CHAPTER ONE

THE POWER OF THE PAST

On an island where the Dnepr flows into the Black Sea there is a runic stone. Grani raised it at Berezan in memory of Karl “…his companion [félagi] …”. In the simple line of runes, the only known runic stone in the kingdom of Rus’ has captured what has been considered to be the chief interest of the Norsemen in the areas to the east. Trade along the road between Varangians and Greeks went on intensively between 800 and the end of the tenth century, leaving its traces in Arabian and Byzantine chronicles.

In Sønder Vissing church in Jutland there is another runic stone with a type of text that is commonly found: “Tove, Mistivoi’s daughter, wife of Harald the Good Gormsson, had this memorial raised after her mother”. Family members erected such stones in memory of a brother, a son, or, as in this case, a mother. This particular stone has a special meaning. The message it has borne over the years is about kinship connections over a cultural boundary. It stands as evidence of a political agreement between people differing in language, material culture, and lifeways.

The runic stones are in many ways symbols of the direction taken during the twentieth century by research into contacts between Slavs and Scandinavians. The perspective from Sweden has had a Nordic colouring, from sources such as runic stones telling of foreign expeditions, and hoards of Arabian coins. Because of the clear texts on the monuments and the origin of the silver, the contacts have been viewed in a rather one-sided way, and research has focused on active Norsemen off in the east collecting silver. The exchange seems to show a poor balance, with a flow of people from Scandinavia to the Slavic regions and a flow in the opposite direction of the wealth they amassed. In the east the picture is also conjured up of Scandinavian initiatives to found a state in Rus’, the name of the emergent political organization that later became Russia. The concentration on the Viking Age in research on connections between the Swedes (Svear) and East Slavs has had the effect that trade and political exchange seem to cease at the start of the Middle Ages. In Sweden narratives about the subsequent period have
concerned conflicts and negotiations with Novgorod from the end of
the twelfth century to the boundary agreements of the fourteenth cen-
tury. The burning of Sigtuna in 1187, Alexander Nevsky’s victory over
Spiridon, voivoda of the Swedes, in 1240, and the Peace of Nöteborg
in 1323 are individual events with roots in a larger political process in
which the focus has been on disputes. If we turn to Denmark, we see
that the shared interests of the late tenth century are overshadowed by
the conflicts of the twelfth century. Then Danish exploits were required
to meet the threat from the untrustworthy Wends who tormented the
population of the islands. Saxo’s Gesta Danorum, with its politically
coloured content, has set the tone for medieval relations with the West
Slavs south of the Baltic Sea.

The problem of obtaining a nuanced picture of the contacts also
has to do with the chronology of historical scholarship. The years
900–1300 are squeezed in between two well-defined research fields, the
Viking Age and the ‘Hanseatic Age’, and represent a period when the
political and cultural situation in the Baltic area is difficult to capture.
In archaeological terms a very elastic string ties the late Viking Age to
the High Middle Ages, periods which with their rich amounts of finds
display separate patterns of culture. The few written sources give an
incomplete picture, with glimpses of the political situation but not of
relations between people. In texts where details of Slavic connections
occur, the content is politicized or far too general, which makes it harder
to understand cultural changes in the Baltic Sea area during the period.
Rus’, Poland, and the Wendish federations developed in different direc-
tions as regards relations with the surrounding world, material culture,
and political ambitions. Relations were moreover in constant change. In
the last three decades, however, there has been a change in the direc-
tion of studies of the links. The Slavic material culture manifested on
Scandinavian soil has attracted increased attention.

Archaeological interpretations are stances we take up in the present.
In our formulations we shape the future’s view of the past and put
arguments in the hands of people who use them for their own pur-
poses. When I choose to bring up the question of cultural transfer, it
presupposes the existence of a sender and a receiver. Since I am work-
ing in a time with a fair number of Scandinavian and German written

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1 Härdh 1976a, 1976b, 1996; Andersen 1982; Duczko 1983, 1985; Grinder-Hansen