recent years, a small team at the National Museum has been working on unfolding the amulets so that the inscriptions will come to light (Imer & Stemmann-Petersen 2016). This has resulted in a number of inscriptions (Imer & Steenholt Olesen 2018), but the task is time-consuming. In addition, the mechanical unfolding of each item is not an optimal choice from the perspective of preservation. Every time the lead layers of an amulet are taken apart, the amulet will lose its original shape. The process is comparable with an archaeological excavation, which in a strict sense is a controlled and documented destruction of an archaeological context. Once an amulet is unfolded, it is impossible to reconstruct its original shape. Instead of mechanical unfolding, we are seeking new options for reading the texts inside the tightly folded lead sheets, for example 3D neutron imaging or very strong X-ray photos that will hopefully result in 3D data and the possibility to unfold the amulets digitally.

The inscriptions present a variety of texts, ranging from a few cryptic runes and rune-like characters to very elaborate, high-quality Latin texts. The short texts with cryptic runes or rune-like characters are perhaps imitations of the “genuine” texts, where the combination of lead and the presence of some sort of writing represents the power that is necessary for expelling or avoiding sickness of any kind. A few newly unfolded amulets present inscriptions that have provided us with new words for the Old Danish lexicon. These are four amulets from Bornholm (Imer & Steenholt Olesen 2018), and they present the first evidence of apotropaic texts on lead amulets written

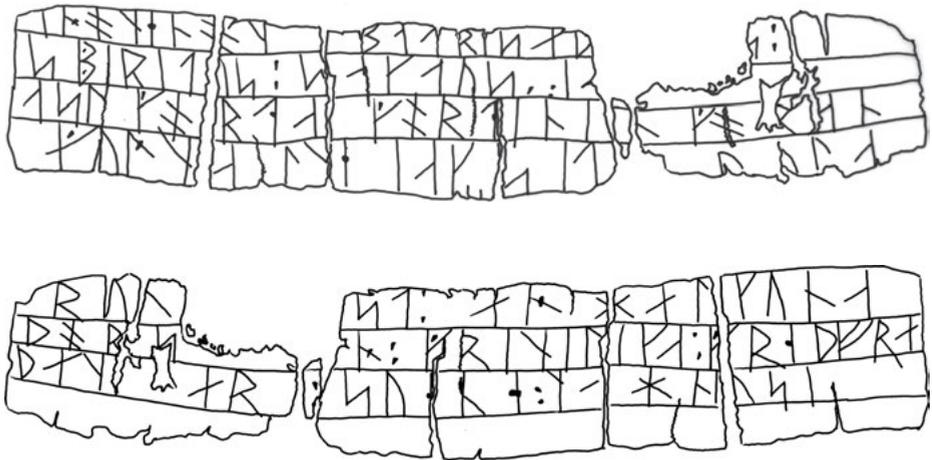
in the vernacular. One of them is the amulet from Kællingeby (Figure 2), where large parts of the text are preserved. It seems to begin on the outside of the amulet and end on the inside. The transliteration is as follows:

**inomenom batris æ(p) . . . s : . . .**  
**spirit(u)s : saktus : (i)- . . .**  
**as(u) gorda- gordin ingor-an**  
**guLmalme iak sit. . . (p)(u)(l)a**

**run. . . st : -æN hælkuNa**  
**þors . . . N : grimilika : greþ fra**  
**þæ m. . . ær. . . : sue(n)(i) : magnusi**

This text translates into English thus:

In the name of the Father and . . . Holy Spirit . . . . . Gordan, Gordin, Ingordan. Into/On/With gold metal, I place/sit skald-runes/a skald-rhyme (in runes) [I carved] the giant that derives from hell/is sorcery-skilled and the terrible cry/sorrow(?) from you(?) . . . Sveinni Magnus.

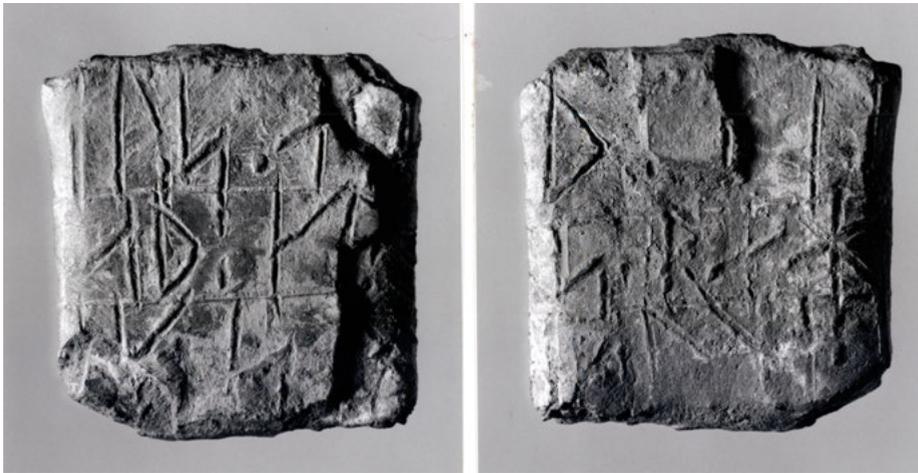


**Figure 2:** The Kællingeby 2 amulet was found on the Danish island of Bornholm in 2004 but was not properly read until a decade later. The inscription presents one of the first recorded Old Danish texts on a lead amulet. Drawing: Lisbeth M. Imer, National Museum of Denmark.

The sequence **þæN grimilika greþ** is not known from other sources, and there may be other solutions for the translations than the one given here. The three other amulets from Bornholm present the exact same phrase, which reveals for us that the **grimilika greþ** must have been a well-known evil being or an evil phenomenon that one should try to avoid (Imer & Stemmann-Petersen 2016; Imer & Steenholt Olesen 2018).

Two of the amulets from Bornholm were presumably carved by the same rune-carver. They both have dotted **l**- and **n**-runes to indicate long consonants, for example in the words *troll* and *þænn*. These are features that we would also find in other parts of medieval Denmark and Sweden (Källström 2016; Palumbo 2020: 59–83). They also have the extremely rare one-sided **m**-rune that has parallels in as diverse places as Gotland and Greenland (Imer 2017: 45, 61). Additionally, the carver's handwriting is quite special. It seems that he cuts very deep into the lead – he almost beats the knife into the lead – and the branches of the runes are very long. This unusual handwriting is also visible on a third amulet from Bornholm, the Østermarie 1 amulet, which is still folded tightly (Figure 3). It was found in 2001 and published by Marie Stoklund with the following tentative reading:

. . . -(æ)þ(-)ti-us : (a)-. . .-. . . |  
 . . . : os : ræh(n)ap : k(r). . . |  
 . . .-. . .(l)(i)(s)l(æ)i : --ks(i). . .



**Figure 3:** The Østermarie 1 amulet was found in 2001 and is still folded tightly. The visible part of the inscription has similarities with the unfolded amulets from Kællingeby and Østre Skovgård in the shape of the runes and the way the runes have been carved. Photo: John Lee, National Museum of Denmark.

Stoklund suggested that part of the text refers to [. . .] *Christ reigns* [. . .], but left the rest of the inscription uninterpreted (Stoklund 2002). At the time, no vernacular inscriptions on lead amulets were known, but on the basis of the inscriptions now

known from Bornholm, it seems more appropriate to transliterate the visible part of the text with

...(:) æþ : fi(l)ius : (æ)|  
 ...- : os : ræhnap : k(r)|  
 ... L(m)(a)lme : (i)(a)(k)s|

The interesting sequence is **L(m)(a)lme**, which has great similarity with the **gulmalme** of Kællingeby and Østre Skovgård. The sequence **ræhnap** is similar to the **ræ . . . oþ** of Østre Skovgård, and the spelling of ‘Christ’, **krestos**, in Østre Skovgård might also be the same in the Østermarie amulet. A tentative translation would be ‘[In the name of the Father] and the Son and [the Holy Spirit] . . . [Christ] reigns, Chr[ist] . . . gold metal I . . .’.

What is also evident from the amulets from Bornholm is that the texts of these amulets combine a Nordic tradition that we know from West Norse sources with a Christian tradition.

The amulets that have been carved with Roman letters only demonstrate the use of the Latin language. Texts written in the vernacular with Roman letters are still missing among the amulets. Although Roman letters were used in written sources to express the vernacular from the mid-thirteenth century onwards, there generally seems to have been a closer connection between Roman letters and Latin than between Roman letters and the vernacular. On the other hand, runes were used for expressing the vernacular as well as Latin. Among the runic amulets, we find Latin texts in combination with vernacular ones as described above. This is probably a result of the fact that the runes had been in use for almost a thousand years when the Roman letters were introduced, and the carvers must have been more used to expressing themselves in runic writing when they used the vernacular.

Some of the Roman-letter amulets have been presented in Imer & Steenholt Olsen (2018). One of them is the Svendborg amulet from the fourteenth century (Imer & Dørup Knudsen 2019). It was found during the excavations of central parts of the town, lying in the middle of a medieval street. It was folded from one end to the other five times and has the Latin text:

*+ In nomine patris. Amen. ++ . . . nomine(?) . . . amen. + Gordan, alfa et omega + Gordin, alfa et omega + Ingordan, alfa et omega + Adiuvo vos elvos et elvas et omnes demones per patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum et per omnes sanctos dei ut non noceatis famulam dei Margaretam nec in oculis nec in aliis membris. Amen + a+g+l+a+*

In English translation:

+ In the name of the Father. Amen. + . . . Amen. + Gordan, Alpha and Omega + Gordin, Alpha and Omega + Ingordan, Alpha and Omega. I adjure you, elf men and elf women, and all demons, by the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and all the saints of God, that you do not harm this servant of God, Margaret, neither in the eyes nor in any joint of her limbs. Amen. +a+g+l+a+

‘AGLA’ is the well-known Hebrew abbreviation that means ‘You are strong in eternity, o Lord’.

The amulet from Vester Broby was found by a metal detectorist and has no visible text on the outside, meaning that the text was hidden from the eye and kept firmly within the amulet. Some of the text has gone missing in the folding of the metal, but the overall sense of it is clear. The Latin text goes:

*In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen. Adiuro vos elvas sive elvas atque . . . adiuro(?) . . . ut non noceatis hanc famulam, haec sancta portanta . . . in oculis nec in genibus [nec in ullo] compagine membrorum suo[rum]. Sententiam fugiatis velut luce tenebre. Gordin, Gordan, Ingordan. Crist[us] vincit. Cristus regnat, Cristus [imper]at. Cristus me benedicat . . .*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. I adjure you, elf women and elf women [sic] and . . . that you do not harm this servant, this holy carrier(?) . . . in the eyes, nor in the knees, nor in any joint of her limbs. May you fly from this decree just as darkness flies from the light, Gordin, Gordan, Ingordan. Christ conquers, Christ reigns. Christ blesses me . . .

The Latin texts on the amulets can also be very short, like the one from Troelseby. As in the case of Vester Broby, the Troelseby amulet did not carry any text on the outside; it has the inscription:

+ *Adiuro vos elvos vel elvas in nomine dei patris omnipotentis ut non noceatis portanti. In nomine domini* +

+ I conjure you, elf men and elf women, in the name of God the Father the Almighty, that you do not harm the carrier. In the name of the Lord +

Some of the runic amulets have purely Latin texts, for example the Lille Myregård amulet from Bornholm (Figure 4) with this Latin text:

*Ave sanctissima Maria, gratia plena. Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus et benedictus fructus ventris tui. Increatus Pater. Immensus Pater. Aeternus Pater. Gala agla a[g]la la[ga]. Gala a[g]la agla la[ga].*

Hail most holy Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. The Father is uncreated. The Father is incomprehensible. The Father is eternal.

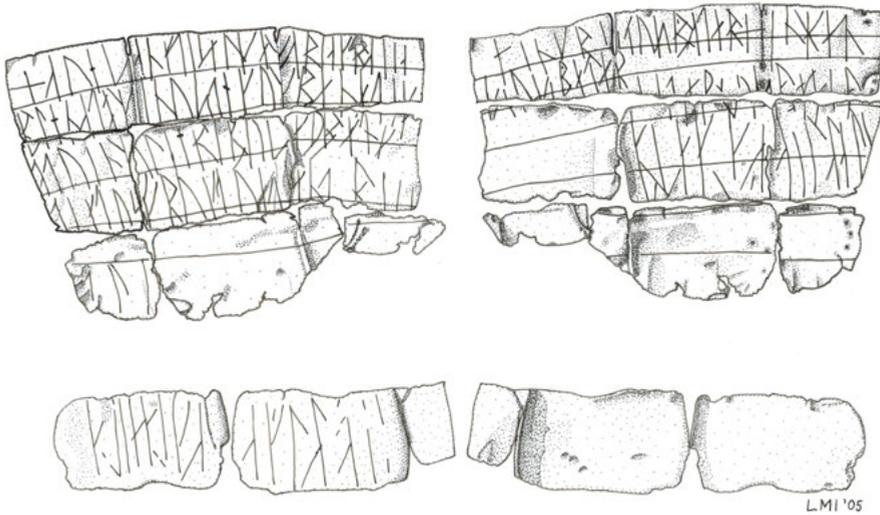
The main text is followed by different versions of the AGLA formula (Stoklund, Imer & Steenholt Olesen 2006).

The longest runic inscription from Denmark is the Blæsinge amulet with the Latin text:

*Coniuro vos, septem sorores . . . Elffrica(?), Affricca, Soria, Affoca, Affricala. Coniuro vos et testor per patrem et filium et spritum sanctum, ut non noceatis istam famulum Dei, neque in oculis neque in membris, neque in medullis, nec in ullo comp[ag]ine membrorum eius, ut inhabitat in te virtus Christi altissimi. Ecce crucem Domini, fugite partes adverse, vicit leo de tribu Juda, radix David. In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti, amen. Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat, Christus liberat, Christus te/et benedicit, ab omni malo defendat. Agla. Pater noster . . .*

I invoke you, seven sisters . . . Elffrica(?), Affricca, Soria, Affoca, Affricala. I invoke and call you to witness through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that you do not harm this servant of God, neither in the eyes nor in the limbs nor in the marrow nor in any joint of his limbs, that the power of Christ Most High shall reside in you. Behold the cross of the Lord; flee, you hostile powers. The lion of the tribe of Juda, the root of David, has conquered. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. Christ conquers, Christ reigns, Christ rules, Christ liberates, Christ blesses you, defends you from all evil. AGLA. Our Father . . .

(Stoklund 1987: 205)



**Figure 4:** The lead amulet from Lille Myregård on Bornholm was found in 2002 and has a Latin text carved with runes. Drawing: Lisbeth M. Imer, National Museum of Denmark.

The earliest recorded find of a lead amulet with runes is from Odense. It was found as early as 1883 in the churchyard of St Canute in Odense. It is unclear if it was found in a grave. The text is mostly in Latin and begins with some rhyming words that we cannot translate. Among them are | **anakristi : anapisti (k)ard--r : nardiar | : ipodiar :**, and then the text proceeds with

*Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat, Christus ab omni malo me Asam liberet, crux Christi sit super me Asam, hic et ubique.*

Christ conquers, Christ reigns, Christ commands, Christ from all evil deliver me, Asa, the cross of Christ be over me, Asa, here and everywhere. (Jacobsen & Moltke 1942: 242)

Then follows the sequence : **khorda : : inkhorda : khord(a)i**, which was unknown at the time of the find and was later interpreted as a chorda-formula (Knirk 1998: 502; McKinnell et al. 2004: 159–161; MacLeod & Mees 2006: 136–137). However, in light of the many recent finds, it seems more appropriate to interpret the sequence as the three demon or elf names Gordan, Gordin, and Ingordan, although the sequence

seems to be mixed up. The origin of these names is unknown, but it is characteristic that they occur as a triad, like the introductory rhyming words. It might be hypothesized that they are of Hebrew origin, but this needs closer examination. Finally, the text has the AGLA formula and concludes with

*sanguis Christi signet me.*

The blood of Christ bless me.

(Jacobsen & Moltke 1942: 242)

## The amulets and the contexts in which they are found

Most of the amulets that have been found with the aid of a metal detector are obviously recorded as stray finds, which means that we are on shaky ground as to where (and when) the amulets were in use. It is clear that the texts were meant to help and protect the person that carried them. The Kävlinge amulet from Skåne shows us that the text could also protect a whole farm or a whole community (Gustavson 1999: 20–23). From the lead roll that was found in Sverker’s chapel in the monastery of Alvastra in Östergötland, we learn that the amulets could also accompany the deceased in their graves. The inscription says: “In the mountain of Celion and in the state of the Ephesians, the seven holy sleepers rest: Malchus, Maximian, Martinian, Dionysius, Serapion, Constantine, John. May the servant of Jesus Christ, Benedicta, rest in the same way, if she succumbs to her illness. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen” (Brate 1918). A Norwegian example is the Sande cross, which was found at the edge of an Iron Age grave mound that was excavated in 2000. It has the inscription: “Behold the cross of the Lord; flee, you hostile powers. The lion of the tribe of Juda, the root of David, has conquered. Four letters on the forehead-plate that Aaron bore on his forehead, Jesus. John, Mark, Matthew, Luke. AGLA. Alpha and Omega [. . .]” (Sørheim 2000; Nordby 2003).

In Denmark, we have only a few finds that have been found in specific archaeological contexts. The Viborg amulet was found in 1994 when the Viborg Stiftsmuseum was excavating the old churchyard of St Matthew. This lead roll with a runic inscription in Latin was found in a man’s grave, and the text is very damaged: “[. . .] Alpha Omega [. . .] name(?) [. . .] name spirit Matthew and John(?) fever. Amen. AGLA. Mary” (revised translation after Stoklund 1996: 283). An amulet from Randers with minuscule writing and a Latin text was found as a stray find in St Peter’s churchyard. It has a long Latin text that invokes the holy powers to protect a man named Skjalm, and it also includes the first fourteen verses of the Gospel of John (Andersen 2002: 105–108).

The archaeological context – i.e. the place where the artefact is found – is one thing, however; the systemic context – i.e. the place(s) where the artefact was used – is another. The archaeological context is where the artefact ended up: lost in the street,

placed in a grave, or in a grave mound, for example. The systemic context is much harder to detect because objects move with people in different environments. It is also possible, as some of the directions for preparing textual amulets in British manuscripts state, that the amulets were either to be destroyed or thrown away after their use (Hindley 2019: 369). That could be one of the reasons that we find many amulets lying in the fields, seemingly without any systemic context.

In some cases, the systemic context may coincide with the archaeological context. An amulet ending up in a grave could be regarded as part not only of an archaeological but also of a systemic context (cf. Gilchrist 2008). The Romdrup amulet, which was found wrapped around the relics in the reliquary within the altar of Romdrup Church, the most holy place in the medieval church, also represents both contexts. It has the text: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. I adjure you, elf men and elf women and demons, by the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that you do no harm to this servant of God, Nicholas, neither in the eyes, nor in his head, nor in any joint of his limbs. But reside in them shall the power of Christ Most High. Amen. Christ conquers, Christ reigns, Christ commands. Christ bless these eyes, and the head, and all limbs. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. +++ +a+g+l+a+”. On the other side of the strip, we find different versions of names of God (Adonai, Alpha and Omega, Emmanuel), and then again the AGLA formula (Christiansen 1981).

The physical manifestation of Nicholas’s name in the amulet and the position of it in the most holy place of the church, surrounded by carved manifestations of holy words and powers, was probably part of the same plan: to seek the best possible way of ensuring good health for the person mentioned in the text. We might ask if the position of the amulet was a recognized Christian practice or if we are faced with superstition and a behaviour that was not accepted within the Church (Christiansen 1981: 178). The text itself, which is a mixture of benediction and adjuration, however, does not suggest any such connection, which can only be drawn if we accept that there was an official and an unofficial form of religious practice. In the light of research within the field of lived religion within the past decade (Ammerman 2016), this is hardly likely.

It seems instead that the Romdrup lead strip is related to other containers of relics, like that from Stokkemarke in Denmark and the Ingleby Arncliffe crucifix in Britain. The Romdrup Nicholas was presumably lucky – or rich – enough to be mentioned in a prayer on the lead strip, and that prayer took up the most holy of holy places in the church, touching the relics. We can compare the setting of Nicholas’s amulet to the location of the textual amulets that were found inside the Limoges crucifix dated to the thirteenth century at Ingleby Arncliffe in Britain. The crucifix probably belonged to the married couple Adam and Osanna – the latter is a female name used in Yorkshire in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – and served as a general protection for the household. It is now lost, unfortunately, but it contained two textual amulets written on parchment as general protection against demons,

elves, and everything evil. Most of the text is an invocation of the Trinity, Christ and the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, Evangelists, and other elect of God: an abridged list of divine names, separated in writing by crosses and other marks (Skemer 2006: 185). The Stokkemarke reliquary (Figure 5) was found in 1835 during the restoration of the medieval altar of the church. On the outside of the lead casket, the inscription “Bishop Gisico” was carved with runes. The reliquary is dated to an inauguration of the altar around 1300 – Gisico was the bishop of the diocese of Odense from 1286 to 1304 (Jacobsen & Moltke 1942: 260–261). There was no liturgical obligation for the bishop to put his name on the reliquary, so the reason for his doing so might lie in the fact that he would benefit personally – maybe eternally – from placing a physical manifestation of his name in close contact with the holy relics (Imer 2018: 84).



**Figure 5:** The reliquary from Stokkemarke Church on the Danish island of Lolland measures  $6 \times 2 \times 1.7$  cm, and the height of the runes is 1.5 cm. The name of Bishop Gisico is carved on the outside of the casket. Photo: Roberto Fortuna, National Museum of Denmark.

The idea that writing is a physical manifestation of the spoken word is not new. In all religions, the word is invoked with great power (Schindler 1858: 96), and a person or an object takes residence in its name (Skemer 2006: 108). The spoken word vanishes in the exact second it is articulated, and there is no verbal way to keep it fixed. If one stops speaking in the middle of the word, the sounds obviously stop with it, and if one continues speaking, the word is gone in the same second as the last sound is expressed (Ong 1982: 32). But by writing down the word, one is able to give the word a physical form that is permanent – or at least longer lasting than the spoken word.

In 2007, an organization called the Times Square Alliance organized “Good Riddance Day” in New York, where an industrial-size paper shredder was brought to Times Square to give people an opportunity to get rid of their most unpleasant memories: failed exam results, mortgages, evidence of broken engagements, and other forms of disagreeable paper documentation (Schapiro 2007). By shredding

evidence, reducing materialized words to illegible matter, the owners had the ability to act on material stuff to enact a hoped-for transformation of thought and feeling. One might call it a ritual to materialize something elusive in order to be able to interact with it. The American social anthropologist Webb Keane speaks of “spirit writing” (Keane 2013).

These examples from social anthropology are highly relevant in relation to textual amulets from the Middle Ages. The writing down of spoken words gives them a physical representation, and they become durable in a way that spoken words cannot be. Once they are written down, one can make them act for oneself in any way that one wants them to. Take the text from Vester Broby with the phrase “May you fly from this decree just as darkness flies from the light” as an example. The holy words are given a physical presence, and the textual amulets become mediators of a single medieval person’s direct communication with God. The Romdrup amulet with Nicholas’s name is another example. Here, the physical manifestation of Nicholas, that is, his name on the amulet, is placed in eternal close contact with the holy relics of the church, so that the text as well as the context plays a role in religious practice.

Within this framework of materialized words, there are numerous questions and possibilities for retrieving new information from the artefacts and their interaction with the people that used them.

Most of the Roman-letter texts must have been carved by clergymen, maybe by local priests. Some of the texts indicate extensive knowledge and training in manuscript-writing, with beautiful carving technique and abbreviations of Latin words.

One of the local metal detectorists has found around ten to fifteen amulets from the vicinity of Tamdrup Church in Jutland. Analyses of these amulets are still ongoing – all of them are carved with Roman letters – but they seem to have been carved by different people, presumably all members of the clergy.

We could discuss if clerics produced the runic amulets as well as the Roman-letter ones. A few amulets are written in a combination of Old Danish and Latin, but most of them have been written in Latin, suggesting that the rune-carver would have been trained in Latin and Roman-letter writing as well as Old Danish and runic writing. And we could discuss who would be able to write with runes as well as Roman letters. In the Middle Ages, most people were not able to read and write Latin, unless they were trained in clerical circles, but some people would probably have learned runic writing at home. One of the best examples of the interaction of runic and Roman-letter writing from the Old Danish area is the stylus from Dalby in Skåne, on which Bovi wrote a short text in Old Danish with runes: “Bovi owns the stylus”. The item was most definitely used for Roman-letter writing in Latin (Moltke 1985: 469–473), and Bovi was possibly one of the well-educated men in the monastery at Dalby and trained in both writing systems. In relation to the lead amulets, though, the choice of writing system does not seem to have had the same significance as the choice of language. Perhaps the Latin formulae – not their translations into the vernacular – held magical power in themselves.

## Scandinavia and Europe

The large amount of lead amulets in Scandinavia, especially in Denmark, easily leads to the conclusion that the tradition was first and foremost a Scandinavian one. However, the resemblance to finds of textual amulets across Europe suggests that the Christianization of Scandinavia pulled the existing tradition out of paganism and into a Christian context.

The Ingleby Arncliffe crucifix is a good example of a European tradition that resembles the Scandinavian one, also in terms of where the amulets are placed. The Halberstadt amulets from Germany are also important as parallels. During the excavation of a graveyard at the Liebfrauenkirche in Halberstadt, a lead amulet was found in a child's grave, where it was uncovered in the chest area of the deceased. The text invokes God and other divinities (angels, apostles, and prophets) to help and protect the young Tado from any harm, day and night, and no matter whether he is eating or drinking (Muhl & Gutjahr 2013: 33–36). Several other such amulets have turned up in Sachsen-Anhalt and in excavations in other parts of Europe (Vavřík et al. 2020), so the tradition of inscribing benedictions in lead is also known from the European area, although finds seem to be more numerous in Denmark. That we find so many lead amulets in Denmark compared to the rest of Europe is undoubtedly due to the treasure law and the liberal legislation in Denmark that allows amateurs to go searching the fields for archaeological artefacts. We should probably interpret the Roman-letter amulets – and also a good deal of the runic ones – as part of a Christianization process that began quickly after the introduction of Christianity. And it was probably a process that found fertile ground because a textual amulet tradition was already rooted in the pagan North. In Anglo-Saxon England, the pagan practice of charms was also Christianized with the advent of Christianity (Gilchrist 2008: 123).

The human skull fragment with a runic invocation of the pagan gods from early eighth-century Ribe is the earliest Danish evidence (Stoklund 2004), and several other metal amulets with different types of apotropaic texts have been recorded all over Scandinavia (Pereswetoff-Morath 2019). The use of textual amulets seems to have gone through a transformation process in which the pagan gods were exchanged with the Christian world of divine characters. But it also seems that the transformation process came to a stop. The Latin invocations and prayers continued to be written in Latin and were not translated into Old Danish. The Latin texts could, however, be carved with runes, so that the original words were retained but transformed by lettering into a Northern context. The Christian model seems more to have met and blended with an old Northern tradition, whereby potentially rather old formulae to expel evil beings were mixed with characters from the Christian world. In that sense, the amulets reflect an older and continued tradition more than a vernacularization of Roman script.

The Østermarie silver amulet, traditionally dated to the eleventh century, has a text that points more to West Norse literature than towards Christianity. The text

was presumably carved as a means of help during childbirth, and transliterates according to Rikke Steenholt Olesen as

**si(g)moþr i- . . . | . . . -arns mo|þir s(i). . .  
sua ristar . . . | . . . aki reist b(i)|-rk|runar auk . . . | . . . r heil (i)**

Sigmóðr . . . child's(?) mother(?) . . . In this way NN carves(?) . . . Áki carved helprunes and . . . Heal in/forever.

The text is comparable to a phrase from the poem *Sigrdrífumál*, stanza 2: *Bjargrúnar skaltu kunna, ef þú bjarga vilt ok leysa kind frá konum* ‘You need to know help-runes if you want to help and deliver the child from a woman’ (Stoklund 2003: 863–867; Steenholt Olesen 2008; Steenholt Olesen 2010: 169–171).

One interesting feature on this particular amulet is that the text has a special outline on it. The most logical reading of the text implies that the text was carved in a spiral, beginning in one corner of the object and continuing towards the middle around the hole (Figure 6). This was first noted by Rikke Steenholt Olesen during her PhD studies (Steenholt Olesen 2007: 87–88). A similar text order is found in one of the Sigtuna copper amulets, presumably of the same age (Nordén 1943; Pereswetoff-Morath 2019: 70–72). That we find two amulets with a similar reading order is reasonable if we expect an established Scandinavian tradition. What is more interesting, though, is that this particular text order is also found in a British manuscript, Additional MS 15236, fol. 54r, from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. The text includes directions for the preparation of a lead plate to help a woman conceive (Skemer 2006: 128), and the drawing in the right-hand margin shows the text – or characters – as written in a circle or a spiral (Muhl & Gutjahr



**Figure 6:** The Østermarie silver amulet from eleventh-century Bornholm was found in 1998. The text points towards well-known West Norse literature, but the layout and reading order of it points more towards material in medieval German manuscripts. Photo: John Lee, National Museum of Denmark.

2013: 2). The charm text says that the plate should be wrapped in cloth or leather and hung around the woman's neck until she conceives. Soon after the birth of the child, it should be removed to prevent various diseases from entering (Hindley 2019: 369). A similar practice relates to *Margrétar saga*, which deals with the life of St Margaret of Antioch. St Margaret was known to protect women from dying in labour and children from being deformed. It was a widespread belief that it was beneficial for a woman to have a small manuscript copy of *Margrétar saga* nearby during childbirth. The saga is often found in small formats that would support such a practice (Wolf 2010). Such recipes are good parallels to the Østermarie silver amulet, which on the basis of this evidence might be interpreted as an amulet to help during childbirth. The charm text in the British manuscript points in a European direction, suggesting that the production and use of amulets followed some geographically more widespread standards than we are able to detect if we confine our studies to the Scandinavian material. A few women's graves from England have preserved textual amulets in the shape of granular material, interpreted as parchment, wrapped in textile or lead. The amulets have been found on the abdomen or between the legs of adult females (Jackson 2006: 141; Gilchrist & Sloane 2005: 200; Gilchrist 2008: 125). Such finds indicate that textual amulets were indeed used across Europe.

The text on the Østermarie silver amulet is also comparable with the text on the lead amulet from Kællingeby that has 'runes of rhyme' and 'giants from hell' and seems to have some sort of rhythm when read aloud. At the same time, the text invokes holy characters from the Christian world, demonstrating how these types of texts combine the best features from two worlds. Maybe the oral traditions of the North were influenced by the manuscript tradition, so that with the advent of Christianity it became increasingly important to write down incantations that were previously more part of an oral tradition.

Maybe the closer contacts with Europe also resulted in the use of lead for the production of textual amulets as described in the above-mentioned British manuscript (Skemer 2006: 128; Hindley 2019: 369). Lead was hardly ever used in metal production in the Iron and Viking Ages, and the textual amulets that we normally ascribe to the Viking Age are all made of other materials: copper alloy, bone, or wood. A medieval manuscript from the thirteenth century that is now in the University Library in Uppsala (Codex Upsaliensis C 222 of the *Gemma animae* by Honorius Augustodunensis) is said to be of German origin. On one of the pages is written the beginning of the Gospel of John ("In the beginning was the Word [. . .]"), and then comes the sequence "I adjure you elves Gordin, Ingordin, Gord'i, and Ingordin, Gord'i by the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, by Holy Mary, the mother of our Lord [. . .]". In the margin of that particular phrase, it is said that "You should inscribe this in lead to avoid the elves" (*contra elphos hoc in plumbo scribe*; Gjerløw 1960: 21). The above-mentioned directions in the Additional MS 15236 from Britain also mention that the charm should be carved on lead.

So, it seems that lead as material has significance for the function of the amulet *as well as* the words written on it. And it also seems that this tradition was not rooted in a Scandinavian context, but rather in a European one. The use of lead for amulets was not necessarily a Christian tradition – it could originate from the Greek and Roman *defixiones* that we know of as far back as Antiquity. In a medieval context, it is also possible that lead was a popular type of material for amulets because lead was usually used to wrap the reliquaries of churches. Or it could be that lead was so popular because it was heavy. The weight of the amulet would then serve as a constant reminder of its presence.

## Future research

There are, of course, a number of other questions and themes that could be addressed in future research concerning textual amulets. Some of these are related to linguistic research. First of all, the amulets provide us with new words in Old Danish vocabulary; second, they provide us with further insight into the question of runic Latin. The texts on the lead amulets could contribute to a better understanding of the interaction of runic writing and Latin language, the pronunciation of Latin words, and the educational level of parish priests, which might be revealed in the poorly written Latin of some of the texts. The introduction of dotted runes, which has been much debated (e.g. Spurkland 1995; Knirk 2010; Seim 2004; Korn-sæther 2013), may also have something to do with an increased need or wish to transliterate Latin, Christian texts into runes. Dotted runes were introduced in runic writing at the advent of Christianity, but because of the poorly preserved finds from the time, our understanding of the reasons for this innovation is rather fragile. The increasing amount of Latin texts from the early medieval period might help to shed light on this problem. And finally, the amulets in many cases contain personal names. They reveal that amulets were used and worn by men as well as women, but we do not know if there was any social status connected with the possession of lead amulets, or if certain texts were related to either men or women – apart from the childbirth formulae.

When learning more about the context, the discussion needs to separate the archaeological and the systemic contexts. The archaeological context is where the artefact is found. It can be helpful in terms of dating the object, although stray finds are rarely datable, and in understanding the geographical distribution, but when it comes to the interpretation of the object, the archaeological context will only inform us about the final destination of the artefact. The archaeological context might well be where the object was used, or where it was of use to people – for example, the Ingleby Arncliffe crucifix or the Romdrup lead strip – but it might also be a grave or a field into which the amulet had been thrown when its function was no

longer of any use. Most amulets are found in fields that have never been excavated, and future investigations of some of these fields would probably provide us with much more information and details about the final destination of amulets. The systemic context for stray-find amulets is much harder to detect, but the texts and their outlines, and maybe the shape of the artefacts, can be helpful in the interpretation process.

The amulets form an interesting hybrid between epigraphic and manuscript writing, one in which the text, the way that it is carved, the material, and the way that it is handled are equally important components in a ritual for ensuring the best possible health and prosperity for the user. The tradition of wearing such amulets in Scandinavia is rooted in the pre-Christian era, and by the advent of Christianity, the tradition was immediately influenced and in some ways transformed into a Christian setting that covered most of Europe. Whereas the European medieval manuscripts contain directions for the production of amulets, the Scandinavian soil is bursting with the archaeological remains of their use.

## Bibliography

- Ammerman, Nancy T. 2016. "Lived religion as an emerging field: an assessment of its contours and frontiers." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 29 (2): 83–99.
- Andersen, Michael. 2002. "Indskrift på en blyplade." In: *Vor Frue Kloster. Et benediktinernonnekloster i Randers*, ed. Hans Mikkelsen, 105–109. Randers: Jysk Arkæologisk Selskab.
- Barnes, Michael. 2011. "Deerness Runic Inscribed Plague." *Orkney Archaeological Society Newsletter* 06 November 2011: 7.
- Brate, Erik. 1918. "Alvastra-blyet, Ög. 248." *Fornvännen* 1918: 202–206.
- Christiansen, Tage E. 1981. "To gejstlige typer fra Valdemarstiden." In: *Middelalder, metode og medier: Festskrift til Niels Skyum-Nielsen på 60-årsdagen den 17. oktober 1981*, ed. Karsten Fledelius, 167–179. København: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Gilchrist, Roberta. 2008. "Magic for the Dead? The Archaeology of Magic in Later Medieval Burials." *Medieval Archaeology* 52:1: 119–159.
- Gilchrist, Roberta & Barney Sloane. 2005. *Requiem: The Medieval Monastic Cemetery in Britain*. London: Museum of London archaeology Service.
- Gjerløw, Lilli. 1960. "Notes on the Book of Cerne and on MS Uppsala C 222." *Nordisk tidskrift för bok- och biblioteksväsen* 47: 1–29.
- Gustavson, Helmer. 1999. "Verksamheten vid Runverket i Stockholm." *Nytt om runer* 14: 19–25
- Hindley, Katherine S. 2019. "Eating Words and Burning Them. The Power of Destruction in Medieval English Charm Texts." In: *Zerstörung von Geschriebenem. Historische und transkulturelle Perspektiven. Materiale Textkulturen*, ed. Carina Kühne-Wespi, Klaus Peter Oschema & Joachim Friedrich Quack, 359–372. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Hines, John. 2012. *Spindle whorl*. Portable Antiquities Scheme. <https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/409249> (1 October 2020).
- Imer, Lisbeth M. 2017. *Peasants and Prayers. The Inscriptions of Norse Greenland*. Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark.
- Imer, Lisbeth M. 2018. *Rigets runer*. Århus: Aarhus University Press.

- Imer, Lisbeth M. & Otto C. Uldum. 2015. "Mod dæmoner og elverfolk." *Skalk* 2015 (1): 9–15.
- Imer, Lisbeth M. & Karen Stemann-Petersen. 2016. "Vi folder historien ud – amuletter af bly fra middelalderens Bornholm." *Nationalmuseets Arbejdsmark* 2016: 118–129.
- Imer, Lisbeth M. & Rikke Steenholt Olesen. 2018. "'In the beginning was the Word . . . ' New finds of lead amulets in Denmark." In: *Epigraphy in an intermedial context*, ed. Alessia Bauer, Elise Kleivane and Terje Spurkland, 123–155. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- Imer, Lisbeth M. and Allan Dørup Knudsen. 2019. "'Jeg besværges jer elvermænd og elverkoner og alle dæmoner . . . ' Blyamuletten fra Møllergade i Svendborg." In: *Fund fortæller. Nye arkæologiske fund på Fyn*, ed. Kurt Risskov Sørensen, 64–67. Kerteminde: Arkæologi Sydfyn.
- Jackson, Reg. 2006. *Excavations at St James's Priory*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Jacobsen, Lis & Erik Moltke. 1942. *Danmarks runeindskrifter. Text*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.
- Keane, Webb. 2013. "On spirit writing: materialities of language and the religious work of transduction." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 19: 1–17.
- Knirk, James. 1998. "Runic Inscriptions Containing Latin in Norway." In: *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung. Abhandlungen des Vierten Internationalen Symposiums über Runen und Runeninschriften in Göttingen (4.–9. August 1995)*, ed. Klaus Düwel & Sean Nowak, 476–507. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Knirk, James. 2010. "Dotted runes: where did they come from?" In: *The Viking Age: Ireland and the West – Papers from the proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> Viking Congress 2005, Cork*, ed. John Sheehan & Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 188–198. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- Kornsæther, Cecilie. 2013. *Fra angelsaksisk A til skandinavisk A? En undersøkelse av teorien om angelsaksisk forelegg for de skandinaviske punkterte runene*. Unpublished Master thesis from Department of Linguistic and Scandinavian Studies, University of Oslo.
- Källström, Magnus. 2016. "Gravhällsfragmentet från Tornby i Fornåsa i Östergötland och utvecklingen av några medeltida runformer." *Futhark. International Journal of Runic Studies* 6: 107–142.
- MacLeod, Mindy & Bernhard Mees. 2006. *Runic Amulets and Magic Objects*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.
- McKinnell, John, Rudolf Simek with Klaus Düwel. 2004. *Runes, Magic and Religion. A Sourcebook*. Wien: Fassbaender.
- Moltke, Erik. 1985. *Runes and their Origin – Denmark and Elsewhere*. Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark.
- Muhl, Arnold & Mirko Gutjahr. 2013. *Magische Beschwörungen in Blei. Inschriftentäfelchen des Mittelalters aus Sachsen-Anhalt*. Kleine Hefte zur Archäologie in Sachsen-Anhalt, Heft 10. Halle (Saale): Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt.
- Nordby, K. Jonas. 2003. "Arbeidet ved Runearkivet, Oslo." *Nytt om runer* 16: 13–18.
- Nordén, Adolf. 1943. "Bidrag til svensk runforskning." *Antikvariska studier* I, KVHAA handlingar 55, 143–231 (+plancher 1–18). Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhetsakademien.
- Palumbo, Alessandro. 2020. *Skriftsystem i förändring: en grafematisk studie av de svenska medeltida runinskrifterna [Changing writing systems: a graphemic study of the Swedish medieval runic inscriptions]*. Uppsala: Institutionen för nordiska språk.
- Pereswetoff-Morath, Sofia. 2019. *Viking-Age Runic Plates. Readings and Interpretations*. Runrön 21. Uppsala: Uppsala University.
- Ong, Walter. 1982. *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge.
- Schapiro, Rich. 2007. "Times Square shredder gets rid of bad memories on Good Riddance Day." *New York Daily News*, 29 December.
- Schindler, Heinrich Bruno. 1858. *Der Aberglaube des Mittelalters. Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte*. Breslau: W. G. Korn.

- Seim, Karin. 2004. "Runologi." In: *Håndbok i norrøn filologi*, ed. Odd Einar Haugen, 128–193. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.
- Skemer, Don. 2006. *Binding Words. Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Spurkland, Terje. 1995. "Kriteriene for datering av norske runesteiner i vikingtid og tidlig middelalder." *Maal og Minne*: 1–14.
- Steenholt Olesen, Rikke. 2007. *Fra Biarghrúnar til Ave sanctissima Maria. Studier i danske runeindskrifter fra middelalderen*. Unpublished Ph.d. thesis. Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen. <http://cms.ku.dk//upload/application/pdf/e3d23f57/RSO-phd-afhandling-20okt2008.pdf> (1 October 2020).
- Steenholt Olesen, Rikke. 2008. "Runic amulets Made of Metal from Medieval Bornholm." *Lund Archaeological Review* 2005/2006, vol. 11/12: 5–16.
- Steenholt Olesen, Rikke. 2010. "Runic Amulets from Medieval Denmark." *Futhark. International Journal of Runic Studies* 1, 161–176.
- Stoklund, Marie. 1987. "Runefund." *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*: 189–211.
- Stoklund, Marie. 1996. "Runer 1995." *Arkæologiske udgravninger i Danmark 1995*: 275–294.
- Stoklund, Marie. 2002. "Runer 2001." *Arkæologiske udgravninger i Danmark 2001*: 252–257.
- Stoklund, Marie. 2003. "Bornholmske Runeamuletter." In: *Runica – Germanica – Mediaevalia*, ed. Wilhelm Heizmann and Astrid van Nahl, 854–870. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Stoklund, Marie. 2004. "The Runic Inscription on the Ribe Skull Fragment." In: *Ribe Excavations 1970–76*, vol. 5, ed. Mogens Bencard, Aino Kann Rasmussen and Helge Brinch Madsen, 27–42. Højbjerg: University Press of Southern Denmark.
- Stoklund, Marie, Lisbeth M. Imer & Rikke Steenholt Olesen. 2006. "Nyfund fra Danmark 2003." *Nytt om runer* 19: 4–10.
- Sørheim, Helge. 2000. "Sensasjonelt funn på feil sted! Nytt funn av kristent runekors i hedensk gravhaug på Sande i Sola." *Frå haug ok heiðni* 2000/4: 16–28.
- Vavřík, Daniel, Konrad Knauber, Daniela Urbanová, Ivana Kumpová, Kateřina Blažková & Zdeněk Šámal. 2020. "Unveiling magic from the middle ages: tomographic reading of a folded lead amulet from Dřevíč fortress (Czech Republic)." *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* 12: 12.
- Wolf, Kirsten. 2010. "Margrétar saga II." *Gripla* 21: 61–104.

