

# A ceramic beaker with runes – the archaeological and linguistic context of the word **alu**

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## The rune beaker

It is sometimes said that the best archaeological finds are made in the stores, and this was again the case in 2019, when archaeologists from Museum of Southwest Jutland were examining the finds from the excavation of an Iron Age village near the abandoned village Tovrup. The entire Iron Age village was excavated in 1988–94 prior to the planting of Østskoven, a recreational area east of Esbjerg on the west coast of Jutland (South Denmark Region) (*Fig. 1*)<sup>1</sup>. After having lain undiscovered in a finds box for 30 years, an unmistakable runic inscription was identified on the underside of the base of a drinking beaker (*Fig. 2*).

Only the lower part of the beaker is preserved. It is flat and measures 5.6 cm in diameter. Its preserved height is 5.9 cm and on the surviving part of the vessel wall are six encircling grooves, which invite one to grip it (*Fig. 3*). The appearance of the decoration on the upper part of the beaker is of course unknown, but the area with the grooves may have been succeeded by an undecorated zone. When comparisons are made with other drinking beakers (cf. *Fig. 7* below), it seems very likely that the vessel wall had zones of decoration like the glass prototypes, see for instance Eggers type 196<sup>2</sup>. It is finely burnished, which is typical of this vessel type<sup>3</sup>. The runes are on the underside of the base of the small beaker and are 3–4 cm high, forming the word **alu**<sup>4</sup>. They were added to the vessel before it was fired. The uppermost part of the main stave and branch of the first rune, the **a**-rune, can only be faintly made out in the clay, which is probably because the clay was almost dry when the inscription was applied to the object. The long grooves, however, show no signs

<sup>1</sup> Excavations ESM 1661, Grønnegård I, and ESM 1697, Grønnegård IV.

<sup>2</sup> EGGERS 1951, 189; LUND HANSEN 1987, 97–98.

<sup>3</sup> STIDSING 2008, 31; NIELING 2015, 143.

<sup>4</sup> Transliterations of runes converted into Latin letters are written in **boldface** type. Two dots (colon) : denotes a separation mark, short horizontal stroke (hyphen) - denotes remains of a rune, brackets () denote an uncertainly read rune, angled brackets [] a missing rune, three dots in a row ... a missing

sequence of unknown length, and the equal symbol = a ligature (bind-rune). Transcriptions (normalisation of transliteration to Proto Norse or Old Norse) are given in *italics*, and an asterisk \* denotes that the word is not evidenced but reconstructed. The beaker and its inscription has the number DK SJy 82 in the – currently offline – Danish rune database (<http://runer.ku.dk>) and is also included in the international database (<http://runesdb.eu>).

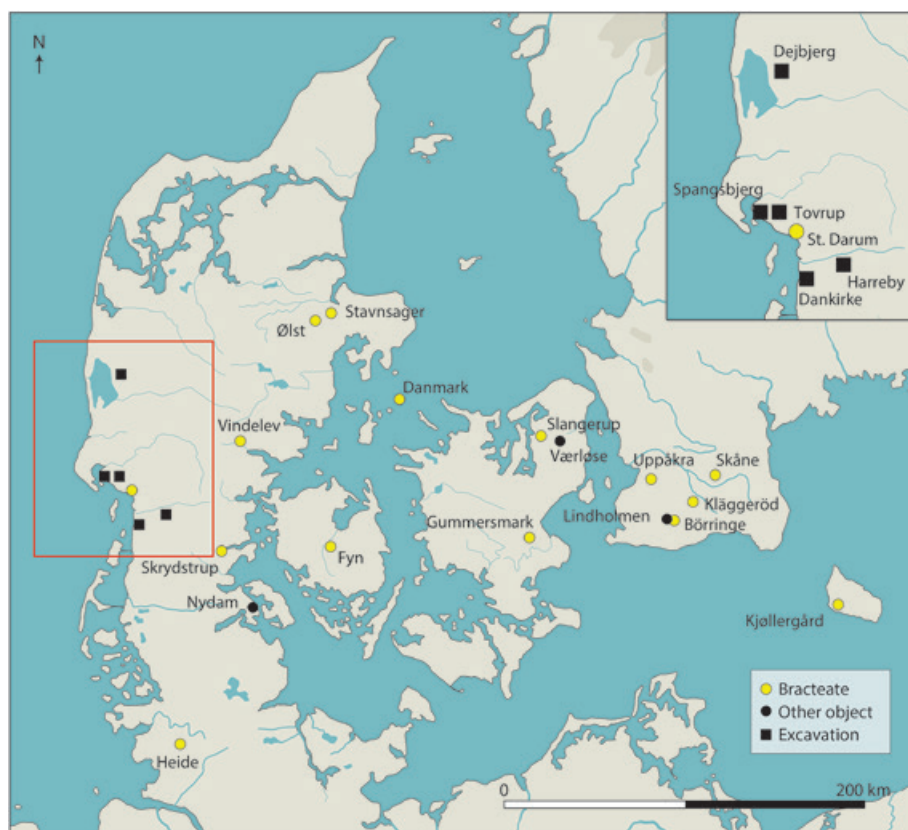


Fig. 1. The distribution of **alu** inscriptions in Southern Scandinavia. Yellow dots: gold bracteates. Black dots: other objects. Black squares: excavated sites mentioned in the text.

of the characteristic small peeled-off areas, which would be expected if the lines had been scratched into the fired clay. The inscription must therefore have been added when the beaker was made, probably during the burnishing process.

#### The context and dating of the drinking beaker

The rune beaker was found in roof-bearing posthole MAR of longhouse XXXIV (*Fig. 4*). When it was erected, the southeast–northwest-orientated house was 30.5 m long and 5.1 m wide. The roof-bearing framework in the west consisted of two four-posted modules, which constituted the dwelling area. In the east was the byre section, carried by seven sets of closely-placed, roof-bearing posts. At the transition between the dwelling area and the byre was an entrance with a door both to the north and south. A fence surrounded the four-sided croft. To the east a small house was integrated in the fence while parts of the western fence had been covered by a pitched roof.

There were two phases of the farm at this location. In the later phase, within the central house, several roof-bearing posts were replaced in the eastern end. It was in one of the roof-bearing posts of the second phase that the rune beaker was found (*Fig. 4b*). We do not know whether this rebuilt section housed animals or served some other purpose. However, it is not uncommon to find roof-carrying posts arranged like we see in both phases of the



Fig. 2. The base of the pottery vessel with the runic inscription **alu**.



Fig. 3. The pottery vessel viewed from the side.

house in question. The fences surrounding the farmstead were also replaced. In the later phase the longhouse measured 32.7 m while the croft measured 38 m east–west and 50 m north–south.

During the initial excavation, charcoal samples were collected from three roof-bearing posts of longhouse XXXIV. These were examined in 2020 after the discovery of the rune beaker and one piece of charcoal from each was selected for  $^{14}\text{C}$ -dating. No charred grains were present in the samples. Instead one piece of oak, one hazel twig and one birch twig was dated by Aarhus AMS Centre (AARAMS). All three dates are contemporary within the uncertainty range with the oak-sample being perhaps slightly older. This was expected since the sample comes from a more long-lived piece of wood. When combining the three dates including the oak sample as a charcoal-outlier in the OxCal software programme the result is a date of AD 245–365 ( $2\sigma$ ) (*Tab. 1; Fig. 5*) which must be regarded as a quite secure dating of the two phases of the house in which the rune beaker was deposited and therefore also a dating of the **alu** inscription itself.

The excavation records reveal that the beaker was found in a roof-bearing posthole in 1988, although no more detailed documentation regarding the find is available. As only the base is preserved, it is possible that the vessel was deposited upright in the posthole. The upper parts of the vessel may have been lost during subsequent cultivation and removal of the topsoil by machine during the excavation – a quite common phenomenon, for



Fig. 4. Tovrup, longhouse XXXIV. a The earliest phase of the farmstead consisted of a main building, with an enclosed croft to the north. A small building constituted part of the fence. The yellow ditches are modern land drains. b In the later phase, the farm was rebuilt and the main building extended slightly to the east. The fences were also replaced. The farmstead in which the beaker with the runic inscription was found did not differ in size or architecture from its neighbours in the small village. The vessel was recovered from a posthole for a roof-bearing post.

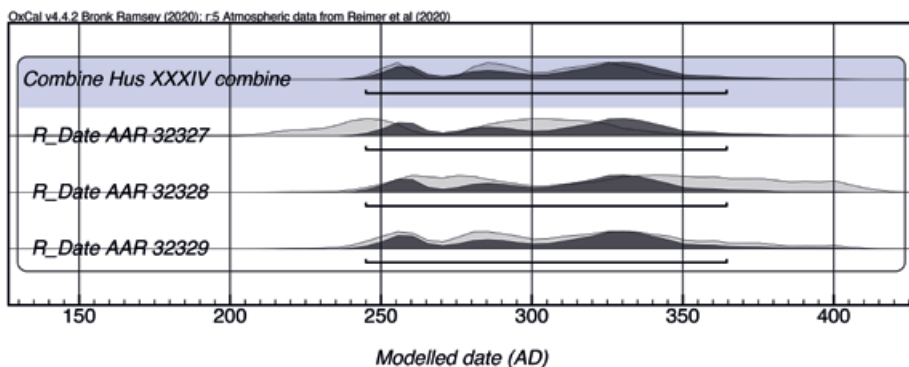


Fig. 5. A combined dating of the three  $^{14}\text{C}$ -dates done on charcoal-samples from three different roof-carrying posts in house XXXIV (s. Tab. 1).

AAR	Name	Material (species)	Description	Submitter	C14 age	pMC	δ13C AMS	Calibration and correction	Calibrated age
32327	P1	Charcoal (oak)	Grønnegård 19.05.03 sb. 276, Esbjerg sogn, Ribe Amt. x276 Datum: utm32euref89 (Imported) Height: 20 m asl (Imported) Latitude: 6149179 (Imported) Longitude: 470045 (Imported) Expected age: AD 450	Søvsø	1788 ± 31	80.04 ± 0.31	-24 ± 1	Calibration curve: IntCal13 (Atmospheric)	68.2 % probability 145 AD ( 1.6 %) 150 AD 170 AD ( 9.8 %) 194 AD 210 AD (33.3 %) 259 AD 280 AD (23.5 %) 324 AD 95.4 % probability 134 AD (66.1 %) 264 AD 272 AD (29.3 %) 331 AD
32328	P2	Charcoal (hazel)	Grønnegård 19.05.03 sb. 276, Esbjerg sogn, Ribe Amt. x278 Datum: utm32euref89 (Imported) Height: 20 m asl (Imported) Latitude: 6149179 (Imported) Longitude: 470045 (Imported) Expected age: AD 500	Søvsø	1730 ± 35	80.62 ± 0.35	-26 ± 1	Calibration curve: IntCal13 (Atmospheric)	68.2 % probability 252 AD (38.0 %) 304 AD 12 AD (25.2 %) 348 AD 369 AD ( 5.0 %) 378 AD 95.4 % probability 235 AD (95.4 %) 395 AD
32329	P3	Charcoal (birch)	Grønnegård 19.05.03 sb. 276, Esbjerg sogn, Ribe Amt. x330 Datum: utm32euref89 (Imported) Height: 20 m asl (Imported) Latitude: 6149179 (Imported) Longitude: 470045 (Imported) Expected age: AD 500	Søvsø	1750 ± 27	80.43 ± 0.27	-25 ± 1	Calibration curve: IntCal13 (Atmospheric)	68.2 % probability 246 AD (15.2 %) 264 AD 272 AD (53.0 %) 331 AD 95.4 % probability 230 AD (95.4 %) 381 AD

Tab. 1. List of the three <sup>14</sup>C-dates done on charcoal-samples from three different roof-carrying posts in house XXXIV (s. Fig. 5); AMS <sup>14</sup>C Dating Centre, *Institut for Fysik og Astronomi, Aarhus Universitet*. <sup>14</sup>C ages are reported in conventional radiocarbon years BP (before present = 1950) in accordance with international convention (STUIVER / POLACH 1977, 355). Thus, all calculated <sup>14</sup>C ages have been corrected for fractionation so as to refer the result to be equivalent with the standard δ<sup>13</sup>C value of -25 ‰ (wood). Reported δ<sup>13</sup>C and δ<sup>15</sup>N values have been measured by high-precision stable-isotope mass spectrometry. The values represent the isotopic composition of the original sample and are therefore useful for interpretation regarding association with the terrestrial / marine / freshwater food chains as well as trophic levels. Calibrated ages in calendar years have been obtained from the calibration curves in REIMER et al. 2013 by means of the Oxcal v4.3.2 calibration programme (BRONK RAMSEY 2009) using the terrestrial calibration curve, IntCal13 (for marine samples, see below). The probability method has been used to calculate the calibrated age ranges corresponding to 68.2 % probability (one sigma) and 95.4 % probability (two sigma) with the probability of each range given in brackets (indicating the probability that the true date belongs to the interval in question).

example, at cremation urn cemeteries. It is, therefore, possible that the beaker was originally deposited complete, although we cannot be sure of this.

Containers are commonly found on Iron Age settlements. They appear in connection to fences or border markers, in pits on the settlement between houses, and within the houses themselves<sup>5</sup>. In the houses, ceramic pots are mostly found in postholes, but also in or near walls, and furthermore, miniature vessels often occur in connection with or under the central hearth. Pots were often placed in the hole for a roof-bearing post and thus had a concrete relationship with the post in the hole and therefore also the house that was erected above ground<sup>6</sup>, however there are few examples of pots deposited after the building of the house<sup>7</sup>. The custom is especially common in the Pre-Roman, Roman and Early Germanic Iron Age (BC 500–AD 550), but the tradition continues into the Late Germanic Iron Age and Viking Periods (AD 550–1050) but with a different expression<sup>8</sup>. It is important to note in respect of the beaker found in the Esbjerg excavation that the ceramic containers were not produced especially for the deposition. They do not differ in form or ornamentation from other containers used in daily life<sup>9</sup>. There is general consensus amongst scholars that such finds represent building offerings, whose function was to ward off evil or were of a religious character – to protect the house and its inhabitants against some form of phenomenon and thus communicate with a religious world of beliefs<sup>10</sup>. A famous example of this is the drinking cup in the cult house at Uppåkra (southern Sweden) dated to c. AD 500<sup>11</sup>. The rune beaker that is examined here may be an expression of the same outlook, although it is of a much more modest character<sup>12</sup>.

#### Germanic to Viking Age settlement patterns and social structures

The farmstead was part of a small village, which during the Late Roman (AD c. 160–375/400) and Early Germanic (AD c. 375/400–550) Iron Age moved around within a small strip of land, naturally bounded by meadows and wetlands on three sides (*Fig. 6*). It is difficult to determine how many contemporary farmsteads this village consisted of, as the farms regularly changed location without overlapping one another to any extent, perhaps indicating they were moving around within a field system, which is not archaeologically preserved<sup>13</sup>. The excavated remains of the village suggest that there were most likely three to four contemporary farms during the Late Roman and Early Germanic Iron Age. The small village seems to have been abandoned in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. In the Viking Period, probably the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, a single farm lay in the area and later the settlement moved west where remains of a small medieval village, probably from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century has been excavated. From written sources we know this, later abandoned, village was called Tovrup<sup>14</sup>.

The place name, with its ‘-rup’ ending, belongs to the group of village names which denote the outlying settlements of the so-called main villages<sup>15</sup>. These outlying settlements are often characterised by a discontinuous pattern of habitation. In periods of population

<sup>5</sup> HANSEN 2006; BEILKE-VOIGT 2007; MARTENS 2010; NIELSEN et al. 2018.

<sup>6</sup> SARAUW 2019, 48–54.

<sup>7</sup> BEILKE-VOIGT 2007, 117.

<sup>8</sup> BEILKE-VOIGT 2007, 118.

<sup>9</sup> BEILKE-VOIGT 2007, 304.

<sup>10</sup> BEILKE-VOIGT 2007, with further references.

<sup>11</sup> HÅRDH 2004.

<sup>12</sup> SØVSØ 2017.

<sup>13</sup> HOLST 2010.

<sup>14</sup> SIEMEN 1990; 1993.

<sup>15</sup> JØRGENSEN 2008. Danish-language Law texts of the 13<sup>th</sup> century separate between ‘adelbyer’ and ‘torper’. In this text translated as ‘main villages’ and ‘outlying settlements’.

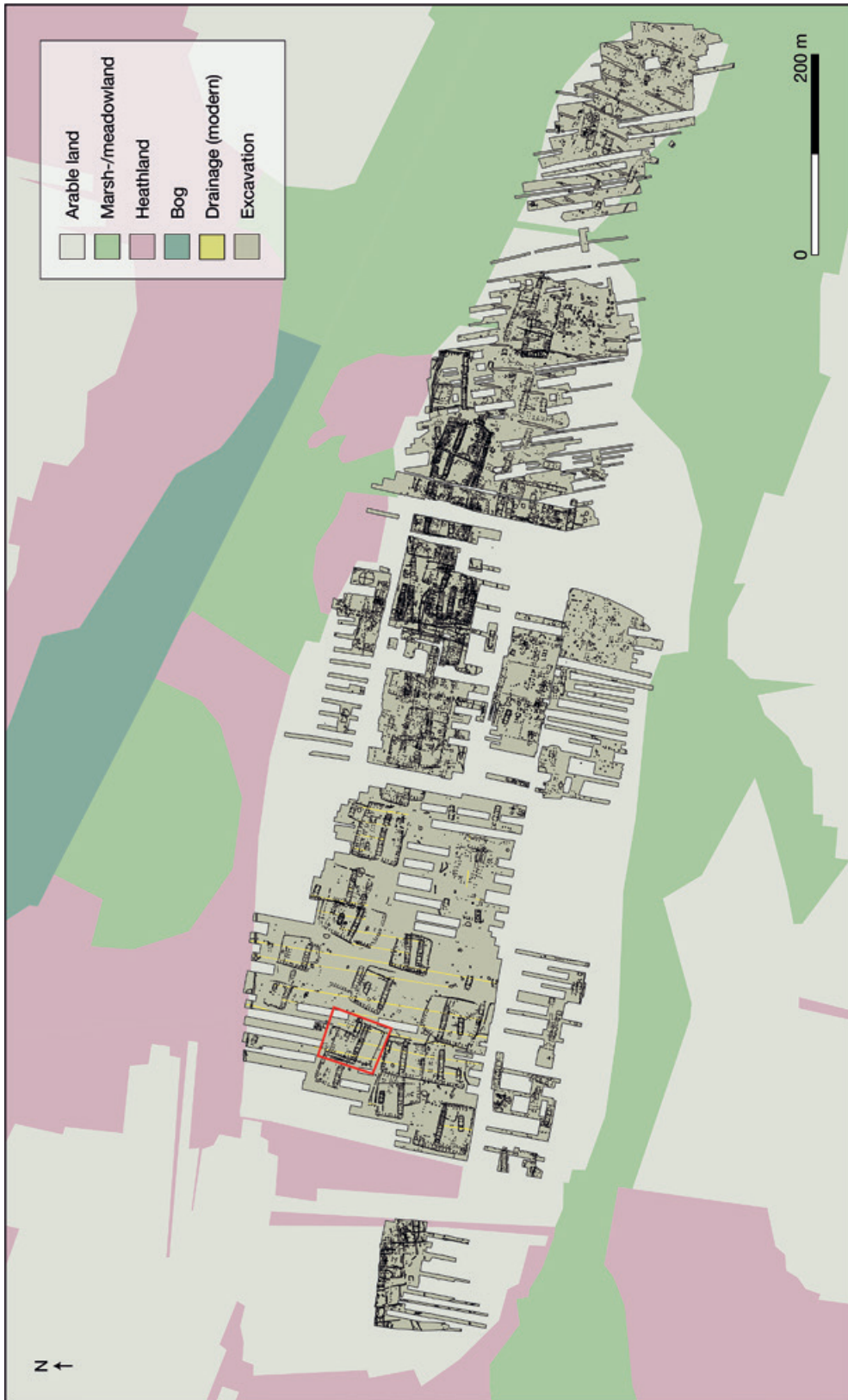


Fig. 6. Summary plan of the excavated area superimposed over a map showing the landscape types around the year 1800. The whole of the inhabited area was excavated, which provides a good opportunity to place the beaker with the runic inscription in its contemporary context. The farm at which the beaker was found, see Fig. 4, is marked with a red line.

surplus, people settled in these more marginal areas, but they were often abandoned again at times of crop failure, epidemics, or other types of crises.

Series of excavations done by Museum of Southwest Jutland over the years have demonstrated a very strong continuity in the overall settlement pattern. The arable land as depicted on the oldest, precise maps from c. 1800 also holds the remains of former villages stretching all the way back to the formation of the villages in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC<sup>16</sup>. The size of the villages or the number of farmsteads around 1800 correlates with the sizes / number of farmsteads of former villages on the sites known through excavation.

The knowledge gained from excavations in the region, the overall landscape, the place names, and the archaeological remains from Tovrup clearly categorise the village with the rune beaker as one of these more marginal outlying settlements<sup>17</sup>.

A cemetery associated with the village, consisting of 62 inhumation burials dating to the Late Roman and Early Germanic Iron Age, was also excavated<sup>18</sup>. These graves can only have constituted a fraction of the inhabitants of the village during the period in question, and therefore do not provide an adequate picture of its demography and social structure<sup>19</sup>. It is nevertheless a striking trait that the burial custom is consistently uniform and reflects a certain social level. Numerous female burials contain jewellery in the form of strings of beads of amber or glass, as well as copper alloy brooches. The cemetery's relatively uniform nature corresponds well with the equally uniform farmsteads of the village and the grouping of the graves in small clusters could reflect different family groups in the village.

The architecture and burial customs of this village are not unique but correspond with a number of excavations around Esbjerg and many other sites in West Jutland<sup>20</sup>. Most of the villages of the Iron Age consist of equal-sized, probably family-run farmsteads on a certain social level, without any easily identifiable social stratification. It was this environment that the beaker with the runic inscription was part of. This relatively homogeneous group of villages constituted the dominant majority of settlements<sup>21</sup>. The only exceptions from this general settlement pattern in West Jutland are a number of magnate's farms with extensive evidence of religious activities, such as at Dankirke, Dejbjerg, and the newly-discovered complexes at Fæsted and Harreby (*Fig. 1*)<sup>22</sup>.

### Drinking beakers of glass and clay

In the Roman and Early Germanic Iron Age, various types of Roman and later Frankish glass drinking vessels reached Scandinavia. These are rare objects and are concentrated amongst the social elite, where they are found in graves and rarely also as fragments at the settlements<sup>23</sup>. In 1965–70, the National Museum excavated the site at Dankirke, 35 km from where the rune beaker was found<sup>24</sup>. Here, several phases of an elite site with extensive

<sup>16</sup> Søvsø 2020a.

<sup>17</sup> Søvsø 2020b, 91–97.

<sup>18</sup> The excavations are still unpublished. The finds are accessible in an online database: <http://sol.sydvest-jyskemuseer.dk/?mode=thumbnail&side=1&antal=0&search=esm+1661&csagsnr=&typekode=&combocode=1> (last access: 10.11.2022).

<sup>19</sup> If the village consisted only of three households, at least 20 people must have lived in it. If the life expectancy, taking into account the high infant mortality, is estimated at 20 years, this means that

there would have been an average of one death a year. The period of c. 350 years of the Late Roman and Early Germanic Iron Age ought therefore to have produced roughly 350 graves.

<sup>20</sup> HVASS 1978; 1979; 1988; SIEMEN 2000.

<sup>21</sup> SØVSØ 2020a.

<sup>22</sup> JØRGENSEN 2014; SØVSØ 2019.

<sup>23</sup> LUND HANSEN 1987.

<sup>24</sup> THORVILDSSEN 1972; JARL HANSEN 1990; SØVSØ 2019.



evidence of offerings and religious activities were excavated. The excavated remains included a sequence of hall buildings dating to the Roman and Early Germanic Iron Age. In and around these buildings, more than 1000 fragments of imported drinking glass in different forms and colours were found. This large and important group of material was, however, unfortunately only published in summary form<sup>25</sup>, but it confirms the use of glass drinking vessels in the magnates' halls and therefore supports the argument that these objects played a role in the drinking rituals of the elite. Glasses from hall buildings are also found at Sorte Muld on Bornholm, Denmark, and at Helgö, Sweden<sup>26</sup>. A similar picture involving finds of drinking beaker fragments in a magnate's hall, but on a slightly smaller scale, is known from the site at Dejbjerg, also located on the west coast of Jutland, as well as a number of other sites in South Scandinavia<sup>27</sup>.

For the many who did not have access to the actual product, clay copies of glass beakers were more obtainable. Sherds of these ceramic beakers are quite easy to recognise due to their small diameter and are present amongst finds from excavations of the villages of the period<sup>28</sup>. Sherds of ceramic drinking beakers are most often attractively decorated and burnished and are amongst the best quality ceramic material. But they constitute only a very small proportion of the pottery sherds as a whole and are rarely represented amongst the large numbers of complete vessels that are known from graves. They are much more common than the glass beakers but are nevertheless a rare vessel form amongst the pottery. To our knowledge, analyses of food residues and wear marks are not carried out on this type of ceramic vessels, but the fact that they seem to be more frequent in settlements rather than as grave goods could underline the idea that they were indeed used for drinking.

No general overview of the Danish material is available, although there is a recent summary of the North European material, which indicates that ceramic drinking beakers were widespread, although only rarely found across the whole of the Germanic area, appearing at the end of the Late Roman Iron Age (AD 310/20–375/400), with their distribution lasting into the Early Germanic Iron Age, spanning the period c. AD 300–550<sup>29</sup>.

There are three more or less complete examples in Museum of Southwest Jutland's collection, only one of which has been published<sup>30</sup>. The first two were found at excavations of villages. Beaker ASR579x46 (*Fig. 7a*) was found as a ploughed-up surface find close to the site of Dankirke<sup>31</sup>. Beaker ASR2253x178 (*Fig. 7b*) was found at St. Darum during the excavation of a pit house in a village<sup>32</sup>. The phase in question has been <sup>14</sup>C dated to around AD 500<sup>33</sup>. SJM614x18-1 (*Fig. 7c*) was found in 2016 during the excavation of the cemetery at Spangsbjerg, where the associated settlement was also more or less completely excavated<sup>34</sup>. This drinking beaker was found in an inhumation burial, which contained a

<sup>25</sup> LUND HANSEN 1984.

<sup>26</sup> LUND HANSEN 2009; 2011.

<sup>27</sup> EGE BERG HANSEN 1996; JØRGENSEN 2014.

<sup>28</sup> MIKKELSEN / NØRBACH 2003, 74; STIDSING 2008; NIELING 2015.

<sup>29</sup> HEGEWISCH 2005, 307.

<sup>30</sup> SØVSØ 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Excavation ASR 579, Dankirke Nord. <http://sol.sydvestjyskemuseer.dk/?mode=detail&genstandsnr=200088261&side=1&antal=21&indexno=2&search=asr%20579&sid=9d461055b705df54f5f3ec5bcac89d97&tt=215> (last access: 10.11.2022).

<sup>32</sup> Excavation ASR 2253, Håndværksvej. <http://sol.sydvestjyskemuseer.dk/?mode=detail&genstandsnr=200149634&side=1&antal=21&indexno=2&search=asr%202253&sid=9d461055b705df54f5f3ec5bcac89d97&tt=310> (last access: 10.11.2022).

<sup>33</sup> SØVSØ 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Excavations ESM 730 Spangsbjerg (1977, 1982), ESM 2698 Spangsbjerg (2010) and SJM 614 Lysningen (2016). <http://sol.sydvestjyskemuseer.dk/?mode=detail&genstandsnr=200293811&side=1&antal=21&indexno=3&search=sjm%20614&sid=9d461055b705df54f5f3ec5bcac89d97&tt=108> (last access: 10.11.2022).



Fig. 7. Drinking beakers from Iron Age settlements and cemeteries in Southwest Jutland: a Dankirke (ASR579x46, height 17 cm); b St. Darum (ASR2253x178, height 16 cm); c Spangsbjerg (SJM614x18-1, height 17.5 cm).

trunk coffin. The grave goods consisted of a lance head, a knife and belt buckle as well as two attractively-made pottery vessels, a handled cup, and a drinking beaker, which perhaps made up a set.

An interesting group of finds associates the prototype, that is the Roman glass vessels, with the ceramic copies. On rare occasions a piece of actual glass was inserted into pottery vessels, creating so-called window vessels. Adopting a *pars pro toto* approach, these objects constitute a hybrid between the two vessel forms, clearly indicating that the pottery vessels copied the coveted glass<sup>35</sup>.

To summarise regarding the ceramic drinking beakers, it can be said that they copy the Continental prototypes of glass. Their rarity amongst the ceramic material suggests that they played another role apart from just the intake of liquid, such as in connection with drinking rituals.

No other ceramic objects bearing runic inscriptions of an Iron Age date are known from the present Danish area. There is a very poorly-preserved urn from a cremation burial dated to the Late Roman Iron Age from Dragby, Uppland, Sweden, where four runes have been scratched into one of the sherds, although these do not have any linguistic meaning<sup>36</sup>. There is also a small sherd from Osterröfeld, Rendsburg-Eckernförde, Germany, which was found during the excavation of a well dating to the Early Roman Iron Age (AD c. 1–160). The inscription on this sherd was initially interpreted as runes or Latin letters<sup>37</sup> but is rather a weight, as, for example, can be seen on the silver beakers from Hoby, Lolland, Denmark<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> OLDENBURGER 2017; cf. SCHREIBER 2018.

<sup>36</sup> SCHÖNBECK 1994.

<sup>37</sup> DIETZ et al. 1996.

<sup>38</sup> IMER 2007, 65.



Fig. 8. Glass beaker from Stilling Trehøje with the Greek inscription “Drink, and you will live well”. Height 15 cm.

Drinking beakers with inscriptions are, however, found in materials other than pottery. Well known examples of this are the stylistically uniform glass beakers from Stilling Trehøje (*Fig. 8*) and Vorning Mark, Jutland, Denmark, and Tubakken, Rogaland, Norway, with the Greek inscriptions ΠΙΕ ΖΗΧΑΙC ΚΑΛΩC ‘Drink, and you will live well’<sup>39</sup> as well as the famous and attractive blue glass bowl with silver inlay from the Varpelev grave on Zealand, Denmark, with the Greek inscription ΕΥΤΥΧΩC ‘For luck’ (*Fig. 9*)<sup>40</sup>. It is interesting for the following discussion that the inscriptions on glass beakers are well-wishing formulae that ensure good health for the person, who drinks.

#### Previous research on the meaning of **alu**

Although inscriptions on ceramic and glass drinking beakers dating to the Iron Age are very rare, **alu** is one of the most common words amongst the runic inscriptions dating to

<sup>39</sup> IMER 2007, 97.

<sup>40</sup> LUND HANSEN 1987, 96–97; GRANE 2013, 138–139.



Fig. 9. The Varpelev grave from Zealand contained a blue glass bowl with inlaid silver decoration, which includes the Greek inscription “For luck”. Height 9.3 cm.

the Iron Age, as well as one of the most discussed (*Fig. 10*)<sup>41</sup>. Even though scholars have known the word for more than 100 years, there is still much disagreement about its meaning. In order to achieve a greater understanding, the problem can be investigated from different perspectives: The linguistic and language-historical involving a discussion of the word’s development, the etymological regarding the origin of the word, and the semantic involving the word’s meaning and the context it appears in. Previous research is mainly divided into three camps, summarised by Klaus Düwel<sup>42</sup>, with one group of scholars arguing that the word corresponds with the Old Nordic *ǫl*, today’s Danish *øl* (ale or beer)<sup>43</sup>, whilst another group argues that there is an etymological association with ‘protection’<sup>44</sup>, and a third group for the word ‘sorcery’<sup>45</sup>. But there is also a fourth interpretation, which is not often mentioned in the literature, but which suggests that the word **alu** is a verb in the first person singular meaning ‘I reproduce’ or ‘I help, make thrive, strengthen’<sup>46</sup>.

In the following text, we will attempt to shed light upon these possible interpretations in order to then examine the possibilities of the etymological origin, the word’s semantic meaning and its development, in other words to make comparisons with similar words in later linguistic stages.

<sup>41</sup> See above and ROTH 1926; MARSTRANDER 1934; BÆKSTED 1945; POLOMÉ 1954; KRAUSE / JANKUHN 1966; HØST 1976; ELMEVIK 1999; HEIZMANN 2011; ZIMMERMANN 2014.

<sup>42</sup> FINGERLIN et al. 1998, 817–818.

<sup>43</sup> E. g. HØST 1976; ZIMMERMANN 2014.

<sup>44</sup> BUGGE 1892; ARNTZ 1935; KRAUSE 1937; DÜWEL 2001b.

<sup>45</sup> POLOMÉ 1954; KRAUSE / JANKUHN 1966.

<sup>46</sup> LINDQUIST 1923; ROTH 1926; ELMEVIK 1999.



Fig. 10. The distribution of **alu** inscriptions in Europe. Yellow dots: gold bracteates. Black dots: other objects.

Many scholars favour the idea that the word is a noun meaning ‘protection’ or ‘ward off’, referring to the Old English *ealgian* ‘protect’, Gothic *alhs* ‘temple’<sup>47</sup> and the Greek *alké* ‘ward off, protection’. It was the Norwegian scholar, Sophus Bugge, who first proposed the idea<sup>48</sup>, and this interpretation has since gained support amongst many scholars<sup>49</sup>.

Bugge’s suggestion was rejected on linguistic grounds<sup>50</sup>. Since then it has been proposed, and this is probably also the most well-known interpretation, that **alu** means ‘ale or beer’ (*øl* in Danish), which can be traced back to the Old Norse *ol*, Old English *ealo(p)* and Proto-Germanic *\*alup*. This was first suggested by the Danish scholar Anders Bæksted in connection with the find of the Værløse brooch in 1944, on which there was the runic inscription **alugod**<sup>51</sup>, and has since gained much support. The scholar who has perhaps

<sup>47</sup> See also BRINK 1992, 116, who convincingly argues that there was a Germanic word *alb-* meaning ‘protection’. This also corresponds better with the two examples that Bugge presents. – MARSTRANDER 1934, 414.

<sup>48</sup> BUGGE 1892, 28–29; 1891–1903, 163–164.

<sup>49</sup> E.g. OLSEN / SHETELIG 1933, 47; ARNTZ 1935, 265; KRAUSE 1937, 25; DÜWEL 2001b.

<sup>50</sup> MARSTRANDER 1934, 414.

<sup>51</sup> BÆKSTED 1945, 88.

argued most vigorously for this interpretation is Gerd Høst, who referred to the Edda's *Sigrdrífumál* and its *ǫlrúnar* 'ale runes'. She argued that ale played an important role in the lives of our ancestors in terms of important ritual activities and feasts. So when **alu** is written on a gravestone, it is perhaps an expression that the burial ritual has been carried out, and that the traditions and customs associated with the burial have been followed. To interpret **alu** as 'protection, taboo' or similar made no sense to Høst, as a grave in itself would always be a preserved and protected place. Høst also stated that the word was only found in Nordic inscriptions and subsequently died out<sup>52</sup>. Later finds, however, have shown that the word **alu** was used all over Europe. Bæksted's and Høst's interpretation gained support from, amongst others, Peter Pieper, who considered that there was an inherent power in the ale, which could be transferred to the one who wore a piece of jewellery or amulet displaying this word<sup>53</sup>, and Grønvik, who believed that **alu** on burial inscriptions referred to the ale that was given as a grave good, so that the deceased would be welcomed with ale on the other side<sup>54</sup>. Anders Andréén interpreted the word **alu** as meaning both the ale and the feast or celebration that the magnates held in honour of the gods, friendships and alliances<sup>55</sup>, as has also been proposed by Elmar Seebold on several occasions<sup>56</sup>. Sean Nowak emphasises that ale is an intoxicant and states that it is possible that the word **alu** not only covers ale as a substance, but also the effect that comes from drinking it<sup>57</sup>. Ute Zimmermann believes that from a linguistic point of view the interpretation of **alu** as 'ale' is the most likely, as the rune word **alu** would phonetically develop into the Old Nordic *ǫl*. She finds justification for this in the word being found on objects which would have been used in connection with the large halls of the Iron Age, where drinking ceremonies took place. The word's use in a burial context may indicate that the ceremonies that took place in earthly life continued in the life after death<sup>58</sup>. In his work upon the use of formula words on the bracteates, Wilhelm Heizmann discusses the meaning of **alu** and states that its etymology is very uncertain, although more support can perhaps be found in the context in which the word appears. He points out with reference to Høst's suggestions, for instance, that the use of ale in a cultic context in prehistory is only supposition, and that a semantic interpretation of 'ale' cannot be explained without further evidence. The word **alu** appears in many archaeological contexts in which an apotropaic function is thought to be more convincing<sup>59</sup>.

The third suggestion for an interpretation of the word **alu** is proposed by Edgar Polomé. He compares the word with two Hittite words, *aluanzabh-* 'enchant' and *aluanzatar* 'sorcery, enchantment', which are apparently derivatives of *\*aluanza-* 'enchanted, bewitched'. Polomé interprets the Proto-Germanic *\*alup* 'ale' as 'enchanting, bewitching drink' and a derivative of **alu**<sup>60</sup>, an interpretation that he suggests again in 1996<sup>61</sup>. Polomé's interpretation has been accepted by a number of runologists, including Wolfgang Krause. He certainly does not associate **alu** with 'ale' but interprets the word as a neutral u-stem with the basic meaning 'rage, ecstasy', 'in ecstasy produced sorcery' and like Polomé identifies the greatest similarity with the Hittite *aluanzabh-* 'enchant' and *aluanzatar* 'sorcery' as well as with the Greek *aljein* 'to be outside of one's self' and the Lithuanian *aliótis* 'to bring strife, rage'. Krause states, on the other hand, regarding *Sigrdrífumál's* *ǫlrúnar*: "... wo freilich der

<sup>52</sup> HØST 1976, 102; 1980, 46–49.

<sup>53</sup> PIEPER 1986, 193–194.

<sup>54</sup> GRØNVIK 1987, 137–143.

<sup>55</sup> ANDRÉÉN 1991, 250–254.

<sup>56</sup> Most recently SEEBOLD 1998, 289; 295.

<sup>57</sup> NOWAK 2003, 220 Ann. 46; 222 Ann. 51.

<sup>58</sup> ZIMMERMANN 2014, 57–58.

<sup>59</sup> HEIZMANN 2011, 542–544.

<sup>60</sup> POLOMÉ 1954.

<sup>61</sup> POLOMÉ 1996, 103.

Dichter, dem Sprachschatz seiner Zeit entsprechend, das Wort als ‘Bierrunen’ auffasste”<sup>62</sup>. Elmer Antonsen also supports Polomé’s interpretation. Antonsen states that the Proto-Germanic *\*aluh* ‘ale’ is a derivative of **alu**, so it must have been used as ‘the means that brings one to ecstasy’<sup>63</sup>.

But there is also a fourth interpretation of the word **alu**, which is not as widely accepted in the literature as the other three. Lennart Elmevik has examined the problem, stating that nearly all researchers who have examined the word have assumed that it is a noun<sup>64</sup>. He refers to Ivar Lindquist and Erik Rooth, who believe that it is more likely to be a verb in the first person singular, the Proto-Germanic *\*alō* with an early Proto-Norse development to *\*alu* of the Germanic *\*alan*<sup>65</sup>. Lindquist interprets **alu** as corresponding with the Icelandic *el ek* used about a man, i. e. ‘I reproduce’, whilst Rooth considers whether **alu** means ‘I help, make thrive, strengthen, give power, keep alive, protect’. He provides several examples of a connection between the meanings ‘feed, nourish’ and ‘protect’ from the Germanic area, and also points out that the Latin *alere* means ‘feed, nourish’, as well as ‘protect, help’. This interpretation, as Elmevik points out<sup>66</sup>, has not gained a foothold in the research or published literature and is not even mentioned amongst the proposed interpretations in the otherwise very comprehensive work “Danmarks Runeindskrifter”, in which a list of the most important interpretations is presented<sup>67</sup>. The reason for this is unclear, but the interpretation will nevertheless be included in our following considerations.

### Discussion of the interpretations

The above examination of the interpretations has shown that the scholars have sought support from three general methods in their attempts to understand the meaning of the word **alu**: 1. The etymological origin and association with equally-old or earlier, similar words, 2. The word’s semantic meaning supported by contextual use and 3. The linguistic development of the word compared with similar later words. The aspect of the etymology that deals with the word’s origins and comparisons with words of a similar date, seems more valid than comparison with later words, as the meaning of the individual words can change over time. The semantic meaning and contextual use of the word is rooted in the time of its use, and as the word **alu** is found on numerous objects of different social significance, it makes sense to distinguish which contexts these are involved in. It may also be a good idea to attempt to follow a given word’s linguistic development from the Iron Age and later periods, even though we should bear in mind that the word’s meaning can change over time. We can be lucky and encounter a word that resembles the word or is even a perfect match. Regarding **alu**, the word would indeed have developed from *alu* > *ol*, and this interpretation has won much backing due to the linguistic simplicity. Several scholars state that that there is not anything that linguistically stands in the way of such an interpretation<sup>68</sup>, but both Elmevik and Heizmann maintain that such a linguistic explanation cannot stand alone without more detailed explanation. The question is whether we can place an equal sign between the two without investigating the Old Nordic *ol* ‘øl’ more closely.

We are familiar with the Old Nordic *ol* from many sources, and it is translated to today’s Danish *øl* (ale or beer). One of the problems with this translation is that there is a

<sup>62</sup> KRAUSE / JANKUHN 1966, 239; KRAUSE 1971, 145.

<sup>63</sup> ANTONSEN 2002, 199.

<sup>64</sup> ELMEVIK 1999.

<sup>65</sup> LINDQUIST 1923, 74; ROTH 1926, 9–10.

<sup>66</sup> ELMEVIK 1999, 25.

<sup>67</sup> JACOBSEN / MOLTKE 1942, 629.

<sup>68</sup> E. g. ELMEVIK 1999, 24; HEIZMANN 2011, 543; ZIMMERMANN 2014, 57–58.

significant chronological gap between the two words. The latest use of the word **alu** dates to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, and the word's development through the Syncope period is not attested to. If we move forward in time, it is first in the Norse sources and with the inscription on the Late Viking period rune bone dating to the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century from Sigtuna<sup>69</sup>, that we find the word **aul** that linguistically corresponds with **alu**, in other words *ǫl*. Therefore at least 500 years and a process of Christianisation have passed between the two words.

If we, on the other hand, move from the known Norse word *ǫl* back in time, we encounter another problem. The word *ǫl* is a neutral wa-stem<sup>70</sup>, whereas the word **alu**, if it is a noun, is probably a neutral u-stem<sup>71</sup>. Magnus Källström has proposed that *ǫl* of the Viking and Middle Ages can be traced back to a Proto-Norse *\*alwu*<sup>72</sup>. It therefore seems as if *alu* and *ǫl* are two different words, which may well be related.

Let us turn our attentions to the Eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál*, in which the Valkyrie Sigrdrífa is awoken by the dragon slayer Sigurd and tells her knowledge of all worlds. Here, we encounter the phenomenon of *ǫlrúnar* 'ale runes'. If we examine the immediate context in which 'the ale runes' are found, that is which types of runes are otherwise mentioned in the poem, we can establish that 'ale runes' more likely refer to a concept rather than something physically tangible. In *Sigrdrífumál*, many different types of runes are mentioned: victory runes, for those who desire victory, help runes to help women giving birth, speech runes to become more eloquent, mind runes to become cleverer than others and 'ale runes' to win an unfaithful woman's loyalty. These all refer to concepts that are important to different abilities. None of the runes that are mentioned in *Sigrdrífumál* refer to foodstuffs, such as mead, pork, cabbage or similar in the Viking world. It is therefore more likely that 'ale runes' refer to some form of concept, where it is important to become better at something or to prevent something bad. Seen in this light, the *ǫlrúnar* that are mentioned in *Sigrdrífumál* are more likely to indicate that *ǫl* in this context is not the same as 'ale'. It seems more like an ancient word, about which Krause states that the poet understood it as 'ale runes'<sup>73</sup>.

There is therefore much evidence that suggests, based upon linguistic developments, that **alu** and *\*alwu*- both developed into *ǫl* in the Viking period and the Middle Ages. The two words ended up competing and apparently *alu* > *ǫl* lost this battle to *\*alwu*- > *ǫl*. Why this development occurred and *alu* > *ǫl* apparently went out of usage is difficult to determine, but we can guess that the word was closely associated with religion and leadership in Iron Age society, even though on the Tovrup beaker it was used outside an elite context, and that both religion and leadership underwent a process of change during the second half of the 500s.

Even though we cannot directly equate **alu** with the drink *ǫl* (ale), it is worth considering whether the two words might be related. The etymology of *ǫl* is uncertain, but Elmevik suggests, based upon Polomé, that *ǫl* is 'the nourishing, life-giving drink', 'the drink that gives power and strength' or perhaps more likely 'the drink that grows, overflows' and he refers to the numerous Germanic and Nordic *Al*-names that are associated with the sea and watercourses, making reference to the water's "overflowing", which has resulted in flooding<sup>74</sup>. This fits in well with the properties of ale, which is perhaps characterised by

<sup>69</sup> KÄLLSTRÖM 2014, 53.

<sup>70</sup> IVERSEN 1972, 49.

<sup>71</sup> POLOMÉ 1954.

<sup>72</sup> KÄLLSTRÖM 2014, 53.

<sup>73</sup> KRAUSE / JANKUHN 1966, 239.

<sup>74</sup> ELMEVIK 1999, 24.



increasing or overflowing from the beaker when it is poured in. But it is very important to maintain that the word **alu** cannot be directly translated as the drink ale, even though ale may have an etymological connection to it.

We are now left with the two possible interpretations of the word **alu**, which we arrive at by making comparisons with earlier or related branches of the Indo-European languages. It may be a noun meaning ‘protection’ or ‘ward off’,<sup>75</sup> even though this is linguistically problematic<sup>76</sup>. It could also be translated with ‘sorcery, enchantment’<sup>77</sup>, or it could be a verb in the first person singular, meaning ‘I reproduce’ or ‘I help, make thrive, strengthen, give power, keep alive, protect’<sup>78</sup>. All three of these cases involve powerful words. In the following, we will present all the European objects that carry runic inscriptions containing the word **alu** in order to discuss the semantic meaning of the word and to investigate which conclusions can be drawn from the context, in which the word occurs. We will attempt to make these conflicting interpretations fit better together within an archaeological, contextual framework of interpretation.

### Objects with the inscription **alu**

The word **alu** is found on many objects dating to the Late Roman Iron Age, the Migration period and the beginning of the Merovingian period from all of Europe (*Figs 1; 10; Tab. 2*). It appears alone as well as together with other words, and can also be part of a personal name, such as **alugod** on the brooch from Værløse, Zealand, Denmark<sup>79</sup>. It is also possible that the word **alu** – later *ol* – constitutes the first part of the place name Ølgod in West Jutland, Denmark. The last part -god in this place name is not interpreted<sup>80</sup>.

The inscription on the Værløse brooch dates to Late Roman Iron Age phase C1b<sup>81</sup>, and represents one of the earliest examples of the word, which apparently loses its meaning at the end of the 500s; it certainly does not appear to have been used in the inscriptions after c. AD 600, with the gold pendants from Hüfingen, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, as well as possibly the comb from Setre, Hordaland, Norway, being the latest examples. Both these finds date to the second half of the 500s<sup>82</sup>. In other words, the word is not found amongst the quite few inscriptions that survive from the 600s, a period that is otherwise characterised by the great linguistic developments within the Nordic language: Syncope, Umlaut, and Brechung<sup>83</sup>. Neither are there thought to be any examples of the word in the many runic inscriptions from the Viking period. It is, on the other hand, possible that the word is reproduced in syncopated form – *ol* – in the Eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál* as the first part of the word *olrúnar*, which is usually translated as ‘ale runes’<sup>84</sup>.

The word **alu** is, however, often used in inscriptions dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, and the geographical distribution, from Nordland in Norway to Hüfingen in Germany and from Spong Hill in England to Karlino in Poland, indicates that it was of great importance to all the Germanic-speaking peoples throughout Europe.

<sup>75</sup> See BRINK 1992; BUGGE 1892, 28–29; 1891–1903, 163–164.

<sup>76</sup> MARSTRANDER 1934.

<sup>77</sup> POLOMÉ 1954.

<sup>78</sup> LINDQUIST 1923, 74; ROTH 1926, 9–10; ELMÉVIK 1999.

<sup>79</sup> STOKLUND 1995, 320–321.

<sup>80</sup> JØRGENSEN 2008, 346.

<sup>81</sup> LUND HANSEN 1987, 410.

<sup>82</sup> OLSEN / SHETELIG 1933, 31; FINGERLIN et al. 1998, 792–794.

<sup>83</sup> E. g. SKAUTRUP 1944, 44–51.

<sup>84</sup> MCKINNELL et al. 2004, 91.

Find	Find group	Type of object	Date AD	Graphic variation	Textual context	Position of inscription
Bjørnerud	Single find	Bracteate	c. 520/30–560/70		Single word, running left	In front of the male head turning left
Böringe	Hoard	Bracteate	c. 520/30–560/70		Part of longer inscription, running left	Above male head
Denmark, unknown find place	Unknown find circumstances	Bracteate	c. 520/30–560/70		Part of longer inscription, running right	In front of male head, concluding the inscription
Djupbrunns	Hoard	Bracteate	c. 460/70–520/30		Single word, running left	In front of male head turning left
Elgesem	Grave mound	Runestone	160–560/70		Single word, running left	Top of stone, vertical
Fosse	Cremation grave	Bronze fitting	375/400–460/70		Part of longer inscription, running right	Front of object, separated from the rest of the inscription
Fyn (unknown find place)	Single find	Bracteate	c. 460/70–560/70		Part of longer inscription, running right	Above male head, separated from the rest of the inscription
Førde	Single find	Net sink?	520/30–560/70		Part of personal name, running right	On one even surface
Grenay	Grave	Sword pommel	520–570		Single word, running right	One the side of the pommel
Heide	Single find	Bracteate	c. 520/30–560/70		Single word, running right	In front of male head
Horvnes	Inhumation grave	Bone comb	500–600	Doubled runes, except for the <b>u</b> -rune	Single word, running right	The surface of the comb
Hüfingen	Inhumation grave	Gold pendants	570–590		Single word, running left	In front of female head
Karlino	Hoard?	Golden fingerring	?		Single word, running left	Above the inscription a sign, maybe bind-runes
Kjøllergård	Single find	Bracteate	c. 460/70–520/30	Tripled runes	Part of a longer inscription, running left	Along the rim under the animal
Klaggeröd	Hoard	Bracteate	c. 460/70–560/70		Single word, running left	In front of male head

Tab. 2. Inscriptions presenting the word **alu**. Grey entries indicate uncertain examples. The finds in the table are listed alphabetically. The find group entails the archaeological context, and the type of object describes the object onto which the inscription is added. The date is given in absolute years AD. Graphic variation is noted only in cases with double- or triple-lined runes, mirror runes, doubling or tripling of runes. Textual context entails reading order and if **alu** is represented as a single word or is part of a longer inscription. Position of the inscription informs of the inscription's position on the object and in relation to other visual elements.

Find	Find group	Type of object	Date AD	Graphic variation	Textual context	Position of inscription
Lindholmen	Single find	Amulet / insignia	460/70–520/30	Triple-lined runes	Part of longer inscription, running left seemingly, concluding the inscription	At one end of the object, separated from the rest of the inscription by separation marks
Maglemose	Hoard	Bracteate	c. 460/70–560/70		Part of longer inscription, running right	Above male head, separated from the rest of the inscription
Nydam	Hoard	Wooden shaft	210/20–375/400		Part of longer inscription, running left, seemingly commencing the inscription	At one end of the object, separated from the rest of the inscription by separation marks
Nydam	Hoard	Arrow shaft	310/20–375/400		Single word, running left	Next to fletching
Nydam	Hoard	Arrow shaft	310/20–375/400		Single word, running left	Next to fletching
Nydam	Hoard	Arrow shaft	310/20–375/400		Single word, running left	Next to fletching
Saint-Dizier	Inhumation grave	Sword pommel	520–535		Single word, running right	On the side of the pommel
Setre	Grave?	Bone comb	560/70–600		Part of longer inscription, running right	On either side of the comb
Skrydstrup	Single find	Bracteate	c. 520/30/560/70		Part of longer inscription, running left	In front of animal along the rim, separate from the other word
Skåne (unknown find place)	Hoard	Bracteate	c. 520/30/560/70		Part of longer inscription, running right	In front of male head, concluding the inscription
Slangerup	Hoard	Bracteate	c. 460/70–520/30		Single word, running right	In front of male head
Småland (unknown find place)	Single find	Bracteate	c. 460/70–520/30		Part of a longer inscription, running right, but a and l reversed	Along the rim
Spong Hill	Cremation graves	Three ceramic urns	450–550	Mirrored runes	Single word, impressed into the clay	On the shoulder of the vessels, several times
Stavsager	Single find	Bracteate	c. 520/30/560/70	Doubled runes, except for the <b>u</b> -rune	Single word, running left	Along the rim

Tab. 2. cont.

Find	Find group	Type of object	Date AD	Graphic variation	Textual context	Position of inscription
St. Darum	Hoard	Bracteate	c. 460/70–560/70		Part of longer inscription, running right	In front of male head, separated from the other word
Tovrup	Posthole of house	Ceramic beaker	c. 245–365		Single word, running right	Under the bottom of beaker
Uppåkra	Single find	Bracteate	c. 375/400–460/70		Part of longer inscription, running left	In front of male head, separated from other words
Vindelev	Hoard	Bracteate	c. 375/400–460/70		Part of longer inscription, running right	Above male head, separated from the rest of the inscription
Vindelev	Hoard	Bracteate	c. 375/400–460/70		Single word, running right	Under the animal
Værløse	Grave	Monstrous fibula	210/20–250/60		Part of personal name, running right	On the pin-casing
Ødemotland	Grave mound	Amulet / insignia	460/70–560/70	Double-lined and doubled runes, except for the <b>u</b> -rune	Part of longer inscriptions, running left and right	At one end of the object, either finishing or commencing the inscription
Ølst	Single find	Bracteate	c. 460/70–520/30		Part of longer inscription, running left	Under the animal, separated from the other word of the inscription
Årstad	Grave mound	Runestone	160–375/400		Part of personal name, running right	Middle of the runestone

Tab. 2. cont.

In the following, we will present the inscriptions according to the objects on which they are placed. This serves to present the wide range of objects on which the word **alu** is used and it underlines the high frequency of the word from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. A closer analysis of the chronological development of the use of the word will receive less attention. The fact that the archaeological inventory of objects with runic inscriptions changes very much from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries will blur a potential chronological development. Types of objects that are in use in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries are not necessarily in use during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries and vice versa. Moreover, the inscriptions from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries are outnumbered by the many inscriptions on various artefacts, especially the bracteates, from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. Suffice to state that already from the beginning of runic writing in the North European region **alu** was a well-known word and one of the most frequently used in runic writing. Our agenda here is to try and detect the meaning of the word and under which circumstances it was used in a long-term perspective.

## The bracteates

The largest group of inscriptions involving the word **alu** is found on the gold bracteates from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Three words, **alu**, **lapu** and **laukaz**, are found particularly often on the bracteates, and these are normally referred to as formula words<sup>85</sup>. The bracteates are distributed all over Europe, with the greatest concentration within today's Danish area. More than 1000 bracteates in all are known and struck with around 715 stamps<sup>86</sup>, and the number is still steadily increasing thanks to the many metal detector enthusiasts who search for finds in Danish soil<sup>87</sup>. Currently, 272 bracteates from 182 different stamps are known to bear inscriptions<sup>88</sup>. The word **alu** is present on 15–20 bracteates, either alone or as part of a longer inscription, and we can possibly also add four further bracteates from three different stamps: the identically-stamped bracteates from Kjøllegård on Bornholm, Denmark (IK 95)<sup>89</sup>, the bracteate from Börringe, Scania, Sweden (IK 26), and the stray found bracteate from Småland, Sweden (IK 339).

On the two identically-stamped Kjøllegård bracteates, **alu** is possibly part of the long runic sequence that runs along the edge, under the four-footed animal<sup>90</sup>, and on the bracteate from Småland the word may be part of the long inscription, which runs along all of the edge of the bracteate, if we accept Düwel's interpretation in "Ikonographischer Katalog"<sup>91</sup>. The corpus of bracteates contains several examples that may feature the word **alu**, but these are not included in this article. For example, part of the inscriptions on the three identically-stamped bracteates from Faxe, Zealand, Denmark (IK 101), can be read as **alu**, if we assume there is swapping of the runes in the inscription **foslau**<sup>92</sup>. The same principle applies to the inscription on the bracteate from Kellersmose, Jutland, Denmark (IK 289)<sup>93</sup> and the bracteate from Tønder, Jutland, Denmark (IK 252)<sup>94</sup>. These examples, however, only serve to emphasise how often the word **alu** is used and will not be examined in more detail in the following text<sup>95</sup>.

Most bracteates with the word **alu** are C-bracteates, which are characterised by a male figure in profile who is riding on a four-footed animal. **alu** is also found on a single A-bracteate, on which the motif is a male head in profile, and four B-bracteates, where the motif is a group of people, as well as a single D-bracteate, on which the motif is a stylised animal figure<sup>96</sup>. The word **alu** is placed just in front of the face of the depicted male person on more than half of the bracteates, and on those from Börringe (IK 26), Funen (IK 58), Vindelev (s. below), and Maglemose (IK 300) just above the head. On the Darum bracteate

<sup>85</sup> E. g. HEIZMANN 2011.

<sup>86</sup> M. Axboe, personal comment, March 2023.

<sup>87</sup> In Denmark metal detecting is legalised. More than 3000 detector enthusiasts are unearthing treasure finds (*danefæ*) all over the country. A legislation concerning treasure trove (*Danefæ-lovgivning*) ensures that the finds reach the National Museum, where treasure finds (such as bracteates) are incorporated in the collections. Due to the rather limited number of detectorists and the considerable degree of social control amongst them, compliance with the law is very high.

<sup>88</sup> M. Axboe, personal comment, March 2023.

<sup>89</sup> IK refers to "Ikonographischer Katalog", which since the middle of the 1980s has been a joint European project, which undertakes the cataloguing and publication of all known finds of bracteates.

<sup>90</sup> IMER 2022.

<sup>91</sup> AXBOE et al. 1986, 182–183; HEIZMANN 2011, 536.

<sup>92</sup> AXBOE et al. 1985, 180–181.

<sup>93</sup> AXBOE et al. 1986, 118–119.

<sup>94</sup> AXBOE et al. 201–203; HEIZMANN 2011, 536.

<sup>95</sup> For further discussions of bracteates that possibly contain an **alu** inscription see HEIZMANN 2011, 535–537.

<sup>96</sup> IMER 2017.

(IK 43) (*Fig. 11a*), **alu** appears together with the word **niujil**, which can be interpreted as a personal name derived from the adjective *\*niuja-* ‘new’ and related to the name **niuwila** on the Skonager bracteate (IK 163)<sup>97</sup>. On the bracteate from Ølst (IK 135), **alu** is written under the front part of a four-legged animal, whilst another, uninterpreted word **hag** is under the rear of the animal. If we read the whole inscription in the context of **hagalu**, it is highly reminiscent of the also uninterpreted word **hagala** on the spear shaft from Kragehul with the inscription ‘I, Ásugísl’s eril am called Muha **g=ag=ag=a** power **g=ah=e ...lija hagala** hallow(?) **big-...**’<sup>98</sup>. On the Maglemose (IK 300) and Funen bracteates (IK 58), **alu** probably appears together with ‘The high one’ and also longer inscriptions, where the inscription on the Maglemose bracteate is not interpreted.

The long inscription on the Funen bracteate (IK 58) (*Fig. 11b*) begins with the word **laþu**, which is interpreted as ‘invitation’ or ‘summons’<sup>99</sup>, and the inscription continues afterwards with some unusual rune forms, which can perhaps best be interpreted as a mixture of ordinary runes and mirror runes (*Spiegelrunen*), to use Peter Pieper’s terminology from his work on the Spong Hill urns<sup>100</sup>. In 2020 one of the largest golden hoards from Danish prehistory was found near the small village of Vindelev in southern Jutland. The hoard consisted of Roman coins, medallions, a mouthpiece, and bracteates<sup>101</sup>. One or two of the bracteates had inscriptions containing the word **alu**. The object x4 is almost an exact copy of the well-known bracteate from Funen (*Fig. 11c*), but they have not been made from the same stamp. The bracteate x17 has the runes **aul** under the horse and could be interpreted as a variant of the **alu** formula (*Fig. 11d*)<sup>102</sup>.

The word **laþu** is found on numerous other bracteates, although not as often as the word **alu**<sup>103</sup>. On the bracteate from Skrydstrup, **alu** appears together with the third formula word **laukaz**, which Wilhelm Heizmann, amongst others, interprets as a healing word with holy meaning<sup>104</sup>, and on the two bracteates with identical stamps IK 149 all three formula words appear in the context **laþu lauk=az : g=ak=az alu**. The word *\*gákaz* can be interpreted as a personal name meaning ‘screamer, i. e. one who uses invocatory language similar to animal noises’<sup>105</sup>. And finally, the word **alu** appears together with the rhyming words **simá þima** on the bracteate from Uppåkra in Scania, Sweden (IK 591). Words that rhyme or are repeated also appear frequently on the bracteates, e. g. **salu salu** at Lellinge (IK 105) and **auja alawin auja alawin** at Skodborg (IK 161). The bracteate from Stavnsager (IK 649) deserves special attention as it is the only D-bracteate with runes that has so far been identified (*Fig. 12*). D-bracteates are otherwise the next largest group of bracteates (after the C-bracteates), constituting over a third of the overall material and are mainly concentrated in Jutland<sup>106</sup>. The style and motifs have also changed, from consisting of human and animal figures, to exclusively stylised animal figures. It may be one of the reasons why runic inscriptions generally disappear from this object type. The inscription on the Stavnsager bracteate reads **aalul** and is situated at the bottom left of the bracteate, under the two fighting animals. It is interpreted as an **alu** inscription with doubling of the runes<sup>107</sup>.

<sup>97</sup> KRAUSE / JANKUHN 1966, 28; PETERSON 2004, 14.

<sup>98</sup> IMER 2015b, 151.

<sup>99</sup> AXBOE et al. 1985, 109–110; MCKINNELL et al. 2004, 98.

<sup>100</sup> PIEPER 1987.

<sup>101</sup> AXBOE 2021.

<sup>102</sup> IMER / VASSHUS 2023.

<sup>103</sup> HEIZMANN 2011, 544–550.

<sup>104</sup> HEIZMANN 2011, 573.

<sup>105</sup> BECK 2001, 64.

<sup>106</sup> BARFOED CARLSEN 2002, 125–126.

<sup>107</sup> IMER 2017.



Fig. 11. Bracteates with **alu** inscriptions: a The bracteate from Darum in West Jutland (IK 43) with the inscriptions **alu** and **niujil**. The latter is interpreted as a personal name, which is a derivative of the adjective *\*niuja* 'new'. Diameter: 2.9 cm. Photo: The National Museum of Denmark. b The bracteate from Funen (IK 58) has a long inscription beginning with the word **lapu**. Diameter: 3.7 cm. Photo: The National Museum of Denmark. c The bracteate x14 from Vindelev, which has great resemblance with IK 58 Funen. Photo: Konserveringscenteret i Vejle. d A folded bracteate from Vindelev, x17, with the inscription **aul**.



Fig. 12. The D-bracteate from Stavnsager in Central Jutland is the only known D-bracteate with a runic inscription. The inscription reads **aalul**, which is interpreted as an **alu** inscription.

When **alu** appears together with other words on the bracteates it is – in the cases where the inscriptions can be read – together with a possible name for Odin and other powerful formula words and words which rhyme or are repeated. Another characteristic is that the word is often found near the depicted male person's head. The runes are mostly carved as normal single-lined runes, but there is a tendency that the runes are placed in front of the face and that they are running right, when the male head is looking right, and running left when the male head is looking left. The reading order of the inscription follows the direction of the head, so to speak. It gives the impression that the word **alu** is falling out of the mouth of the depicted male figure and supports the idea that the word should be interpreted as a verb.

#### Jewellery and personal items

The **alu** inscriptions are also found on other types of jewellery as well as personal items<sup>108</sup>. On the now-disappeared finger ring of gold from Karlino in Poland, the word **alu** is on the upper part of the ring's hoop together with a possible bind-rune (ligature) **a=1**, which is above the **alu** inscription. The ring was recovered in 1839 together with a few bracteates

<sup>108</sup> E. g. HAGLAND 2005; 2017



and coins, although the precise details of the find are not given<sup>109</sup>. The word **alu** is found on two identically stamped gold pendants from Hüfingen, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, which are imitations of Roman coins. On the basis of the runic inscription, the pieces of jewellery are interpreted as amulets and dated to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>110</sup>. The pendants are stamped on one side and the motif is a stylised female figure, perhaps the goddess of victory, Victoria, or an angel. She has a small, globular head, which faces to her right. In her right hand she is holding a long object, which resembles something between a scythe and a long cross. The word **alu** is placed to the left of this object and runs from right to left, in the same direction as the head turns. On the right of the woman are imitations of Latin letters, which may well be imitations of the name Victoria<sup>111</sup>. The placement of the **alu** formula on these pendants is therefore very like that on the bracteates, on which it is often associated with the depicted male's head.

In 2003, excavations were undertaken of a cairn of mixed stone and soil at Horvnes, Nordland, Norway. Around the middle of the cairn was a very disturbed inhumation burial dating to the 500s, which contained remains of bones and grave goods, including beads. On two of the bone fragments, which the excavator interpreted as pieces of a comb, were runes<sup>112</sup>. The fragments are all together 3 cm long and 0.5 cm high, and the runes cover the whole surface. The inscription reads **aallu-**, in which the ending **u**-rune lacks the full inscription, and is interpreted as a doubling of the word **alu**<sup>113</sup>, which is reminiscent of the inscription on the D-bracteate from Stavnsager (see above).

A bone comb with runes was found a little further south in Norway, at Setre, Hordaland. The comb was recovered in 1932 from a cultural layer, along with pottery dating to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and bears a long inscription **hAl mAz mAunA AlunaAlunanA**, which has been interpreted in several different ways<sup>114</sup>, but in this context it should be noted that the inscription may contain the word **alu**, although it is disputed<sup>115</sup>.

### Weapons

If we turn our attentions to the weapons on which **alu** is found, the tradition of placing the **alu** inscription on weapons covers the period from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries and from the Jutland peninsula to the north of France. The word is seemingly well-known in martial activities and the first example is probably the wooden shaft from Nydam, which is broadly dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>116</sup>. The name **wagagastiz** is found on one side of the shaft, whilst a longer and partly uninterpreted inscription is on the other side. The long inscription begins with the word **alu**, which is separated from the rest of the inscription by separation marks. Part of the long inscription can probably be translated as 'I dedicate' or 'I fight'. The inscription apparently ends with two personal names<sup>117</sup>. Heizmann also includes the three arrow shafts from the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD with the inscriptions **lua**, **la**

<sup>109</sup> KRAUSE / JANKUHN 1966, 105–106.

<sup>110</sup> FINGERLIN et al. 1998, 798; MCKINNELL et al. 2004, 68.

<sup>111</sup> MCKINNELL et al. 2004, 804–813.

<sup>112</sup> BERGLUND 2005. Information on the object provided by Terje Hellan, NTNU *Vitenskapsmuseet*, Norway, states that the function of the object is unknown.

<sup>113</sup> HAGLAND 2005; KNIRK 2006; HAGLAND 2017.

<sup>114</sup> E.g. OLSEN / SHETELIG 1933, 39–58; KRAUSE / JANKUHN 1966, 49–52; GRØNVIK 1987; LOOJENGA 2003, 355–356; MCKINNELL et al. 2004, 53.

<sup>115</sup> OLSEN / SHETELIG 1933; DÜWEL 2001a, 18–19; MCKINNELL et al. 2004, 53.

<sup>116</sup> JØRGENSEN / PETERSEN 2003, 263–270.

<sup>117</sup> STOKLUND 1995, 341; 2004, 723.



Fig. 13. The antler piece from Lindholmen presents a type of objects that are normally interpreted as an amulet or some form of insignia. It carries the runic inscription 'I, the eril, am called the Cunning one' on one side of the object and the runes **aaaaaaaazznnn-bmuttt** concluded with the word **alu**.

and **lua** amongst the **alu** inscriptions, although Imer cautiously interprets these as maker's marks<sup>118</sup>. The inscriptions are placed near the fletching of the arrows. The word **alu** is also found on two pommels from France dating to the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, from Grenay and Saint-Dizier<sup>119</sup>. The inscription on the pommel from Grenay Fischer reads **l(a)u**, which both Fischer and Heizmann interpret as **alu**<sup>120</sup>.

#### Amulets or insignia

Some objects made of antler are interpreted as amulets or insignia for a prince or another prominent person. All the known finds date to the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> or first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The long piece of antler from Lindholmen (*Fig. 13*), Scania, Sweden, was found in 1840 at the bottom of a deep bog at the manor of Lindholmen<sup>121</sup>. It is slightly bent and c. 16 cm long and has been cut so it has three sides. On two of these sides are runes that are carved with tripled lines. On one side is **ek erilaz sa wilagaz hateka :**, which translates as 'I, the eril, am called the Cunning one'. The inscription on the other side is not as easy to translate. It begins with a number of repeated runes: **aaaaaaaazznnn-bmuttt**. After this there is a punctuation mark before the word **alu**, and the inscription ends with another punctuation mark. The inscription probably consists of two different text parts, with **alu** ending an uninterpreted sequence.

The piece of antler from Lindholmen is often compared with other objects of the same type, such as the antler fragment from Sorte Muld<sup>122</sup> on Bornholm, Denmark, with its incomplete runic inscription<sup>123</sup>, the now-disappeared horn from Kragehul Mose, Funen, Denmark<sup>124</sup>, and the piece of antler from Ødemotland, near Fosse on Jæren, Norway<sup>125</sup>.

<sup>118</sup> IMER 2015a, 81.

<sup>119</sup> FISCHER 2008, 90–93; 103–109.

<sup>120</sup> FISCHER 2008, 93; HEIZMANN 2011, 538.

<sup>121</sup> ENGELHARDT 1867, 9.

<sup>122</sup> The inscription on the Sorte Muld object does not contain the word **alu** and is not incorporated in the catalogue or distribution maps, but it is included in this discussion because the object itself resembles

the other amulets or insignia containing the word **alu**.

<sup>123</sup> STOKLUND 2009.

<sup>124</sup> JACOBSEN / MOLTKE 1942, 230–231. The inscription on the Kragehul object was never recorded, so the content of it is unknown.

<sup>125</sup> KRAUSE / JANKUHN 1966, 72 Ann. 2.

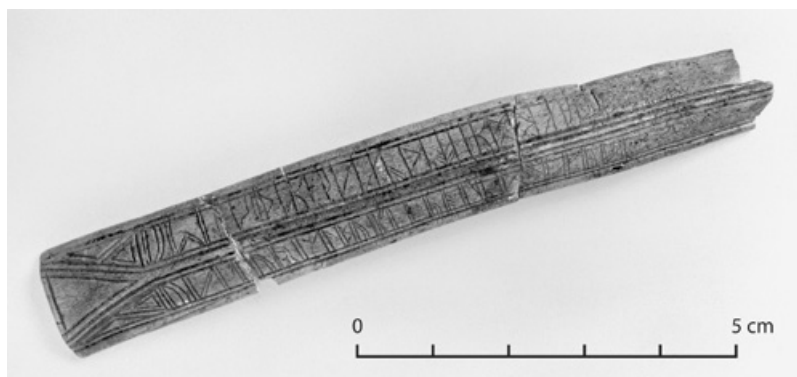


Fig. 14. The antler piece from Ødemotland with an illegible inscription. Part of it may contain an **alu** sequence.

The last-mentioned piece was found in an urn together with other objects and came to the museum in Bergen in 1886. It probably dates to the first half of the 500s and consists of a c. 10 cm-long piece of deer antler, which has been cut so that three sides have been formed (Fig. 14) – exactly like the object from Lindholmen, Scania, and the antler fragment from Sorte Muld<sup>126</sup>. The runic inscription is carved on two of the sides and most scholars consider it to be uninterpretable<sup>127</sup>. Some of the runes are of the same type as those on the objects from Sorte Muld and Lindholmen, that is with the main stave and branches crossed with a number of lines, whilst other runes are crossed with a single line, where there, however, can be doublings of the side-strokes. The runes are also quite reminiscent of the partly uninterpreted text on the bracteate from Funen (IK 58) as well as that on the wooden shaft from Nydam (see above). The question is whether a closer examination of the object from Ødemotland can decipher the word **alu** in part of the inscription, that is the part which, when viewed from above, resembles a stylised animal head. Here, on both sides of the back of the object, are two sequences, which apparently begin around where the object is broken. The inscription is placed so that the upper part of the runes adjoin one another, and therefore run in the same direction, one sequence facing right and the other facing left. The sequence begins with an **a**-rune that possibly has side-strokes on both sides, which Ottar Grønvik apparently also read<sup>128</sup>. It can be interpreted as two **a**-runes, like the inscription at Spong Hill (see below). Next, in the line above the back, are two **l**-runes, which turn the side-strokes towards one another, like the **a**-runes on the Nydam shaft<sup>129</sup>. Grønvik has read these as an **e**-rune. On the line under the back, **l**-runes can possibly be made out, which are upside down in relation to one another, also with adjacent side-strokes, read by Grønvik as an **h**-rune. This principle is known from the Karlino ring (see above). Finally, on both sides of the back is a single **u**-rune. So a complete reading of this sequence would be **aallu**. It would be expected that the terminating **u**-rune was also doubled, although this may have been impossible due to spatial limitations, and also gives us reasons to consider whether the **aallu**[-] inscription on the bone fragments from Horvnes actually consisted of more than

<sup>126</sup> MAGNUS 2009.

<sup>127</sup> See GRØNVIK 1996, 255–267.

<sup>128</sup> GRØNVIK 1996, 255–256.

<sup>129</sup> RAU / NEDOMA 2014, 67.

the five runes that are preserved. It is noteworthy that the inscription on the bracteate from Stavnsager reads **aalul**, i. e. without a doubling of the **u**-rune.

### Cremation urns

The three famous cremation urns 1224, 1564 and 2167 from Spong Hill in Norfolk, England, were found during the excavation of the large Anglo-Saxon cemetery in 1973–77<sup>130</sup>. All the inscriptions have been stamped into the wet clay before firing and the pottery vessels probably date to the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century or first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, most likely the first half of this period<sup>131</sup>. The inscriptions were first read by Catherine Hills as **ttiu** or **tty**, which was interpreted as a reference to the god Tyr<sup>132</sup>, but it was only after Peter Pieper's work on mirror runes that an understanding of the inscriptions was arrived at. Pieper proposed that the branches of the individual runes were mirrored on either side of the main stave. This resulted in the reading **aalluu**<sup>133</sup>. The stamps are located on the girth and shoulder, and on two of the best-preserved vessels, it is obvious that the stamps have been used several times.

### Rune stones

The word **alu** is also found on two rune stones from Norway. The stone from Elgesem in Vestfold was found in a burial mound but probably stood upright in the grave. The inscription on the stone consists of the word **alu**, which stands alone and runs vertically from the top and down. The burial did not contain any grave goods and therefore cannot be archaeologically dated<sup>134</sup>. The rune stone presumably dates to the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries as do most of the Iron Age rune stones in Norway. The rune stone from Årstad in Rogaland was found as a result of the disintegration of a burial mound, and the find was reported ten years after this, in 1865. The finder stated that the stone was placed upright in the burial mound, next to a stone coffin. The contents of the burial – an urn containing burnt bones, a very rusty weapon and several glass beads – were either destroyed or thrown away, and therefore cannot help dating the rune stone<sup>135</sup>. Based on the rune forms, the rune stone can probably be dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>136</sup>. The inscription on the stone is in three sequences, probably consisting of three names: **hiwigaz**, **saralu** and **ekwinaz**, and **alu** possibly constitutes part of the personal name in **saralu**<sup>137</sup>.

### Other objects including the Tovrup vessel

The variety of objects that carry an **alu** inscription is large and it is difficult to include all objects under a few headlines. The diversity of objects reveals the frequency of the word, which is not restrained to occur on a few types of objects. The Tovrup beaker adds another example to the variety of objects with a runic inscription containing **alu** and is best compared with the Roman glass beakers with well-wishing formulae.

<sup>130</sup> HILLS 1987.

<sup>131</sup> HILLS 1991, 49–51.

<sup>132</sup> HILLS 1974, 89.

<sup>133</sup> PIEPER 1987.

<sup>134</sup> SHETELIG 1914, 67.

<sup>135</sup> Cf. BUGGE 1891–1903, 228.

<sup>136</sup> IMER 2015b, 346.

<sup>137</sup> KRAUSE / JANKUHN 1966, 29–30.

Two other objects, but with unknown or debatable functions, should be mentioned. In 1874, during cultivation of a field near Førde, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway, an oblong piece of soapstone was found, which was 12 cm long and had holes in both ends. On the flat side of the stone, between two holes, is the runic inscription **aluko**, which is interpreted as a personal name that contains **alu**<sup>138</sup>. On the basis of the rune forms, the stone is dated to the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>139</sup>.

During an archaeological excavation of an area containing burial mounds near Fosse, Rogaland, Norway, a cremation burial dating to the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD was found in 1939<sup>140</sup>. The objects that were recovered included a small bronze fitting measuring 4.4 cm in length, possibly from a small box, upon which were two separate rune sequences **kka** and **alu**<sup>141</sup>.

### Not included objects

On a small, 7.5 cm-long stone slab from Kinneve in Västergötland, Sweden, there is an inscription, which since the stone was found in 1843 has been interpreted as an inscription written in the older futhark. The stone is broken on one side and the inscription is therefore incomplete **...siz alu h**. It has not been possible to interpret the inscription<sup>142</sup>, but the word **alu** is certainly involved, if we read from right to left. If we read from left to right, however, this results in another reading<sup>143</sup>.

According to Heizmann<sup>144</sup>, the word is also present in a sequence on the Eggja stone from the 600s. Heizmann follows Krause's reading **Alumisurki**<sup>145</sup> of the line, which according to Ottar Grønvik should be read **a(i a)u is urki**<sup>146</sup>. Terje Spurkland reads **a(du) is urki**<sup>147</sup>, but in the later edition of his book follows Grønvik's interpretation<sup>148</sup>. The Scandinavian Runic-text Database, available on Uppsala University's website<sup>149</sup>, contains the reading **A-- is (u)(r)(k)(i)**. It is therefore very uncertain as to whether the sequence on the Eggja stone contains the word **alu**.

### Conclusion

It ought to have been made clear in the text above that the word **alu** is found on more than 30 objects from all over Europe, from Karlino in northern Poland in the east to Norfolk in eastern England in the west, and from Baden-Württemberg in southern Germany to Nordland in north-west Norway (*Figs 1; 10*). This represents an impressive geographical distribution, which covers all of rune-writing Europe in the Late Roman and Early

<sup>138</sup> KRAUSE / JANKUHN 1966, 109.

<sup>139</sup> IMER 2015b, 86.

<sup>140</sup> KRISTOFFERSEN 2000, 306.

<sup>141</sup> LUND 1940, 49–54.

<sup>142</sup> LUND 1940, 114.

<sup>143</sup> At the meeting of runologists at Skara, Västergötland, in 2017, Dr Per Stille of Linnaeus University, Växjö, proposed that the inscription could also be read from left to right (contradicting previous interpretations, in which the inscription was read from right to left) and therefore may have represented medieval runes. If we read the inscription

from left to right, it is possible to read the l-rune in **alu** as a t-rune, the a-rune as an o-rune and the following z-rune as an m-rune. This gives ... **tomi(n)...**, which very much resembles *dominus*, as is often found in medieval texts.

<sup>144</sup> HEIZMANN 2011, 537.

<sup>145</sup> KRAUSE / JANKUHN 1966, 228.

<sup>146</sup> GRØNVIK 1985, 162.

<sup>147</sup> SPURKLAND 2001, 79.

<sup>148</sup> SPURKLAND 2005, 68.

<sup>149</sup> <https://www.nordiska.uu.se/forsk/samnord.htm/> (last access: 10.11.2022).

Germanic periods. The examples range in date from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, in other words the period in which traditionally the linguistic stage is Proto Norse within the Nordic area, even though the position this language actually occupies is often discussed<sup>150</sup>. Most of the objects with the inscription **alu** are golden bracteates dating to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, but we should be careful in jumping to a conclusion about the word being more used in that period, because the preservation conditions for gold is much better than for organic material. The new find from Tovrup dates to c. AD 245–365 (2  $\sigma$ ) and we must assume that the word has had great significance in the whole period – if not also even earlier. The linguistic status and the use of certain words in the time prior to the invention of runic writing c. AD 160 is, of course, difficult to establish.

Heizmann suggests that because formula words, appellatives with a certain meaning, including **alu**, are mainly found on bracteates, often depicting gods, this suggests that there was a close connection with the language of sorcery<sup>151</sup>. But after the above examination of the **alu** inscriptions, it should perhaps be highlighted that they are *not* found on a single type of object but on many different types of objects and materials. We should not underestimate the significance of the word being found on many of the gold bracteates, but it is also important to draw attention to the fact that the many other types of objects suggest that **alu** was very widespread. It is probably only the issue of preservation that prevents us from finding more inscriptions, for example, on organic material. This means that the word was of considerable importance and was often used.

Another characteristic of the **alu** inscriptions is that the three runes are often doubled, tripled, mirrored in different ways or swapped places. This means that the word can be difficult to recognise in the inscriptions, as, for example, is the case at Spong Hill, and perhaps also indicates that there are more inscriptions awaiting to be discovered in the known corpus of runes dating to the Iron Age. Therefore, it is possible that e.g. the inscriptions on the arrow shafts from Nydam should be interpreted as **alu** inscriptions, as proposed by Heizmann<sup>152</sup>.

But this apparently accidental play with the order of the runes and mirroring may also be of significance in terms of interpretation. We know from other literate societies dating from antiquity until the Middle Ages that repetition of letters, double writing, letters swapping places and palindromes can have hidden and holy meaning. The written word is a physical manifestation of the spoken word, and if this word is especially important, it can be given increased emphasis by repeating it in different ways<sup>153</sup>. It is noteworthy that the layout of the inscriptions on the amulets or insignia from the 5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries from Lindholmen and possibly also Ødemotland shows double-lined or triple-lined runes. This layout requires more writing space than single-lined runes and is eased on this type of objects, simply because they are larger than e.g. quite small bracteates. On bracteates and other smaller objects another strategy can be chosen, e.g. the doubling or tripling of runes. This layout is seen on the bone utensil from Horvnes and the bracteates from Stavnsager and possibly Kjøllegård. Interesting in this aspect is that bracteate inscriptions sometimes occur with rhyming words, e.g. **sima (þ)ima** on the Uppåkra bracteate also containing an **alu** inscription or the Skodborg bracteate (IK 161) with the inscription **auja alawin auja alawin auja alawin jalawid**<sup>154</sup>, where the first two words are tripled. Rhyming words also

<sup>150</sup> E.g. ANTONSEN 1975; 1987; NIELSEN 1993; 2000; STOKLUND 1995, 345–346; SEEBOLD 1994; GRØNVIK 1998; SCHULTE / WILLIAMS 2018, 79–81.

<sup>151</sup> HEIZMANN 2011, 532.

<sup>152</sup> HEIZMANN 2011, 538.

<sup>153</sup> E.g. DÜWEL 1988.

<sup>154</sup> JACOBSEN / MOLTKE 1942, 497–498.

occur in Viking-Age inscriptions, such as the 9<sup>th</sup> century Gørlev stone from Zealand with the **þistil mistil kistil** formula<sup>155</sup>. Such layouts of inscriptions almost give the impression that repeating and rhyming words was important and it gives an idea of how cultic activities might have taken place and what they sounded like.

The use of the word **alu** seems to follow a pattern. The word is never found amongst the many maker's and owner's inscriptions, which are amongst the most common types of inscriptions in the rune corpus of the Iron Age – certainly in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>156</sup>, but is often found on the numerous bracteates, which are decorated with religious imagery, as well as on the amulets or insignia that have been retrieved at Sorte Muld, Lindholmen and perhaps also Ødemotland. All these objects were used within the magnates' environment. In addition, **alu** is used on weapons, of which the wooden shaft from Nydam and the pommels from Saint-Dizier and Grenay are good examples. To these can be added the inscriptions on the three cremation urns from Spong Hill, the rune stone from Elgesem and most recently on the fine ceramic drinking beaker. The use of **alu** on all these objects suggests that the word was used in both the contexts of war and religion, in connection with rituals where strength or extra protection was required. In Iron Age society, there are, in a number of cases, indications that the magnate or prince was the supreme military and political leader, as well as the religious leader<sup>157</sup>. There are therefore reasons for us to assume that the word **alu** was primarily associated with this environment.

Seen in the light of which context **alu** is used in, an interpretation of the word as either 'protection' or 'I help, strengthen, give power, protect' perhaps seems the most plausible, whereas the connection to today's ale must be regarded as secondary. It is possible from an etymological perspective that ale relates to this strength-giving, life-giving or protecting word. It could even also correspond with the use of the word in *Sigrdrífumál*, where 'ale runes' were to help the straying woman back onto the right path. Based upon the contextual use of the word, neither can we reject the interpretation of 'enchantment' or 'sorcery', due to its presence on religious amulets, weapons, rune stones and cremation urns.

If, on the other hand, we examine the placement of the word on the objects, this perhaps nevertheless points in the direction that the word is more likely to be associated with a verb. Over half of the **alu** inscriptions on the bracteates are placed near the depicted male person's face, and the same also applies to the small gold amulets from Hüfingen<sup>158</sup>. On some of the bracteates, Bjørnerud (IK 24), Darum (IK 43), Djupbrunns (IK 44), Heide (IK 74), Klaggeröd (IK 97), Slangerup (IK 78), and Uppåkra (IK 591), the word is right in front of the face and in some cases it appears as if the mouth is open and the depicted male person is saying something. This could perhaps suggest that Polomé's interpretation, that **alu** is a verb in the first person singular, 'I help, strengthen, give power, protect', is the most plausible of all the proposed suggestions. This is presumably also underlined by the fact that repetition is important, which is shown graphically by the doubling or tripling of runes and runes carved with double or tripled lines. The inscription under the bottom of the Tovrup beaker also suggests a connection to an interpretation of the word **alu** as either 'protection' or 'I help, strengthen, protect, give power', especially when compared with the Greek well-wishing inscriptions 'For luck' or 'Drink, and you will live well' on glass beakers of roughly the same date.

<sup>155</sup> **þistil mistil kistil** means 'thistle, mistletoe, little casket' (JACOBSEN / MOLTKE 1942, 292–294; SCHULTE 2020).

<sup>156</sup> SCHULTE 2020, 92.

<sup>157</sup> PAULI JENSEN 2011; 2017.

<sup>158</sup> FINGERLIN et al. 1998.

The **alu** inscriptions are widely distributed amongst the runic inscriptions of the Iron Age, and there is much evidence to suggest that it was a commonly used word which, for example, was also found in personal names. As such, the word would have been known by high and low in society. There is a general assumption in the research that runic script was widespread amongst the elite<sup>159</sup>, but there are several objects that also suggest that the script was kept alive amongst ordinary people. Examples are the inscriptions on tools that seem to have been used by craftsmen<sup>160</sup>. The vessel excavated at a non-elite Iron Age site near the abandoned village Tovrup perhaps demonstrates that the runic script was also used by the ordinary population, although to what extent remains unclear simply because of a lack of finds. Most of the runic inscriptions that have survived until today are found on objects of metal and stone, whilst the rich weapon offerings from the period have shown us that if organic material had survived better outside the oxygen-lacking bogs, the overall corpus of material would be much larger. A simple estimate of the known Nordic inscriptions dating to the Late Roman Iron Age indicates that runic script was quite a lot more widespread than the surviving inscriptions can show. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries around 50 inscriptions are preserved, which corresponds with the carving of one inscription every five years. Such a total is obviously insufficient to keep a script tradition alive, and we therefore must assume that there are thousands of other inscriptions we do not know about<sup>161</sup>.

Today, most scholars agree that runic writing was invented out of a growing need for written communication due to an expanding economy and growing administrative structure<sup>162</sup>. The basic reasons for the invention of writing are presented by the anthropologist Jack Goody: administration, economy, religion, and law<sup>163</sup>. John Hines adds a fifth function, which he calls 'phatic', which encompasses the use of writing for social purposes; that writing could be and still is used for maintaining important social ties<sup>164</sup>. It is difficult to imagine that the surviving inscriptions from the Late Roman and Early Migration periods are representative of what writing was used for, and that e.g. accounts were not kept at the large magnate's farms. From a 6<sup>th</sup> century written source, we know that runes were used for written messages among the Germanic peoples. The Merovingian bishop, Venantius Fortunatus, wrote a letter to a certain Flavus, in which he encouraged him to write back with the words 'Let the barbarous rune be painted on tablets of ash-wood, and what a papyrus can do, that a smoothed stick is good for'<sup>165</sup>, seemingly annoyed that his friend did not write back. It is possible that such a (now lost) message was found in the bog of Kragehul on Funen. In his 1761 description of one of the finds, the antiquarian, Søren Abildgaard, writes about '[...] a thin tablet [...] of reed or ash-wood with two rows of large runic letters and other figures, and additionally on one of the columns there is a little row of small runes over the large, elegantly carved runes'<sup>166</sup>. It is plausible that such messages, carved or painted on organic materials, were sent from one ally to another. This could be one of the reasons why an object with runic writing is found in what seems to be an ordinary or

<sup>159</sup> E.g. LUND HANSEN 1998; STOKLUND 2003; DÜWEL 2008; IMER 2011.

<sup>160</sup> IMER 2015a, 94.

<sup>161</sup> IMER 2015a

<sup>162</sup> SPURKLAND 2005, 3–4.

<sup>163</sup> GOODY 1986. Other researchers of literacy may divide differently, see e.g. CLANCHY 2013 and MOSTERT 2005.

<sup>164</sup> HINES 1997, 83–85.

<sup>165</sup> PAGE 1999, 100–101.

<sup>166</sup> Our translation of the Danish text, cited in JACOBSEN / MOLTKE 1942, 235: 'Endnu fantes en tynd flad Spon 2 Tommer breed og et Quarter lang, af Rør eller Aske Træ med 2 Rader store Rune Bogstaver og andre Figurer paa, og endnu er der paa den ene columne en liden Rad af smaa Runer over de store subtil udskaarne.'



modest settlement. It is worth remembering that the site of Dankirke is located not far from Tovrup, where the runic beaker was found.

The Tovrup beaker demonstrates an important addition to the discussion of the social distribution of runic writing, as it comes from a fully excavated and well-dated archaeological context with no obvious connection to the social elite of the time. Instead the Tovrup village was a modest settlement consisting of family-run farmsteads just like the neighbouring villages. And the farmstead with the beaker did not stand out from its neighbours either. The beaker in itself is interesting in that it is a ceramic copy of imported Roman glass vessels and that the inscription could be seen as a Germanic reflection of the Greek well-wishing formulae that we know from such objects. The fact that such well-wishing inscriptions are not limited to an elitist use gives food for thought in respect where and when rituals were conducted. Clay vessels are often found as deposits in villages and farmsteads, and it is interesting that such vessels do not distinguish themselves from other vessels used in daily life<sup>167</sup>. In fact, the Tovrup beaker with the inscription suggests that such containers could have played a role in drinking rituals before the deposition on the farmsteads and that the rituals we mostly know from elite environments seem to have been both known and performed by a much broader spectrum of society involving the majority of the population. Even though the Tovrup settlement seems very modest, the village must have had a leader to perform the shared religious ceremonies.

There is no doubt that **alu** was used with a strengthening meaning, with good intentions and possibly also a religious aim. It was widespread throughout the rune-writing parts of Europe and was used with a frequency and on many diverse objects, which suggests it was used when something special was involved. The word **alu** cannot be directly equated with today's Danish word 'øl' (ale or beer), but it is quite likely that the drink ale is related to this small word of such great importance.

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<sup>167</sup> BEILKE-VOIGT 2007, 304.

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### Abstract: A ceramic beaker with runes – the archaeological and linguistic context of the word **alu**

This article presents the first find of a runic inscription on pottery from Denmark. The word **alu** has been written into the still wet clay on the base of a drinking beaker deposited in a posthole of a Late Roman Iron Age (AD 160–375/400) farmstead near the abandoned village Tovrup in the Region of Southern Denmark. Charcoal from a posthole was dated by <sup>14</sup>C to AD 245–365. It is the most common word in Iron Age runic inscriptions and is found in large parts of the Germanic language area. The find makes us question whether runic script was confined to the elite. **alu** should be interpreted as a verb in the first person singular ‘I help / strengthen / give power / protect’. The word is related to the drink ‘øl’, Old Norse *ǫl*, but is not a direct predecessor.

### Zusammenfassung: Ein Keramikbecher mit Runen – der archäologische und linguistische Kontext des Wortes **alu**

Dieser Beitrag legt den ersten Fund einer Runeninschrift auf Keramik aus Dänemark vor. Das Wort **alu** war in den noch feuchten Ton des Bodens eines Trinkbeckers geschrieben worden, der in einem Pfostenloch eines Gehöfts der späten Römischen Eisenzeit (A. D. 160–375/400) nahe des wüst gefallenen Dorfes Tovrup in Süddänemark deponiert wurde. Holzkohle aus dem Pfostenloch wurde in die Zeit A. D. 245–365 radiokarbondatiert. Das Wort ist das am häufigsten auftretende in Runeninschriften der Eisenzeit und ist im germanischen Sprachgebiet weit verbreitet. Der Fund wirft die Frage auf, ob die Runenschrift auf die Elite beschränkt war. **alu** sollte als Verb in der ersten Person Singular interpretiert werden, im Sinne von ‚ich helfe / Stärke / gebe Macht / beschütze‘. Das Wort ist verwandt mit dem Getränk ‚øl‘, Altnordisch *ǫl*, aber ist kein direkter Vorläufer davon.

### Résumé: Les runes d’un gobelet en céramique – contexte archéologique et linguistique du mot **alu**

Cette contribution présente la première découverte d’une inscription en runes sur de la céramique provenant du Danemark. On avait inscrit le mot **alu** sur le fond encore humide d’un gobelet déposé dans un trou de poteau d’une ferme de la fin de l’âge du Fer romain (AD 160–375/400), non loin du village abandonné de Tovrup dans le Sud du Danemark. Le charbon de bois extrait du trou de poteau a livré une datation au radiocarbone de AD 245–365. Ce mot est celui qui apparaît le plus fréquemment parmi les inscriptions en runes de l’âge du Fer et il est très répandu dans les régions de langue germanique. Cette trouvaille soulève la question d’une connaissance des runes réservée à l’élite. **alu** serait une forme verbale à la première personne du singulier signifiant « j’aide / fortifie / donne du pouvoir / protège ». Ce mot est apparenté à la boisson « øl », *ǫl* en vieux-norrois, mais n’en est pas l’ancêtre direct.

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## References of figures:

*Figs 1–4*: Museum of Southwest Jutland. – *Fig. 5*: M. Søvsø. – *Figs 6–7*: Museum of Southwest Jutland. – *Figs 8–9*: Lennart Larsen, The National Museum of Denmark. – *Fig. 10*: Museum of Southwest Jutland. – *Fig. 11*: Konserveringscenteret i Vejle. – *Fig. 12*: John Lee, The National Museum of Denmark. – *Fig. 13*: Roberto Fortuna, The National Museum of Denmark. – *Fig. 14*: Fotoarkivet – Universitetsmuseet in Bergen. – *Tab. 1*: M. Søvsø, graphics O. Wagner (RGK). – *Tab. 2*: authors, graphics O. Wagner (RGK).