

MIKILL OFLÁTI ‘A GREAT SHOW-OFF’: EXPRESSIONS OF SELF IN THE RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS OF MAESHOWE, ORKNEY

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Abstract: This article examines the runic inscriptions of Maeshowe, Orkney, and discusses how they can be read as expressions of the carvers’ sense of self. I demonstrate that we find various expressions of self in Maeshowe related to runic skills, storytelling, sex, and religious beliefs. Drawing on a combination of cognitive theory and practice theory, I argue that while the inscriptions reveal several topics of interest to the carvers, what they express most of all is the carvers’ wish to be part of the social group. Finally, I hold that there are thematic similarities between the Maeshowe inscriptions and other Norse medieval non-ecclesiastical graffiti inscriptions. Outside of Maeshowe, such inscriptions are mainly found in Norway. Therefore, I argue that the Maeshowe inscriptions should be seen as related to the Norwegian runic tradition.

Keywords: The self, Maeshowe, runic inscriptions, graffiti, non-ecclesiastical graffiti.

Introduction

In the mid-twelfth century, a group of Norsemen broke into Maeshowe, a Neolithic gravemound in Orkney, and they filled the cairn with runic graffiti. Statements in some of the inscriptions give the impression that the inscriptions were part of a discourse which also included oral utterances. The oral part of this discourse is long lost, but its written remnants give us a unique insight into how the carvers once interacted in a highly informal social setting. As such, they can also help us understand how the carvers wished to be perceived in such a setting and what kinds of selves they chose to express. I will analyse the inscriptions from a cognitive and praxeological perspective: I discuss the practice of carving these inscriptions, the carver’s cognition in the moment of carving, and how the carver relates cognitively to the practice. The combined cognitive and praxeological lens will allow us to study both the carving process and the individuals partaking in it, and by studying both in

relation to each other, we can also come closer to an understanding of how the self is created and formed in the carving process.

The aim of this article is to discuss what the Maeshowe inscriptions may tell us about the selves of those individuals who made carvings there. The carvers implicitly and explicitly portray themselves in the inscriptions they carve; the selves they express are created in a mediation between the carver's cognition and social requirements in the carving practice. I argue that the Maeshowe inscriptions were carved during a short period of time and that the carvers knew each other. Moreover, I claim that the Maeshowe inscriptions display a complexity of selves and self-presentations not seen in any comparable corpus from the Scandinavian Middle Ages. Finally, I argue that there is a clear distribution of self-expressions in graffiti inscriptions between churches and non-ecclesiastical sites. While there is overlap in some inscription categories, graffiti carvers in churches put much more emphasis on their religious affiliations, while storytelling and adventurous self-expressions seem to be exclusively non-ecclesiastical.

Previous Studies on the Medieval Self

In the present article, I discuss what aspects of their selves the Norse carvers display in a social and informal context in the mid-twelfth century. Studies of the medieval self often give emphasis to the self-expressions of the higher social classes and the most literate individuals of the Middle Ages (see e.g. Morris 1972; Smith 2012), thus displaying the sense of self in a very limited social group and in a limited context. There are, however, some recent studies on identities in Norse communities which encompass broader levels of society. Examples are Anne-Sofie Gräslund's article on how the Norsemen in Greenland saw themselves (2010), and Judith Jesch's study of the Viking diaspora (2015). In common for both is their emphasis on local and regional senses of group identity, rather than on the individual sense of self. As we will see, though, the Maeshowe carvers do not seem concerned with local and regional affiliation when they position and portray themselves in the mound.

Another very recent study of identity in Norse communities is Andrea Freund's PhD dissertation (2020) on runic writing and identity in Orkney. This study is relevant for the present one. Freund's study is primarily concerned with the inscriptions as expressions of Norse identity and encompasses all of the Orkney inscriptions. Like Gräslund and Jesch, Freund primarily discusses the inscriptions as expressions of identity within a social context, emphasising gender, cultural and religious identity and social status, rather than as

expressions of the individual self. Freund, moreover, takes a diaspora perspective, studying the Orkney inscriptions as ‘sources for the formation and expression of identity in Orkney as part of the Norse diaspora’ (2020, 13). This perspective is interesting when looking at the entire Orkney corpus, though not the most suitable for the Maeshowe corpus when seen as a separate entity, as not all of the Maeshowe carvers are likely to have belonged to diasporic communities.¹ While Freund includes Maeshowe in the Orkney corpus, I will presently argue that the Maeshowe inscriptions are inspired by Norwegian carving practices and should also be seen in relation to Norwegian runic inscriptions.

Additionally, by taking a different theoretical perspective combining cognitive theory and practice theory, I shift the focus from relatively stable identity markers such as gender, cultural background and social status, and I see the inscriptions as expressions of an inner shifting and context-bound sense of self. The Maeshowe corpus provides a new perspective on the medieval self, as we come very close to the agents creating the inscriptions. No scribe serves as intermediary between us and the carvers; the inscriptions we see, are those carved by people almost 900 years ago. The inscriptions were, moreover, carved during a short period, and they relate to each other in a way indicating that the carvers knew each other. This allows us to observe social interaction between individuals which is very rarely recorded and preserved till the present day.

*The Self as a Cognitive and Social Construction**

There are several ways of defining the self, and different theoretical fields provide us with distinct viewpoints on the self. Here, I will concentrate on two of these: cognitive theory and practice theory. My basis is the cognitive definition of the self as a construction individual to each person. In this case it is important to remember that the cognitively constructed self can only be observed indirectly through the runic inscriptions. These are created in social practices where the carvers relate both to each other and to their surroundings. Therefore, I also bring praxeological perspectives into the discussion which can enhance our understanding of the carving process as a practice. In the following, I will bring together cognitive and praxeological perspectives, and I argue that they can be merged to conceptualize the self as both cognitive and social.

¹ This is also pointed out by Jesch 2015, 172–73.

* This section is a condensed version of a discussion I have elaborated elsewhere (Holmqvist 2020).

In cognitive theory, the self is seen as an on-going cognitive process. At the core of the cognitive conception of the self is its instability and flexibility. Human beings have an unlimited cognition; our brain constantly considers a range of possibilities for different selves and choices in every situation (cf. Turner and McCubbins 2018). According to Mark Turner, the self is created in a continuous blending process (2014, 77–78), and our idea of who we are is blended with the context in which we are situated (2014, 65, 88). That our cognition is affected by both our body and the material and social context in which we are situated, is demonstrated by several scholars (cf. Robbins and Aydede 2009b). Of particular interest is perhaps how memory processes, and cognition in general, are influenced by, and indeed also distributed to, the social networks we partake in (Barnier, Sutton, Harris, and Wilson 2008; Lundhaug 2014; Smith and Conrey 2009; Smith and Semin 2007). This implies that although the creation of a self is a cognitive process individual to every human being, it is not an isolated process. It is heavily influenced by the social, material, and bodily context in which we are situated, and our sense of self changes whenever we enter a new context. A carver in Maeshowe will thus form a self when carving which is partly based on his previous conceptions of him- or herself², and partly on his or her immediate surroundings. For instance, the carver of inscription 20, who claims to be the most skilled in runes west of the ocean, is likely to have had a conception of himself as a man skilled in runes before he entered Maeshowe, while the specific context of Maeshowe aroused this sense and spurred his wish to demonstrate exactly how skilled he was.

In practice theory, the self is understood as a construction within the practice. Practice theoreticians see practices as the fundamental structure of all social life, and Andreas Reckwitz defines practices as ‘a regular bodily activity held together by a socially standardized way of understanding and knowing’ (2002a, 211), thus stressing the licit knowledge underlying all our actions. This knowledge is embodied and learnt without explicit instruction, and we act according to it without (necessarily) being aware that we do so. A practice is not only dependent upon agents, understood as human beings, and their licit knowledge, however. The agent’s body, mind, emotions, intentions, and material surroundings are also determining factors in a practice (see Reckwitz 2002b on the material aspects of practice; 2012 on emotions in practice; Schatzki 2001a on affects and ends in

² I use both ‘he’ and ‘she’ here in order not to assume anything about the carvers’ gender. The names in Maeshowe are mostly male, but there are five female names carved in the mound, one or possibly two of which are carvers. Not all carvers identified themselves by name, however, so there might be several unidentified female carvers in the mound. When a carver is identified by name, I will use the pronoun corresponding to the gender of the name.

practices). Articles on practice theory rarely touch upon the topic of the self, although individuals and individuality are recurring discussions. For instance, Theodore Schatzki states that ‘the status of human beings as ‘subjects’ (and ‘agents’) is bound to practices. Practices, in sum, displace mind as the central phenomenon in human life’ (2001b, 20). This statement is in direct opposition to cognitive theory and leaves little room for a cognitively constructed self. Reading between the lines, the self, or our sense of who we are, is tied to the practice: the self is both constructed in the practice and assigned to the agents when they partake in the practice. As an example, one of the rune carving practices in Maeshowe is that of carvers demonstrating their rune skills. In this practice is embedded a sense of being skilled in runes, and when the carvers partake in the practice by carving an inscription which demonstrates their skill, they assign this rune-skilled self to themselves.

I draw on both praxeological and cognitive perspectives to create a new framework for analysing the self in medieval inscriptions. Within cognitive theory, it is assumed that the self is a cognitive construct; in practice theory, the self is a construct within the practice. However, the self expressed in inscriptions will always be a mediation between these two. It is a result of an individual’s wish to express him-/herself and the constraints put upon the individual by the practices in which s/he participates.

By itself, practice theory can seem deterministic as the theory often seems to imply that all actions are determined by the practice to which it belongs. This leads to a problem, for how can change be explained in such a system?³ I argue that by merging praxeological and cognitive perspectives we are able to explain how change can occur within practices: change happens due to individuals’ innate flexibility, creativity, and willingness to transcend existing practices. Furthermore, practice theory provides an elaborate context in which the cognition of agents is situated. While individual articles and books on situated cognition show how cognition is dependent upon different contexts – body, culture, material artefacts, social environment etc. (see e.g. the various articles in Robbins and Aydede 2009a) – few works on cognitive theory attempt to collect and merge all of these perspectives into a larger whole. Practice theory, however, sees all of these contexts as different aspects of practice, and as such, the practice can be seen as a larger context in which cognition is situated. Drawing on both praxeological and cognitive perspectives, a self emerges which is both dependent upon practices and the result of individual, and sometimes innovative, cognitive processes. It is a

³ See for example Caldwell 2012, Reckwitz 2012, and Schatzki 2001a for discussions on this.

self which often actively chooses to conform, but which also has the potential to transgress and cause change.

The Inscriptions

Maeshowe houses, by my counting, thirty-one runic inscriptions which carry meaning and (at least) six less successful attempts at carving further runic inscriptions. In addition to these thirty-seven more or less successful carvings, there can be found a few drawings and several carved crosses on the walls.⁴ These inscriptions form a separate entity from the remainder of the inscriptions in Orkney,⁵ both spatially, as they are all enclosed in Maeshowe, and in their display of runic literacy.⁶ Although there were undoubtedly rune carvers in Orkney, few of the other Orkney inscriptions display the same level of literacy as the Maeshowe inscriptions.⁷ Moreover, the Maeshowe inscriptions also stand out with regard to their contents. Most of the legible and interpretable Orkney inscriptions from outside of Maeshowe are either memorial inscriptions on runestones or carvers' signatures; the Maeshowe inscriptions evoke associations of informal use of runes in Norway, as I will come back to. Orkney also houses an incredible number of binary runic inscriptions. In itself, this might seem a parallel to Maeshowe, but there is reason to believe that these are modern carvings inspired by the binary runes in Maeshowe (cf. Barnes 2003; Barnes and Page 2006, 35–43; Freund and Ljosland 2019, 147; Nordby 2018, 181–82). Finally, there is good reason to believe that several of the Maeshowe carvers were, in fact, not originally from Orkney, a point I will return to in the discussion of the historical background.

⁴ Barnes numbers thirty-three inscriptions which he considers runic but also lists some inscriptions discussed by previous scholars, which he considers 'non- or quasi-runic carvings' (1994, 215). Although Barnes' volume contains comprehensive discussions, it is not always easy to understand what, in Barnes' view, distinguishes a corrupted inscription from a quasi-runic one. Two of the inscriptions he discusses, nos 31 and 33, seem to me to belong to the same category as Farrer's nos XXVII, XXVIII, XXIX, and XXX, listed by Barnes among the 'non- or quasi-runic carvings' (see Barnes 1994, 215–218), which Barnes has chosen to leave unnumbered in his volume. To call these quasi-runic would, in my opinion, be to underrate them. They are, in my view, clearly runic, although the carver has not succeeded in conveying any meaning, and neither are all the characters successful runes. Whether they deserve to be counted in the total number of runic inscriptions is another matter. In the following, I exclude Barnes' nos 31 and 33 in addition to Farrer's nos XXVII, XXVIII, XXIX, and XXX unless otherwise explicitly stated.

⁵ OR + number = inscription from Orkney, nos 1–20 are published in Barnes and Page 2006, no. 21 is mentioned in Barnes 2016, and nos 22 and 23 are published in the same article. A spindle whorl which will likely receive the signum OR 24 is published in Ljosland 2020. See also Freund 2020 for an updated catalogue over the inscriptions.

⁶ Though see Freund 2020, 230–232 for a contradictory view. Freund claims that 'what sets Maeshowe apart is the sheer number of inscriptions and their good preservation' (2020, 232).

⁷ Exceptions are OR 23 Naversdale, a likely early medieval inscription in Latin, and OR 15 Orphir II. Freund notes that OR 15 displays a high degree of literacy (2020, 107, 232). The inscription is fragmented, though it is clear that it is referring to the material on which it is carved. The inscription might be a joke, and Freund comments that this use of runes is far more sophisticated than simply carving a name (2020, 107).

Maeshowe was first opened by James Farrer, amateur archaeologist and M.P., in July 1861, and only a few months later, the first interpretations of the Maeshowe inscriptions by C. C. Rafn and P. A. Munch appeared. In 1862, Farrer published an edition of all the inscriptions with interpretations by Rafn, Munch, and George Stephens, and since then, various other scholars have also given their interpretation of the inscriptions, notably Magnus Olsen, Finnur Jónsson, Hermann Pálsson, and Aslak Liestøl (cf. Barnes 1994, 21–37 with references). The latest, and also most comprehensive, edition of the inscriptions is that of Michael Barnes (1994), and Barnes' volume forms a foundation for the present article. It is comprehensive and detailed, and his deductions are well-explained and mostly reasonable. I, however, also visited Maeshowe in April 2018 to do fieldwork for this article. I was allowed a total of six hours there, and although this was sufficient time for a great deal of investigation, there was not time for everything. I prioritized familiarizing myself with the inscriptions and their appearance and have compared my own preferred readings to those of Barnes. In addition, I have photographed all the inscriptions, and I have mapped how the inscriptions relate to each other spatially and thematically (see fig. 1).⁸

The Maeshowe inscriptions are unique. It is the only relatively large corpus of informal graffiti inscriptions from a non-religious setting in the Scandinavian Middle Ages, and they are also incredibly well preserved and documented. The mound was filled with rubble until the discovery in the nineteenth century, and this has protected the inscriptions from the harsh Orkney weather. Moreover, access to the mound has been restricted since the inter-war period (Barnes 1994, 70), and this has hindered modern graffiti carvers from continuing the 900-year-old graffiti conversations in the mound. In addition, the inscriptions were well documented at the time of their discovery. This makes it possible to track new carvings and any changes to the old inscriptions. There are very few of these, but Barnes argues that some carvings west of the entrance are modern as they are missing from an old lithograph, rubbing, and a glass plate negative of the place in question (1994, 68–70).

⁸ Barnes has also mapped the inscriptions, but my mapping differs from that of Barnes in that I have used a floor plan as a basis for my mapping, while Barnes has mapped the inscriptions on the individual walls. While Barnes' drawings are highly useful for finding the inscriptions, or for imagining how they are placed in the mound, they only show one wall at a time and therefore give no overall impression of how the inscriptions are spatially distributed and how they relate spatially and thematically to each other. This is what I have sought to achieve in figure 1.

Dating of the Inscriptions and Historical Background

There is little outside the carved texts themselves which can aid in dating the inscriptions. Therefore, they have to be dated typologically on runological and linguistic grounds: we find new linguistic forms, such as *er* and *var* instead of the older forms *es* and *vas*, though younger forms with svarabhakti vowels are missing. Also, we have a distinction between the runes **a** and **æ**, and also between **o**, **ø**, and **þ**. Only two dotted runes are found, however: **e** and **g**. In sum, this leads Barnes to conclude that the inscriptions were carved c. 1125–1175 (1994, 39–40). Within this period, one particular event marks itself out as a fitting context for the Maeshowe inscriptions: Earl Rognvaldr’s journey to the Holy Land. Most scholars today make this connection, although with varying degrees of certainty (see e.g. Barnes 1994, 40; Jesch 2013, 156–58; Krüger and Busch 2017, 113; Spurkland 2001, 158). There are several reasons for ascribing the inscriptions to this context, not least the likelihood of Norwegian involvement in the Maeshowe inscriptions (Barnes 1994, 40–41) and the thematic overlap between the *Orkneyinga saga* narrative and the Maeshowe inscriptions (Jesch 2013) in addition to references in the inscriptions to an earl and Jerusalem travellers.⁹ For the discussion of what selves are displayed in the Maeshowe inscriptions, the ascription of the inscriptions to Earl Rognvaldr’s followers is not decisive, though assumptions about the origins of the inscriptions sometimes colour my arguments. I will, therefore, give a brief summary of the events as they are described in *Orkneyinga saga*.

We should be circumspect about taking the saga accounts at face value,¹⁰ but according to them, the earls Rognvaldr Kali and Haraldr Maddadarsonr ruled Orkney jointly in the mid-twelfth century. During the winter of 1150–51, Orkney hosted a large group of Norwegians who were ready to embark on the journey to Jerusalem together with Earl Rognvaldr, and the saga tells us that ‘í eyjunum var sveimmikit um vetrinn’ (*Orkneyinga saga* in Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, ch. 85) (there was much racket in the islands that winter)¹¹.

⁹ Earl Rognvaldr was, however, not the only earl of Orkney who was said to have travelled to Jerusalem. Some thirty years prior to Rognvaldr (cf. Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, lxxxv), Earl Hákon Pálssonr is said to have made the same journey. Freund also mentions the possibility that the Jerusalem travellers may have been participants in King Sigurðr jórsalfari’s campaign in 1107–11 (2020, 174).

¹⁰ *Orkneyinga saga* was probably first written down ca. 1200 or in the late 1100’s, though it has, at least in part, later been reworked (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1967; cf. also Jesch 1992; 1996). The extant manuscripts are also considerably younger, the oldest complete example of which is found in the form of additions to *Óláfs saga helga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Flateyjarbók*, written at the end of the fourteenth century (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1967). As the oldest manuscripts are missing, we do not know how much has been reworked, but it is, nevertheless, worth noting that the saga was originally written down less than 50 years after the events in question took place. Although fictionalized, the events are therefore likely to be more accurately retold than events further back in the past.

¹¹ Unless otherwise stated all translations are my own.

When Rognvaldr left for the Holy Land the following summer, he appointed Haraldr to rule over Orkney. In Rognvaldr's absence, several complications arose; the most pressing for us is that a third earl, Erlendr, made his appearance. The son of the former Earl Haraldr 'inn slettmáli' (smooth-tongue) Hákonarsonr, Erlendr had a claim to the earl's title, and Earl Haraldr Maddadarsonr agreed to give away Earl Rognvaldr's half of Orkney if the Norwegian king, Eysteinn, agreed to it. Erlendr visited the king, who instead made Erlendr earl over the half of Orkney belonging to Earl Haraldr. Unsurprisingly, this led to an escalation of the conflict, during which we find the only direct mention of Maeshowe in the saga:

Haraldr jarl byrjaði ferð sína at jólum út í Orkneyjar; hann hafði fjögur skip ok tíu tigu manna; hann lá tvær nætr við Grímsey. Þeir lendu í Hafnarvági í Hrossey. Þeir gengu þaðan inn þrettánda dag jóla í Fjörð. *Þeir váru í Orkahaugi, meðan él dró á; ok órðust þar tveir men fyrir þeim, ok var þeim þat farartálmi mikill. Þá var af nótt, er þeir kómu í Fjörð. (Orkneyinga saga in Finnbogi Guðmunsson 1965, ch. 93. My italics)*

(Earl Haraldr set out for Orkney at Christmas; he had four ships and a hundred men. He lay off Grímsey (Graemsay) for two days. They put in at Hafnarvágr (Stromness) on Hrossey (Mainland). On the thirteenth day of Christmas they travelled on foot over to Fjörðr (Firth). *They were in Orkahaugr (Maeshowe) when a cloud-burst built up; and there two of them went insane, and that hindered their travels badly. It was night-time when they reached Fjörðr.*) (My italics)

This happened shortly after New Year in 1153, almost a year prior to Earl Rognvaldr's return just before Christmas the same year. He returned without his ships, on a merchant ship belonging to an Icelander, and allied himself at first with Earl Erlendr. During the following summer, his ships arrived from Norway, and at this point, he also met with Earl Haraldr and allied himself with him. Half a year later, just before Christmas 1154, Earl Erlendr was killed. This did not completely resolve the tensions in Orkney, but the situation became less tense.

From this account, we know that there were three different earls operating in Orkney during the mid-twelfth century. One of them is said to have visited the mound; the two others may also very well have been there on one or several occasions without the saga mentioning it. In fact, there are indications in the inscriptions that Earl Rognvaldr, or at least some of his men, visited the mound, as two inscriptions (nos 14 and 24) state that 'Jerusalem travellers' and 'Jerusalem men' broke the mound.¹² One of these carvers also refers to herself as *matselja jarls* (the Earl's housekeeper). From the saga account, we know that people were

¹² In the following, I will continue to use the term 'Jerusalem traveller' rather than pilgrim or crusader. As the journey is described in the saga, it has elements of both crusade and pilgrimage while also resembling a classical Viking expedition.

aware of the mound from the time when the events described took place until the saga was written down some decades later, and possibly after that as well. We do not know how long the mound was accessible, though, as at some point it filled up completely with rubble.

It is also relevant to note the geographical background of Earl Rognvaldr and his men. Rognvaldr himself grew up in Agder, Norway, and many of his men were also Norwegians. The evidence we have for the carvers' geographical background is not conclusive but suggests both Orcadian, Norwegian, and Icelandic involvement (Barnes 1994, 41). As the Norwegian runic tradition was thriving at this time, while we have weaker evidence for a strong runic Orcadian tradition and even less evidence for such a tradition in Iceland at this point,¹³ it is tempting to suggest that the Norwegian involvement in the rune carving was considerable. The Icelanders and Orcadians involved, though not necessarily less skilled in runes, might have learned rune carving either during visits to Norway, or through travelling with Norwegians, for instance to Jerusalem. Rognvaldr himself was also a known rune carver (cf. ch. 58 of *Orkneyinga saga*), and assuming that the attribution of the inscriptions to his followers is correct, he may well have been one of the teachers. In sum, the linguistic and runological evidence suggest that the carvers came from various places in the Western sea area, though the degree of skill displayed implies that the Norwegian component was considerable. Additionally, as I will come back to later, there are clear thematic similarities between the Maeshowe inscriptions and inscriptions from various similar locations in Norway. I will assume, therefore, that, in essence, the runic tradition displayed in Maeshowe is heavily influenced by the Norwegian tradition and might even be considered a part of it.

The Timespan

Barnes argues that the longest possible time span for the inscriptions is approximately 50 years, from 1125 to 1175 (1994, 39–40), though he adds that the inscriptions could, in theory, have been carved on a single occasion (1994, 42–43). In my opinion, there are strong indications in the inscriptions that they were carved during a relatively short time span, perhaps on a couple of occasions over a few years. As Barnes points out, the sexual inscriptions seem to indicate that people came and went to the mound for some time (1994, 43) – unless either the sexual inscriptions are pure fantasy or rune carving and sexual acts took place in the mound at the same time.

¹³ But see Hagland 1989 for arguments of the opposite and Þórgunnur Snædal 2011 for fresh evidence which supports him.

Assuming that our written sources (i.e. *Orkneyinga saga* and inscriptions 14 and 24) are not completely misleading, at least a couple of times in the mid-twelfth century, there were several people in the cairn at the same time. It is likely that many, if not all, of the inscriptions were carved on these occasions. The material invites images of carvers entertaining each other by reading aloud previous inscriptions and their own responses to them. We can, of course, not know whether this mental image of the carving process is correct, but oral utterances are likely to have played at least a minor part in the carving process; it is hard to imagine the carvers sitting in complete silence while carving. Indeed, complete silence is also impossible while carving runes, as the act of carving in stone is not a silent action. From this perspective, the Maeshowe inscriptions can be seen as the last remnants of an otherwise oral discourse. If this is correct, it is also reasonable to assume that much information, lost to us today, is inferred in the inscriptions. That this is, indeed, true in some cases, can be seen in inscriptions such as no. 8, which states that *segja fáir sem Oddr Orkasonr sagði á rúnum þeim er hann reist* (few say as Oddr Orkasonr said in those runes which he carved. Barnes 1994, 93). There is, however, no inscription signed by an Oddr Orkasonr, neither in Maeshowe nor elsewhere. The carver saw it as common knowledge which inscription had been carved by Oddr. After all, his/her inscription seems quite pointless if this was not commonly known. From this, we might also assume that all, or most of, the inscriptions were carved in a close-knit community and in a short enough time span for the carvers to know each other and who had carved which inscriptions.

We have several examples that the inscriptions address each other, for instance by building on each other thematically. In inscriptions nos 23–28, cramped together on two adjacent stones in the south-eastern wall, we see how the carvers build up a narrative together by piecing together information – or perhaps rather statements – about the mound itself, its origins and a supposed treasure which was once hidden there:

23

sia · hōuhr · uar · fyr · laþin : hæltr · loþbrokār · syner · hænar //
þæiruōro · huater · slituōro · mæn · sæmþæiruōrofyreser
Sjá haugr var fyrr hlaðinn heldr Loðbrókar. Synir hennar, þeir váru hvatir; slíkt váru menn, sem þeir váru fyrir sér.

This mound was built before Loðbrók's. Her sons, they were bold; such were men, as they were of themselves (i.e., they were the sort of people you would really call men).¹⁴

25

utnorþr : erfe · folhit · mikit

Útmorðr er fé folgit mikit.

In the north-west great treasure is hidden.

28

· qkq̄n̄einb̄arfeyr̄quhipisum

Hákon einn bar fé ór haugi þessum.

Hákon alone carried treasure from this mound.

27

sælersaerfinamaþanq̄hinmikla

Sæll er sá, er finna má þann auð hinn mikla.

Happy is he who can find the great wealth.

26

· þatuarl̄q̄koerheruarf̄folhketmiket

Þat var löngu, er hér var fé folgit mikit.

It was long ago that great treasure was hidden here.

24

iorsalafararbrutuorkq̄uh · lifmtsæiliaiarls // ræist

Jórsalafarar brutu Orkhaug. Hlíf, matselja jarls, reist.

Jerusalem-travellers broke Orkhaugr. Hlíf, the Earl's housekeeper, carved.

On the opposite wall, two more inscriptions also address the rumours of treasure, while another carver repeats the message that Jerusalem travellers broke the mound:

4

þat · man · sat · er (·)

**ek · sæhe · atfe · uar · fōrt · abrot · þrim · notom · uarfe · brōt · fōrt · hæltr · æn
þæir // br(e)h̄q̄h̄(e)na**

Þat mun satt, er ek segi, at fé var fōrt á brott. Þrim nóttum var fé brott fōrt, heldr en þeir bryti haug þenna.

¹⁴ Bold typeface is used for a transliteration of the runes, italics give a normalization, and roman typeface gives the English translation. ˘ indicates that two runes are written together as a ligature, // is used for line breaks while / indicates that one or more runes are inserted above or below, parentheses indicate uncertain runes or interpretations, angle brackets are used in the transliteration to denote cryptic runes, square brackets are used in the normalization to denote an uncertain word form which is not normalized, - indicates an unidentified rune, and · and : denote separation marks with one and two dots respectively. Spaces are only used in transliterations where they are used in the inscriptions. Where the runes are too damaged to be read, this is indicated by an ellipsis: ... The inscriptions are given in the order of carving suggested by Barnes (1994, 171–74). The transliterations, normalizations, and translations are based upon the corpus editions and *Sammordisk runtextdatabas*, but are corrected or updated in some instances.

That will be true which I say, that treasure was carried away. Treasure was carried away three nights before they broke this mound.

8

...h(a)-rm-r(s)--t(a)tf--r--rf-l--t-r-(t)u(i)lsæhíaf--rsom(o)tr //

orkasonrsahþiarunompæimirhanrist-

... er mér sagt at fé er hér folgit órit vel. Segja fáir sem Oddr Orkasonr sagði á rúnum þeim er hann reist.

...(adverb?) is told to me that treasure is hidden here well enough. Few say as Oddr Orkasonr said in those runes which he carved.

14

iorsalaminburtuhaukþ(æ)--

Jórsalamenn brutu haug þenna.

Jerusalem men broke this mound.

Thus, we see how topics are repeated across the mound. And although the topics in the inscriptions tend to cluster, as is for instance seen above in nos 23–28, the carvers seem aware of what was carved in other parts of the mound as well.

The carvers' self-presentation

We have seen from the above that the carvers relate to each other and that the inscriptions were probably carved in a social environment where most of the carvers knew each other. Thus, we have a practice in which the carver had a very specific group of readers in mind: his peers. The peers were, moreover, also participants in the practice as carvers, so here we can observe a practice in which each individual both participates as an agent and as part of the larger social group establishing the norms that each agent relates to. When agents enter into the practice, they also relate to it cognitively, blending their sense of self with the different selves created in the practice. In the inscription strand cited above, which relates to adventures and treasure, the carvers create a practice in which they relate themselves to the stories told and portray themselves as adventurous and bold; they bring forth their adventurous self. The adventurous self is a cognitive construction in each carver's mind, created when the carver partakes in the practice. The stories told are blended with the carver's sense of self when s/he chooses to participate in this specific practice. At the same time, each new carver adds a layer of meaning to the practice for the proceeding carvers to blend with.

Several carvers state explicitly who they are. Of the twenty-seven inscriptions which can be interpreted with certainty, fourteen identify the carver. Three of these consist only of a name (though one adds a byname), six are agent inscriptions ('X (+ patronymic/byname) carved (runes)'), and five identify the carver while also adding more information. In addition, the four inscriptions with an uncertain interpretation are probably less literate or damaged name and agent inscriptions. Counting these, almost two thirds of the inscriptions identify the carver. This is, of course, given that the name inscriptions all give the name of the carver. This is often assumed, but it does not have to be the case in all instances.

Some of the carvers also add a byname, and these often seem to comment on personal characteristics of the carvers, such as Arnfiðr *matr* (food) in inscription no. 18. Exactly what the inscription refers to is uncertain, but Arnfiðr is presumably fond of food – either of cooking it, eating it, or perhaps both. Several of the carvers' bynames are difficult to interpret (nos 3, 7, 13, and 19), particularly as we know so little about the carvers other than their names. However, most of them seem to be connected to personal characteristics rather than social status. The exception is Hlíf (no. 24), who identifies herself as *matselja jarls* (the Earl's housekeeper). What is interesting is that the carvers seem to identify with these bynames as they have chosen to use them themselves. Though they are difficult to interpret today, the use of bynames indicates that at least some carvers took to their bynames and identified with them.

Moreover, three carvers identify people in the mound (though not necessarily themselves) with a given group. Two of these (14 and 24) are cited above and state that Jerusalem men or Jerusalem travellers broke into the mound. These inscriptions are probably best understood as a claim that the Jerusalem travellers were the first to enter the cave, thus claiming some form of ownership to it. If this interpretation is correct, the carver is likely to be part of the group or closely affiliated to it. The last of the three inscriptions, no. 1, has an uncertain interpretation:

þatiruiķiķkr ... -aķomutirhirtil

Þat er vīķingr/Vīķingr ... (þá) kom undir hér til.

That is a viking/Vīķingr ... (then) came underneath to this place.

The middle part of the inscription is missing, which makes it difficult to interpret the rest with certainty, but the sequence **uiķiķkr** can only have two possible interpretations: either it is a name, or it is a common noun identifying the person in question (either the carver or someone

else) as a Viking.¹⁵ The name is well documented both in runic inscriptions (Peterson 2007, 255) and in medieval manuscripts from Norway (Lind 1905, cols 1105–07). It is also well documented that the common noun *vikingr* was in use in the Middle Ages. Although the Christianization of Scandinavia is usually considered the end of the Viking Age, Viking expeditions did not stop until a couple of centuries later. *Orkneyinga saga*, for instance, reports that Sveinn Ásleifarsonr regularly travelled on Viking expeditions from Orkney, and he met his death on the last of them, possibly in 1171 (*Orkneyinga saga* in Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, 286, n. 4). The noun *vikingr* is found with the meaning ‘pirate’ or ‘robber’ in manuscripts throughout the Middle Ages (cf. *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*). In the earliest Scandinavian sources, runic inscriptions and skaldic poetry, the use of the word as a common noun is always in plural, indicating that Vikings were typically seen as groups of people, and their activities are generally of a military nature and often associated with the sea (Jesch 2015, 6). Thus, it is likely that the carver of this inscription – if using *vikingr* as a common noun – had in mind a picture of a member of a violent and sea-faring group. It is possible that the carver claimed that he himself, or another person in the mound, had taken part in a Viking expedition. It could even be that the trip to Jerusalem was seen by this particular carver as a Viking expedition. After all, the travellers did not only visit Jerusalem to pray and swim in the River Jordan (ch. 88); according to the saga (e.g. ch. 87), they also plundered villages on their way there. In sum, all the inscriptions which say anything about the carvers’ group identity connect them to adventurous expeditions which could give status and wealth. This does not mean that all of the carvers had been on such expeditions, but, as we have seen, adventures and treasure are popular topics among the carvers in the mound.

The other inscriptions addressing adventures and treasure are already cited in the section above on the historical background and dating of the inscriptions, then as an example of social interaction between the carvers. Counting the inscriptions concerning the mound and the treasure, ten inscriptions can be said to thematize the mound itself, the breaking or entering into it and the treasure supposed to have been hidden there (nos 1, 4, 8, 14, 23–28).¹⁶ Almost one third of the inscriptions in the mound relate to these topics, and the carvers saw Maeshowe as a mystery to be solved and a topic for good stories. By referring to themselves

¹⁵ See also Jesch 2017 on the interpretation of this inscription. She favours the name interpretation.

¹⁶ In these numbers, I have counted inscription no. 1, which tells us something about someone entering the mound, but I have not counted no. 9, which also concerns someone entering. This inscription carries sexual connotations, and I will come back to the interpretation of it when I discuss the other sexual inscriptions.

as Jerusalem travellers, the carvers also underline their own identity as adventurers and explorers. Thus, the carving practices in Maeshowe open the way for the carvers to develop and display an adventurous self. However, these are also the inscriptions where the carvers most clearly show how they interact with each other. In addition to the thematic interaction, where the carvers build on each other's inscriptions, we also have two instances where someone seems to have deliberately tried to remove part of the inscription by crossing it out. We see this in inscriptions 4, where deep cuts run through **fe · u(a)r · ført · a** 'treasure was carried a-' (see fig. 2), and 8, where there is a deliberate crossing out of four runes, **-l--**, which, if reconstructed correctly by Barnes (1994, 93), form part of the word *folgit* (hidden). It does not seem like the inscriptions contain any information worth concealing – inscription 8, for instance, states that treasure *was* hidden in the mound, but it does not give any information on the present location of the treasure – but this crossing out can be seen as a continuation of the discourse where someone decided to remove part of the inscriptions to keep the treasure a secret. Alternatively, the hiding of the word 'hidden' may also be a way of visually playing with the text.

The carvers were not only interested in treasures and adventure. Four inscriptions are either explicitly or implicitly referring to sex or desire:

9

ingibiorh · hinfahra · æhkia //
mørhk · kona · hæfer · faret · lu(t)inhermihgiloflate // <ærlikr>
Ingibjörg, hin fagra ekkja. Mörg kona hefir farit lút inn hér. Mikill ofláti. Erlingr.
 Ingibjörg, the fair widow. Many a wife has gone stooping in here. A great show-off.
 Erlingr

10

þornysarþ // hælderæist
Þorný sarð. Helgi reist.
 Þorný fucked. Helgi carved.

21

igikærþirkynænainuænsta
Ingigerðr er [kynæna] in vænsta.
 Ingigerðr is the most beautiful (woman).

6

fuporkhniastbynu

Of these, no. 21 is, perhaps, the most innocent, a testimony of love or desire rather than sex. No. 6 (see fig. 3) could also be completely innocent, a simple rune row with some mistakes at the end, though it is a well-known fact that the rune row begins with the three runes **fup**, meaning ‘cunt’. What is more, someone has drawn some fine, vertical lines between or underneath some of the runes; in Barnes’ counting there are six to eight such lines, and he prefers the following reading: **fup|o|r|k|hni|ast|by|nu**. The first of these lines singles out the first three runes: **fup**. Barnes suggests that by reading every second sequence of singled-out runes, one can find the exclamation *fuð ok ást nú* (cunt and love now) (1994, 81), though he admits that ‘it must be a prime candidate for the designation “far-fetched”’ (1994, 81). His interpretation is a tempting one, but upon closer scrutiny of the lines, one sees that the line dividing the **k** from the **h** is in fact very short and located directly underneath the **h**. The lines dividing **t** and **b**, **y** and **n**, are also located directly underneath **b** and **y** respectively and are, in fact, a prolongation of the stave of these runes. If a carver wanted to suggest the reading *fuð ok ást nú*, he could have done it more plainly had he drawn the lines between the runes instead of underneath them. It is also worth mentioning, though I am uncertain what bearing this could have on the interpretation, that the final three runes, **𐌿𐌿𐌺 ynu**, are very similar in shape to the expected ending of the *fupark*: **mly** **𐌿𐌿𐌺**.¹⁷ Barnes also notes this similarity but finds it probable that the *fupark* ending was unintentionally flawed as this is very common (1994, 80). However, this would, as we will see, not be the only carver in Maeshowe to employ his rune carving skills in a highly conscious and ingenious way to add layers of interpretation to his inscription. But whatever conclusions one chooses to draw from the vertical lines and the corrupted ending of the *fupark*, the first three runes are clearly singled out, and this is likely to be more than a mere coincidence.¹⁸

Inscription 10 is explicitly sexual, though whether Helgi was the lucky partner of Porný, a mere observer, or simply the one to spread the rumours of the act in written form remains unknown. The inscription may also be read as derogatory on Helgi’s part. Freund suggests that the inscription may be a reference to the Eddic poem *The Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani*, where a Valkyrie instigates sexual intercourse with King Helgi (2020, 197–

¹⁷ Generally in Maeshowe we would expect **𐌿** for **y**, but **𐌿** is also a possible realization of **y**, and graphically it is much closer to the form actually present in the inscription: **𐌿**.

¹⁸ Neither is this the only carver to have seen the sexual potential in the *fupark* (cf. Seim 1997; 1998, 265–74).

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Kommentert [HK3]: The footnote has three special characters with the font Gullskoen:
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99). Such an interpretation could, Freund argues, be read as empowering for the woman, Porný (2020, 198). Erlingr's role in inscription 9 is also somewhat obscure. He could be a womanizer, taking on all the women who come stooping into the mound, though at the same time, his final addition, *mikill ofláti* (a great show-off) sounds slightly condescending. Could he also be a mere observer? In any case, the inscriptions hint that more things were going on in the cairn than rune-carving. The inscriptions may testify to actual observations made by the carvers; alternatively, they could be rumours. Seeing as the treasure inscriptions are, in all likelihood, based on rumours and imagination, it is not impossible that the sexual inscriptions also have a basis in storytelling. What the inscriptions testify beyond doubt, however, is the carvers' interest in sex. The topic was probably just as popular then as it is now.

It is worth noticing, moreover, that we have one, possibly two, named female carvers in Maeshowe, and that all the women mentioned in Maeshowe carry Norse names, indicating that they probably belonged to the same social sphere as the male carvers. We do not know who the 'stooping women' were, and whether they came into Maeshowe willingly or by force. Neither do we know whether women participated in the carving of the sexual inscriptions. But we do know that Maeshowe was not an exclusively male sphere, and that women were also participants in at least some of the discourses there. Moreover, one of the sexual inscriptions, no. 10, portray a woman as active, possibly also comparing her to a Valkyrie, while inscription 9 has a somewhat more disdainful tone. Thus, while all of the inscriptions cited above reveal an interest in sex, the approaches vary both in the carvers' willingness to be explicit and in the views they express on especially the female sexual partners.

Another rune-carving practice in the mound was devoted to the demonstration of rune carving skills. This is most clearly seen in inscription no. 20:¹⁹

<þisarrunar> // ristsa<m>ap̄r · er · runstrer · fyrir // uæstanhaf

¹⁹ The inscription is divided in two, and it is not obvious that the two parts belong together because inscription 19 is, in fact, located between them. Barnes makes a good case for reading them together (1994, 144–47), but I am not entirely convinced. For the present discussion, however, this has no great bearing. Either, we have one carver making two bold statements or two carvers making one bold statement each. If the two parts are not seen as one entity, the axe of Gaukr Trandilssonr need not be a carving implement. Given that the second part is a continuation of one of the inscriptions in the mound, it is likely to be the continuation of one of the 'X carved' inscriptions, of which we have three nearby. However, given my argument that the inscriptions are a written part of an otherwise oral discourse, this could be a written emphasis of a statement uttered orally. The oral statement could, for instance, refer to a killing, namely one performed with the axe that Gaukr Trandilssonr owned, and the inscription would, in that case, underline the uniqueness of the killing implement. This is a neat solution to the discussion of whether or not the carver would actually be willing to use a family heirloom for rune carving (cf. the discussion in Barnes 1994, 156–57), an activity which would undoubtedly blunt it, though it does also open up a range of new questions and problems, many of which are unanswerable today.

Pessar rúnar reist sá maðr, er rúnstr er fyrir vestan haf,
That man who is most rune-skilled west of the sea carved these runes

mæþ · þæiriøhse · erate · kþukr · trænilsonrfyrir · sunanlant
með þeiri øxi, er átti Gaukr Trandilssonr fyrir sunnan land.
with that axe which Gaukr Trandilssonr owned in the south of the country (= Iceland).

The carver proves his statement by carving the first two words and the **m**-rune in *maðr* with binary runes (see fig. 4). The binary **m**-rune is particularly clever: the binary **m** and the ordinary **m** are very similar in form, the only difference being two more branches on the right-hand side of the stave. By employing the binary variant in a word otherwise spelled with ordinary runes, the carver points out this similarity for the reader and adds both a didactic element and an embellishment. Furthermore, the inscription is carved in what Barnes terms ‘rough-and-ready verse’ (Barnes 1994, 155),²⁰ which serves to further demonstrate that the carver is a man of words. Not only is the carver proud of his rune carving skills, he also claims to use a very special carving implement:²¹ the axe of Gaukr Trandilssonr. Gaukr is known from several medieval sources, and he is even supposed to have had his own saga which is now lost (Jón Helgason 1939). In the extant sources, however, he is only ever mentioned briefly. In *Brennu-Njáls saga* he is mentioned in connection with Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, Gaukr’s foster brother and also his killer. It is said of Gaukr that he was ‘fróknast maðr hefir verit ok bezt at sér gørr’ (*Brennu-Njáls saga* in Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 72) (the bravest man who has ever been, and the most able). In *Íslendingadrápa* verse 19, line 5–8, Gaukr is described as a warrior:

ok geirraddar gladdi
Gaukr Trandilssonr hauka,
geig vann heldr at hjaldri
hann ófáum manni. (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, 543)²²

(Gaukr Trandilssonr gladdened the hawks of the spear voices (= ravens), he caused harm to many a man in battle.)

²⁰ There has been some discussion about whether the inscription is actually metrical. After a systematic investigation of the metrical characteristics of the inscription, Jana Krüger and Vivian Busch conclude that it is and that it employs some poetic effects (2017).

²¹ Barnes discusses the veracity of the claim that the inscription was carved with Gaukr’s axe and concludes that, although not impossible, it is unlikely (1994, 156–57). The factuality of this claim is, however, of lesser importance to the present argument.

²² The normalization is slightly altered to fit the normalization found in the rest of the article.

It is clear both from the references to him in the *Íslendingadrápa*, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, and inscription 20 that Gaukr was known as a brave fighter. By tying himself to Gaukr through his axe, the carver evokes a picture of himself as a fighter of Gaukr's calibre and in his spirit.

It can be contended that at least three other inscriptions have arisen from the same practice. One is already cited: in inscription 9, Erlingr signs his inscription with binary runes. Thus, the comment *mikill ofláti* (a great show-off) could be read as a double reference both to the rune carving practices in the mound and to the women coming stooping into it.

The final two inscriptions displaying *mikill ofláti* are 2 and 15. Of the two, Maeshowe 15 bears the closest resemblance to the two inscriptions discussed above. This inscription also employs a cryptic rune system, although one which is somewhat rarer than the binary system. The system is what K. Jonas Nordby terms simple substitution ('enkel substitusjon', Nordby 2018, 116–24), and the rune shapes in Maeshowe 15 are found only in that inscription (see fig. 5). The first one to interpret the inscription was Magnus Olsen, who saw that there were some recurring shapes and some ordinary rune forms in the inscription, and that these were compatible with the 'X carved' formula (1903), which is popular both in Maeshowe and elsewhere. Thus, Olsen suggested that the rune shapes in the inscription are substitutions for the following (1903, 11):

<tryhrræistrunarþesar>
Tryggr reist rúnar þessar.
Tryggr carved these runes.

Olsen's interpretation is generally accepted, though Barnes expresses some well-grounded hesitation in accepting the interpretation of the name (1994, 120–21). But whether the carver was named Tryggr or not, he was certainly a skilled rune carver playing with rune shapes. He took part in the rune carving practice of Maeshowe by carving an inscription with a runic system that very few can have known – perhaps it was even self-invented. This allows an exploration of how much you can alter rune shapes without rendering the inscription completely illegible.

In Maeshowe 2, the carver states that

Þólfrrkólþæinssonrræestrúnarþesarhaut
Eyjulfr/Þólfrr Kolbeinssonr reist rúnar þessar hátt.
Eyjulfr/Þólfrr Kolbeinssonr carved these runes high.

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And the inscription is, indeed, carved high up on the wall, 304 centimetres above the floor (Barnes 1994, 64). Barnes suggests, with reference to a drawing in a humoristic article by Aslak Liestøl (1967), that the carver could have been standing on someone's shoulders or alternatively could have reached the location using a rope from a hole in the roof (Barnes 1994, 67). The statement might seem pointless, particularly as it is not easy to see the inscription from the floor, so any reader must have been just as athletic as the carver. The inscription can be read as a simple statement of the carver's presence in the room, but it may also be read as another way of challenging the reader. Several inscriptions challenge the reader intellectually to interpret the inscription. For instance, the cryptic inscriptions mentioned above, nos 2, 9, and 20, all challenge the reader's intellect, although only indirectly: 'think, and you will decipher me'. This is a physical response: 'climb, and you can read me'. In addition to the physical challenge, though, the carver has added proof of his skills with runes: the inscription opens with a rare rune which shows that the carver had firm knowledge of the runic system. Above, the rune is not transliterated as we do not know the sound value of the rune in this inscription. Barnes suggests that it is meant to render the diphthong *ey* (1994, 49–52), but it could equally well be a mirrored **p**-rune. Both would give us names which were common in Scandinavia in the Middle Ages: Þólfr or Eyufr (cf. Lind 1905, cols 247–49; 1133–34).²³ Reading the rune as a diphthong is justified by the fact that Óláfr hvítaskáld claims that the rune can be used for *ey* in the *Third Grammatical Treatise* (Barnes 1994, 49). In the medieval runic tradition, however, diphthongs are usually denoted by two runes, and although several new runes are created in the Middle Ages, there is no tradition for creating runes to denote diphthongs. Alternatively, it could be read as an **e** rune; similar-looking pocketed **e**-runes are found in several Greenlandic inscriptions (GR 1, GR 34, GR 51, GR 92 and GR NOR1998;10).²⁴ Here, however, there are several other **e**-runes, all of which are dotted. It is possible that the carver chose an allographic **e**-variant with pockets as an embellishment to his inscription. The spelling **eo**lfr for the name Eyufr is also known from another medieval inscription, N 688²⁵ from Bergen.

The inscriptions nos 2, 9, 15, and 20 attest to an active engagement with runic script itself: epigraphy was not only a medium with which the carvers could express themselves, it

²³ But note that while Eyufr was most commonly used in Iceland (Lind 1905, col. 249), Þólfr was more common in Denmark and Sweden (Lind 1905., col. 1134). Neither Icelandic nor Danish or Swedish involvement in Maeshowe is unlikely.

²⁴ GR + number refers to runic inscriptions of Greenland, the most recent and comprehensive study of which is Imer 2017. The signums are the ones used in the *Scandinavian Runic Text Database*.

²⁵ N + number = inscription from Norway published in NlyR.

was also a tool for playing and a skill in which many carvers took great pride. This is not only attested in Maeshowe; K. Jonas Nordby's investigation into cryptic runes show how playing with runes was common throughout Scandinavia, and it served an important didactic role for those learning how to use runes (2018). Thus, the cryptic runes were probably well known amongst most of those who were skilled in runes, and the use of cryptic runes must be considered playing or riddle-making rather than an act of concealing information. This is seen clearly in the four inscriptions discussed above, but we also have several other carver's signatures following the 'X carved' formula which could be said to partake in the same practice, where rune carving was the objective in itself. Moreover, some inscriptions have one or two embellished runes, showing that several carvers were attentive to how their inscriptions appeared visually. All of these inscriptions, both those which display a considerable attention to rune carving and those which thematize carving more implicitly through the use of embellished runes and carver's formulas, arise from a carving practice where the carving of runes is an aim in itself. This practice is a varied one, allowing for simple attestations of rune carving as well as bold displays of runic competence and intricate explorations of the runic script system.

By participating in this practice, the carvers blend their sense of self with their rune carving skills, thereby assigning rune carving to their identity. This is done in many ways. Runic skills are a key to participating socially in the rune carving practices, and thus, the skill may give a sense of social belonging. At the same time, it is also practically useful. In a society where not everyone was literate, individuals skilled in runes could be a resource to their peers, making runic literacy a skill that carvers could take pride in. In Maeshowe, moreover, the carvers are not only interested in belonging to the group and showing pride in their skills, they also compete to show who was the most skilled. In sum, the sense of self which arises from this practice is both communal and individual: the community of carvers see rune carving as an important skill, and here, it is also the key to participation, but each carver assigns the skill to his/her identity in their own way.

Finally in this section, I will turn to a group of inscriptions which indicate that the carvers were also aware of their membership in a Christian society. There are no explicitly religious inscriptions such as prayers in Maeshowe, but we find several Christian symbols. These can be viewed as mere ornaments, but the fact that the ornaments chosen have strong Christian connotations attests to the fact that the carvers were members of a Christian society and that many, perhaps all of them, saw Christianity as part of their identity. The most conspicuous inscription is no. 17, which is mostly defaced today. The text in itself follows the

standard carver's formula; it states that Óframr Sigurðarsonr carved these runes (ræistrunarþæs(a)r // oframrsihurþarsonr). It is the visual appearance of the inscription which is remarkable (see fig. 6). Surrounding the runes are six crosses, and there is an additional cross between the two lines of runes. Moreover, the **h** rune, which normally consists of a stave with two crossing branches, is embellished so that it has three crossing branches: one slanting upwards, one downwards, and a final horizontal branch. The **h** rune has a cross-like shape, and is also strikingly similar to the Christogram where I and X are combined (cf. Olsen in NIyR vol. 4, 117; Liestøl 1948, 67–68). Embellishing the **h** rune could therefore be a way of emphasising its Christian connotations. Inscription 17 is not the only inscription in which the **h** is embellished; embellished **h** runes are also found in inscriptions 15 (fig. 7) and 20 (fig. 8), both of which are discussed above. In inscription 15, the **h** is one of the few non-ciphered runes in the inscription; in inscription 20, the **h** is the only embellished rune except for the binary runes also found in the inscription. By embellishing the **h** rune in these two inscriptions, the carvers seemingly show an awareness of the religious connotations that the rune shape carries, and they implicitly mark their belonging to the Christian community. That this is done three times in the mound demonstrates how the carvers in Maeshowe shaped the carving practice within the mound: one carver made an embellished **h**, and other carvers picked up the idea and brought it into the practice.

There are also a few other minor indications of the carvers' religious affiliations in the mound. A curious case is inscription 22, where Benedict claims to have carved *kross þenna* (this cross). There is no cross in the vicinity of the inscription, however, so what Benedict refers to is uncertain; perhaps he intended to carve a cross after the inscription but was distracted or prevented from doing it. In any case, the inscription can be plausibly interpreted as a religious reference. There are also several carved crosses in the mound which are not directly connected to any runic inscription. One of these crosses is very deeply cut, and it is located just inside the entrance, above inscription 3. The force and time which must have been used to carve such a deep cross indicate that this is not carved on a whim; it is also slightly reminiscent of consecration crosses found in churches. I do not mean to suggest that the carver wished to consecrate Maeshowe, but the crosses could, perhaps, be seen as an imitation of a consecration cross. Liestøl writes about these crosses that 'til trods for de fändenivoldske indskrifter har flere set sit snit til at indskære et kristent kors for at sikre sig. En har tilmed signeret det "Benedikt gjorde dette kors". Enhver kan føle sig beklemt sådan et sted' (1967, 25) (Despite the devil-may-care inscriptions, several have taken the opportunity to carve a Christian cross to safeguard themselves. One has even signed it 'Benedict made this cross').

Anyone can feel uneasy in such a place.) Liestøl sees these crosses as a reaction to the runic inscriptions, and that may well be, but they can also be read as parallel assertions of identity which do not express disapproval of the inscriptions as such. As stated earlier in the article, the self is complex and fluid, and never fixed. By carving a cross, the carver expressed some of this complexity, as if to say that s-/he was not only an adventurer but also a Christian.

Finally, two inscriptions, nos 14 and 24, refer to people in the mound as ‘Jerusalem men’ and ‘Jerusalem travellers’. We do not know whether these inscriptions were carved by Earl Rognvaldr’s men themselves as the inscriptions do not state this explicitly, but it seems likely. As I have argued above, the runic competence displayed indicates that Earl Rognvaldr’s followers, or another group with similar connections to Norwegian runic culture, were heavily involved in the rune carving in Maeshowe. Moreover, Hlíf (no. 24) identifies herself as the Earl’s housekeeper, and as she also refers to Jerusalem travellers, it is natural to assume that the earl in question was the one associated with the journey to Jerusalem. There are too many inscriptions in the mound which take uncarved information for granted to draw any final conclusions, but if we assume that the references to Jerusalem were made by the Jerusalem travellers themselves, we see that the carvers identified with the journey and took pride in having accomplished it. And it is no wonder that they did; according to *Orkneyinga saga*, ‘varð þessi ferð in frægsta, ok þóttu þeir allir miklu meira háttar menn síðan, er farit höfðu’ (ch. 89) (This journey became very famous, and all of those who had travelled were considered all the greater.) As noted above, the journey might not have been perceived as an entirely religious achievement; the saga, for instance, highlights the many battles the travellers took part in, while their religious acts on the journey are only briefly described. In the Maeshowe context, what triggered the carvers cognitively to mention the Jerusalem travel was the association with treasures and adventure. The references to the journey emphasise the carvers’ own participation in adventurous journeys and thus connect them to the stories told in the mound.

In none of the inscriptions with religious associations do the carvers display a strong belief in and devotion to God, and neither do we have any prayer inscriptions, although these types of inscriptions are common both in church graffiti and in the rune stick material. In Maeshowe, the Christian symbols mostly seem like identity markers, showing the reader that the carver belonged in a Christian society. This is in compliance with what seems to be the general non-ecclesiastical graffiti practice, which I will turn to below.

The Selves in Maeshowe

As we have seen, the inscriptions in Maeshowe touch upon a number of different themes, and each theme could be said to represent different sub-practices in Maeshowe. By choosing to adhere to one of the sub-practices, the carvers cognitively tie their sense of self to that practice. Thus, the carvers who participate in the storytelling practice display a storytelling and treasure-hunting self, the carvers who explore the sexual undertones in the inscriptions display a sexual or erotic self, and so forth. However, the participation in the practice is also important in itself. For some carvers, it may even have been more important than the given topic of discussion within the practice; the topic of the inscriptions is only important insofar as it gives the carvers an opportunity to form a group identity around it.²⁶

This group identity could be termed a 'social self'. Not, perhaps, a 'social self' in the way David Gary Shaw uses the term, as a self in society as opposed to a private self (2005), or 'a bundle of perceptions held about an individual by a social world' (2005, 15). Rather, I use the term to describe a self wishing to relate and connect to other selves, a self willing to adapt to receive acceptance from the group. Here, we also see very clearly the relation between cognition and practice: the wish to relate to others is cognitive; the way the individual expresses this wish, however, is through participating in the practice. Thus, we see the individual consciously entering into and partaking in the practice. At the same time, to be able to fully partake in the practice, the individual must give up at least the most extreme aspects of his or her own individuality.

At the same time, some of the rune carving practices in Maeshowe allow for stronger expressions of individuality. We see this in the four inscriptions I have characterized as sexual. All of these carvers do, in one way or another, explore the sexual undertones and overtones of their inscriptions, but they do it in very different ways: one underlines the female genitals when they appear in a *fupark*, one hints at several instances of sexual intercourse in the mound, another refers to it explicitly, while the fourth declares which woman is the most beautiful. The carvers tell very different stories of how they relate to sex. The *fupark* carver has a juvenile approach to it, comparable, perhaps, to that age when Norwegian children discover the phonological similarity between the number 'six' (*seks*) and 'sex', and both words for a brief time become taboo. Meanwhile, the inscriptions of Helgi and Erlingr show

²⁶ This is also pointed out by Freund, who notes that several of the carvers refer to events and narratives using keywords. Freund notes that this use of keywords permits the carvers to show that they share narratives and are part of the same social group (2020, 237).

not only a fascination for sex but also for gossip and rumours, or perhaps for showing off one's own sexual achievements.

The individualistic aspect is even clearer in the rune carving inscriptions. This sub-practice is not only open for original expressions; it demands it. The carvers compete to demonstrate their rune-carving skills, and in such a practice, a mere copying of others does not suffice. We also see that this practice transmits to inscriptions wherein rune carving is not explicitly thematized. Erlingr, who hints at the many sexual acts which have taken place in Maeshowe, carves his name in binary runes, proving that he is not only well informed of what takes place in Maeshowe, he is also a skilled carver. Still, the emphasis on individuality does not require that the carver make compromises on the social aspect. By competing to be the best rune carver, the carvers also relate to each other socially. They create a practice in which they can come together as skilled rune carvers, and in which they find room for cognitively tying their skills to their self.

In sum, the carvers orient themselves towards the community of carvers, although the practice in Maeshowe gives them great freedom in how to do this, and in how much individualism they want to express. The Maeshowe practices invite participation in many forms, allowing the carvers a range of choices. As a result, some carvers display their adventurous or storytelling self, while others demonstrate an awareness of themselves as rune carvers, and yet others show a more sexual side of themselves. At the same time, all of them relate to the community and display a social self.

Maeshowe – A Unique Case with Unique Selves?

I have stated that Maeshowe is unique. Freund, moreover, calls Maeshowe a 'transgressive space', and states that it is a place where 'norms can be broken' (2020, 197). There are other non-ecclesiastical sites with medieval graffiti inscriptions, both in Norway and in the British Isles, however. Here, I will briefly turn to eight of these to show how the Maeshowe inscriptions relate to inscriptions from similar contexts. By making this comparison, I aim to demonstrate that Maeshowe is not a place where norms are broken, but rather a place wherein the dominant norms are different from those we normally observe in sagas and runic inscriptions. First, I will discuss Skrivarberget/Ystines, the Hennøy and Hjelmeset stones in Nordfjord, Storhedder in Aust-Agder and St Molaise's cave in Holy Isle, Scotland. These are some of the larger collections of non-ecclesiastical graffiti, though there are other locations as well with one or very few inscriptions. In addition, I will discuss two *lofts*: Vindlausloftet and

Finnesloftet. These differ markedly from the former in that they are farm buildings rather than rock faces, stones, and caves, and though the material is too small to draw firm conclusions, they add interesting perspectives to what we can expect to find, or not find, in graffiti in non-ecclesiastical settings.

Ystines in Stjørdal, Nord-Trøndelag, is a so-called *skrivarberg* (carver's rock), a rock face on which six runic inscriptions, and several post-medieval graffiti inscriptions, are carved. The rock-face is quite inaccessible, located as it is on a steep hillside, but it has a good view over the valley underneath, and this view might be the reason that this particular rock face was chosen for carving: if the interpretation in NIyR of the longest inscription (N 519) is correct,²⁷ the wall, or perhaps the large stone in front of it, was once used as a boundary mark between two farms. The reading of the runic inscriptions is sometimes difficult, which results in several problematic interpretations, but there are seemingly two carvers' signatures (N 519, N 523). I will recite two other inscriptions, however, both of which have a clear thematic connection to Maeshowe:²⁸

N 521

undiraustanu(æ)rþreorfergulg-(y)--niualna(n)iþr

Undir austanverðri horfer gull (geymt) nú alna niðr.

Under the eastern corner is gold (hidden) nine ells down.

N 524

hererfēfolgetuntirst-niþess(u)m

Hér er fé folgit undir steini þessum.

Here is wealth hidden under this stone.

Even more intriguing, the interest in treasures can also be found in two other locations with non-ecclesiastical graffiti, on stones at Hennøy and Hjelmeset in Nordfjord, Sogn og Fjordane:

N 422

²⁷ And this should not be taken for granted; the interpretation was, for instance, debated at the 31st International Field Runologist Meeting in Trondheim 20–23 September 2018.

²⁸ The inscriptions are recited as they are rendered in NIyR. Today, the inscriptions are partly covered by lichen, which seems to have appeared sometime after Aslak Liestøl inspected and photographed the runes, as the lichen is neither commented upon nor is visible in the pictures in NIyR. The lichen complicates the reading of some of the runes, particularly in N 524. I personally examined the runes on 14 February 2018, and though I could not find anything which contradicted Liestøl's reading, I would probably not have been able to find all the runes today without Liestøl's drawing at hand.

her : lago þeir men er komo af // risa /lade/ með loþnu skipi af (g)ulli // ok þat er i þesum steini

Hér lágu þeir menn, er kómu af Risalandi með hlöðnu skipi af gulli. Ok þat er í þessum steini.

Here lay those men who came from Risaland with ships laden with gold. And that is in this stone.

N 425

ræist : ramr : iotun · run(a)r

Reist rammr jotunn rúnar.

The strong giant carved runes.

N 430

h(er) (e)r gull ok uilur un(d)ir

Hér er gull ok villur undir.

Underneath here is gold and magic.

In total, the Nordfjord stones hold twelve inscriptions, of which nine are interpreted. It is impossible to give a precise dating of the inscriptions, but most of them could be contemporary to Maeshowe. Of the nine interpretable inscriptions, three are shown above, and the remaining six inscriptions are names and carver's signatures where the carvers are seemingly men rather than mythological creatures, as seen in N 425 above. As in Maeshowe, the supposed treasures in Nordfjord are connected to mythology and stories, but the carvers here seem to go one step further and connect the treasure to magic as well. Moreover, all of the inscriptions relate to the landscape in which they are placed. Both of the Nordfjord stones are located along the coastline, and the Hjelmeset stone is visible from some distance. The same applies to Maeshowe, which is located in an otherwise flat landscape, and, as noted above, Ystines also holds a prominent position in the landscape. Such locations may have tempted the storytellers' imagination, and we see here reflections of stories which were connected to markers in the landscape. Thus, these four locations are remnants of a culture in which fairy-tale and landscape are interwoven, and they attest to the interest people held in adventures and mystery both in Maeshowe and Norway.

We find gold or treasure mentioned a couple of times on rune sticks as well, although here, there is no reference to any specific hiding place for the treasure (e.g. N B56: *Ráð þú fé, fimbul ...* (interpret for wealth, great-...)).²⁹ Some rune stones also mention treasure. In this

²⁹ N B + number = inscription from Bergen which is not yet published but which is preliminarily registered in the Runic Archives at the University of Oslo.

context, the treasure is connected to the deceased's achievements, and serves to emphasise his achievements (e.g. Sö 179: *Tóla lét reisa stein þenna at son sinn Harald, bróður Ingvars. Þeir fóru drengila fjarri at gulli ok austarla erni gáfu, dóu sunnarla á Serklandi.* (Tóla had this stone raised in memory of her son Haraldr, Ingvarr's brother. They travelled valiantly far for gold and in the east gave (food) to the eagle. (They) died in the south in Serkland. *Scandinavian Runic Text Database*)).³⁰ Although the interest in treasure is visible in other inscription types as well, the concrete connection between landscape, adventure, and hidden treasure seems to be unique to the non-ecclesiastical graffiti.³¹

The Storhedder inscriptions, as those of Ystines, are carved into a rock face. Located in the mountains near a cave used by hunters, it is, moreover, far away from the nearest farm. The inscriptions number eighteen in total, of which twelve have a more or less certain interpretation. Among these, we have six *fuþarks* (one of which only consists of the initial **fuþ**), two names and an agent. Of the remaining three, one states that *þér er hvíld hǫrð* (for you, rest is hard; N 195), another tells us that he wants the most beautiful woman in the (troll?) world (N 192), and the third states that a man named Vífill used to live there (N 198). The first is, perhaps, an expression of compassion, but it is too dependent upon a lost context for us to make much sense of it today. Meanwhile, the two latter inscriptions seem to manifest an interest in local history and a carver's wish to eternalize his sexual desires. Thus, a thematic affinity to Maeshowe, although weaker than in the inscriptions from Nordfjord and Ystines, is visible here as well. It is also worth remarking that as in Maeshowe, we here find embellished **h**-runes. Hence, there is also a visual affinity between the two corpora of inscriptions.

St Molaise's cave on Holy Isle outside Arran, Scotland, is also non-ecclesiastical, though the cave is supposedly where St Molaise, an Irish monk and bishop, spent several years as a hermit. Therefore, the location has religious connotations, contrary to Maeshowe and the other graffiti locations discussed above. This is not directly visible in the inscriptions, but they are surrounded by innumerable crosses. Some of the crosses could have been carved with the same implement and at the same time as the runic inscriptions, though that is hard to establish with certainty today. The inscriptions can plausibly be connected with the Battle of Largs in 1263, when Norwegian troops had a camp at Arran, just across the sound from Holy

³⁰ Sö + number = inscription from Södermanland published in *Södermanlands runinskrifter*.

³¹ Though note the inscription N 540 on the neck ring from Senja. The ring was once a hidden treasure in itself, and the inscription connects the neck ring with adventure, or perhaps with trade (NIyR vol. 5, 127–140; Jesch 1997; Spurkland 2001, 132–133). The inscription does not, however, connect the treasure to the landscape where the neck ring was found, but rather to Frisia.

Isle (cf. Barnes and Page 2006, 274–78 for a critical discussion of the claim). Consequently, the Holy Isle inscriptions have an even more precise dating than the Maeshowe corpus, but the inscriptions are less diverse. In St Molaise’s cave, we only find names and carver’s signatures.

Lastly, I turn to the two *lofts*. The inscriptions here are not as closely tied to the landscape as the inscriptions above, as these are located in farm buildings, and potentially in the carver’s own home. Perhaps as a consequence of this, the carvers neither show any clear fascination with myths and mysteries in these inscriptions. Nevertheless, the topics picked up by the *loft* carvers are neither completely deviating from the inscriptions cited above:

Vindlausloftet, a profane building in Telemark, holds one inscription, N 169: *Þessar rúnar reist Vésteinn. Heill sá en reist, ok svá bæði sá en ræðr.* (Vésteinn carved these runes. Good health both to him who carved and to him who interprets (the runes)). The timber in Vindlausloftet was logged in 1167 (Stornes and Thun 2008, 189–90), and the inscription could be from the late 1100’s or later.³² In Finnesloftet, a profane building in Hordaland, we find five runic inscriptions, including a possible owner’s inscription, the last part of a *fubark*, and the female name Gyða (Zilmer 2018).³³ The inscriptions can, with some likelihood, be dated to the fourteenth century. Just as in the other non-ecclesiastical graffiti inscriptions, we find both *fubarks*, names, and agent inscriptions.

In sum, the non-ecclesiastical graffiti inscriptions testify to the fact that the rune carving practices seen in Maeshowe are not unique. I have here shown examples of other carvers’ signatures, name inscriptions, and inscriptions relating to treasure, adventure, mythology, and, in one instance, sexual desire. In the *lofts*, we also find an instance of well-wishing to the carver and reader. The latter category is also known from churches, although the well-wishing inscriptions in churches are often connected to God or a saint. There is only one parallel to the sexual inscriptions in the non-ecclesiastical graffiti material from outside Maeshowe, but we find several parallels on rune sticks (see Seim 1997 for an overview). It is worth noting that these rune sticks might come from a context which is fairly similar to that of Maeshowe. There is no doubt that many of them originate from an informal setting and were

³² In N1yR, the inscription is dated to c. 1300, but that dating is based on a stylistic dating of the building to 1270–1350 (vol. 2, 264). With Stornes and Thun’s dendrochronological dating of the timber to 1167 (2008), we have a new *terminus post quem* for the inscription, and the dating of the inscription should be discussed anew. This is not the place to go into details about the dating, but the graphemic inventory is reminiscent to that of Maeshowe, and graphemically, the inscription fits well with a dating to the late twelfth century. The linguistic characteristics might point towards a slightly later dating, however.

³³ The final two inscriptions are not yet properly examined or interpreted. One of them is also partially covered at present, but it will be uncovered (Zilmer, pers. com.).

carved in a group; Terje Spurkland even suggests that several of these inscriptions were carved in a tavern (2001, 202–05). The treasure inscriptions are unique for the non-ecclesiastical graffiti inscriptions, however. Finally, there are the names and carvers' signatures. These inscriptions are extremely common, both in churches and in non-ecclesiastical settings, and also on loose artefacts.³⁴ There is one inscription type which we do not find among the non-ecclesiastical graffiti inscriptions, however, and that is the explicitly religious inscriptions, for instance prayers, saint's names, and requests for intercession and blessings. The crosses found in both Maeshowe and St Molaise's cave show that the carvers do not leave their religious identity behind completely, and the Maeshowe carvers' references to themselves as Jerusalem travellers show that this journey carried status in Maeshowe. At the same time, Maeshowe was not the right place for prayers.

Two final points should also be made here: first, there are no clearly medieval Roman alphabetic inscriptions either in Maeshowe or in any of the other locations discussed here. This is in opposition to the contemporary church graffiti, although runes are much more commonly used there as well. This observation might seem a derailment of the article's main argument, but it indicates that runes were perceived as more fitting in informal occasions. Secondly, to the best of my knowledge, there are no comparable finds of non-ecclesiastical graffiti from Denmark and Sweden.³⁵ This could be due to the conditions of preservation in the respective countries, but it may also indicate a cultural difference between the East and West Norse populations, and it could be another indication that Norwegians were involved in the rune carving in Maeshowe.

To return to my initial question: Maeshowe is not unique in itself. None of the inscriptions found there are completely without parallel in other locations or on other objects or buildings, but none of these objects and buildings show the same complex of practices and self-expressions. Thus, the inscriptions in themselves are not unique, but the complexity of the corpus is. From this, we may conclude that the selves displayed in Maeshowe are not specific to that mound and that particular context. Rather, they are reflexions of the wider culture in which the carvers lived. These are some of the selves which the carvers display in

³⁴ Although I argue in another article (Holmqvist 2019) that these inscriptions must be interpreted according to the context in which they are situated and that, conversely, the name inscriptions in churches should be read as expressions of religious affiliation.

³⁵ One could argue that the runic inscriptions on the Piraeus lion from Athens (which is now standing in Venice) are, in some ways, comparable, as they are graffiti inscriptions carved into an already existing monument. There are three inscriptions on this lion, two of which are likely commemorative inscriptions carved by Swedes. The third inscription is an agent inscription with a potentially Norwegian carver (Thorgunn Snædal 2014). Of these, the Norwegian inscription is the most similar to the other non-ecclesiastical graffiti inscriptions mentioned here, as there are no commemorative graffiti inscriptions from non-ecclesiastical settings.

an informal setting when they are among friends, and the uniqueness of Maeshowe is that we, as readers, are allowed to step into this context and observe.

Conclusions

Freund has shown how the inscriptions in Maeshowe, as seen in the wider context of the Orkney corpus, can be read as expressions of Norseness (2020). Moreover, Freund demonstrates that we can extract information about the carvers' gender, cultural identity, social status, religious affiliations, sense of place, and literacy from the inscriptions. When seeing the inscriptions in light of practice and cognitive theory, the focus is shifted to a more personal sense of self expressed in the inscriptions. I demonstrate that the Maeshowe inscriptions are carved in a practice which is less strict and more open for innovation than many other carving practices, for instance the church carving practice. Maeshowe had room for practices where the carvers could explore their cognitive abilities, and where the display of individual talent and innovation were the objectives. At the same time, we see in the inscriptions that social relations and group identity are still important factors. Thus, we see skilful selves emerging, along with adventurous selves, sexual selves, social selves, and religiously aware selves. This complexity of expressions is unique to Maeshowe, and marks it out as an important medieval epigraphical corpus, at the same time as there are other smaller corpora with reminiscent inscriptions.

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