

From Formula to Phantom: Structural Visibility, Network Redundancy, and the Mis-Segmentation of “Oligamus Stella, dux”

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This article proposes a comparative model in which semantic visibility and redundancy act as stabilizing forces in inscriptional systems.

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Abstract:

This article examines the mechanisms by which meaning is preserved and constrained in Viking Age runic inscriptions and contrasts this stability with interpretive vulnerabilities in certain medieval Latin textual traditions. Drawing on a geographically controlled corpus of runestones from Uppland—particularly the Vallentuna–Sigtuna–Orkesta region, including a concentrated micro-corpus at Vallentuna Church—the study demonstrates that runic inscriptions maintain semantic stability through visible structural segmentation, repeated formulaic clauses, explicit relational markers, and network redundancy across inscriptions. By contrast, the phrase traditionally interpreted as “Oligamus Stella, dux” is demonstrated to be a product of mis-segmentation within a structurally ambiguous Latin textual environment rather than evidence for a historical individual. The article proposes a comparative model in which semantic visibility and redundancy act as stabilizing forces in inscriptional systems, while their absence in manuscript traditions creates conditions under which segmentation errors can generate persistent phantom identities within the historical record. From Formula to Phantom: Structural Visibility, Network Redundancy, and the Mis-Segmentation of “Oligamus Stella, dux” .

Introduction:

The Problem of Meaning in Medieval Texts

Medieval texts are commonly treated as reliable transmitters of historical meaning. Yet this assumption depends on the preservation of structural features such as word separation, clause boundaries, and formulaic repetition. Where such features are absent or degraded, meaning is no longer directly recoverable from the text but must be reconstructed by the reader.

In many Latin manuscripts, particularly those written in *scriptio continua*, word boundaries and punctuation are minimal or absent.¹ Under these conditions, segmentation becomes interpretive. A single sequence of letters may yield multiple valid readings, some of which can diverge radically in meaning.

This study addresses the conditions under which meaning remains stable—or becomes vulnerable to distortion—in medieval textual systems. It argues that semantic stability is not an inherent property of textual transmission, but rather the result of visible structural constraints that guide interpretation and limit ambiguity.

To test this claim, the study adopts a comparative approach. It first examines Viking Age runic inscriptions from Uppland, where structural segmentation, formulaic repetition, and network redundancy provide a high degree of semantic visibility. It then contrasts these features with the structural ambiguity characteristic of certain Latin manuscript traditions.

As a focal case, the phrase “*Oligamus Stella, dux*” is analyzed as a product of mis-segmentation within a low-visibility textual environment.

Rather than preserving the memory of a historical individual, the phrase is shown to emerge from the interaction between ambiguous script and interpretive reconstruction. By placing this case within a broader comparative framework, the article demonstrates how the presence or absence of structural constraints determines whether meaning is stabilized—or allowed to mutate—within the historical record.

II. Textual Systems and Structural Visibility

1. *Scriptio Continua* and Ambiguity Continuous script eliminates visual boundaries between words and clauses.² In manuscript traditions employing *scriptio continua*, the absence of spacing and consistent punctuation removes the structural cues that ordinarily guide segmentation. Under such conditions, the division of a text into meaningful units is no longer visually determined but becomes an act of interpretation.

A sequence such as *nosoligamusstelladux* illustrates the problem. Depending on how the reader imposes segmentation, the same string may be read as *nos obligamus* (“we bind ourselves”), forming part of a conventional formulaic clause, or alternatively as “*Oligamus Stella, dux*,” suggesting a personal name accompanied by a title. The underlying sequence of letters remains unchanged; what differs is the segmentation imposed upon it.

The text itself does not determine which reading is correct. Rather, meaning emerges from the interaction between the written sequence and the interpretive framework applied by the reader. In the absence of explicit structural markers, multiple readings may remain grammatically viable, even when they diverge significantly in historical implication.

This ambiguity is not a marginal feature of manuscript transmission but a structural condition inherent to texts lacking visible segmentation. Where redundancy and formulaic reinforcement are limited, the risk of mis-segmentation increases, creating the possibility that interpretive choices may solidify over time into accepted readings, regardless of their original intent.

III. Formula and Meaning Stability in Uppland Runic Inscriptions

1. Core Structure

Runic inscriptions in Uppland display a high degree of structural consistency, typically organized into a sequence of clearly identifiable components. These include a commissioning clause (e.g., “had the stone made”), a memorial statement (“in memory of...”), and an explicit relational marker identifying the deceased through kinship terms such as father, son, or brother. In some cases, these core elements are supplemented by additional narrative, religious, or economic clauses, but the underlying structural framework remains stable across inscriptions.

This recurring pattern is not merely conventional but functionally significant. The presence of clearly delineated components creates a form of structural visibility in which the boundaries between semantic units are reinforced through repetition and predictability. Each element occupies a recognizable position within the inscription, allowing the reader to anticipate and correctly interpret the sequence of information being presented.

Examples from the Uppland corpus illustrate this stability. Inscriptions such as U 304, U 418, and U 162 conform closely to this structural model, combining commissioning formulas with memorial and relational clauses in a consistent and recognizable order. Even where minor variations occur, the overall framework remains intact, ensuring that the intended meaning is preserved across different inscriptions and contexts.

The result is a system in which meaning is not dependent on a single act of interpretation but is instead distributed across multiple structural cues. Repetition, positional regularity, and explicit relational markers work together to constrain interpretation and reduce ambiguity. In this sense, runic inscriptions achieve semantic stability through the visibility of their structure, in contrast to textual systems in which such structure is obscured or absent.

2. Complexity Without Instability

The stability of meaning in Uppland runic inscriptions is not limited to simple or formulaic texts. Even in inscriptions that incorporate multiple clauses, narrative elements, or religious statements, semantic coherence is maintained. Increasing complexity does not result in interpretive instability; rather, it is accommodated within an already robust structural framework.

Multi-clause inscriptions provide a clear example. Stones such as U 233 and U 412 present parallel commemorations in which multiple individuals are named and memorialized within a single inscription. Despite the added complexity, the underlying structure—commissioning, memorialization, and relational identification—remains intact, allowing each component to be clearly interpreted.

Narrative inscriptions further demonstrate this stability. Inscriptions such as U 344 and U 241, which reference participation in campaigns in England, and U 209, which records economic activity in the eastern regions, extend beyond formulaic commemoration into historical narration. Yet these additional layers do not obscure meaning. Instead, they are integrated into the existing structural pattern, preserving clarity while expanding informational content.

Religious inscriptions likewise incorporate new semantic elements without destabilizing interpretation. U 243, which emphasizes baptismal identity, and inscriptions such as U 345 and U 456, which commemorate bridge-building as an act of piety, introduce explicitly Christian themes. Even here, the core structural components remain visible, ensuring that the added religious meaning is clearly situated within the broader commemorative framework.

3. Fragmentation Spectrum

While runic inscriptions in Uppland generally preserve a high degree of semantic stability, variation in physical preservation introduces differing levels of interpretive clarity. These variations can be understood as a spectrum of fragmentation, ranging from fully intact inscriptions to those in which interpretation becomes impossible. At one end of the spectrum are well-preserved inscriptions such as U 304, in which the structural components remain fully visible and meaning is directly recoverable.

In such cases, the combination of clear segmentation, formulaic repetition, and relational markers ensures that interpretation is both straightforward and unambiguous.

A second level includes partially damaged inscriptions, such as U 224, where some elements are lost but the overall structure remains sufficiently intact to guide reconstruction. In these cases, meaning is not fully visible but can be reliably recovered through the persistence of recognizable formulaic patterns and contextual cues.

Further along the spectrum are more heavily fragmented inscriptions, such as U 437, in which structural cues are reduced and ambiguity increases. Even here, however, interpretation remains constrained. Although multiple readings may be possible, they are limited by the residual structure of the inscription and the expectations established by the broader corpus.

At the extreme end are inscriptions such as U 436, where fragmentation is so extensive that interpretation effectively halts. In these cases, the absence of sufficient structural information prevents meaningful reconstruction.

Crucially, across this entire spectrum, no inscription produces a fictitious identity. Where structure is preserved, meaning is clear; where it is partially degraded, meaning is guided; and where it is lost entirely, interpretation ceases. At no point does ambiguity generate a stable but erroneous personal identity. This pattern underscores the role of structural visibility and redundancy in constraining interpretation and preventing the emergence of phantom figures within the runic corpus.

IV. Network Redundancy and the Vallentuna Micro-Corpus

Prosopographic Reinforcement Within the Vallentuna micro-corpus, the repetition of personal names across multiple inscriptions creates a network of prosopographic reinforcement in which individual identities are stabilized through cross-referencing. Rather than appearing in isolation, key figures are attested in multiple commemorative contexts, allowing their identities to be confirmed through overlapping relational and narrative information.

This repetition does not merely duplicate information; it creates a system of mutual verification. Each inscription functions as a node within a larger network, in which the recurrence of names, relationships, and narrative elements constrains interpretation and reduces the possibility of error. Even if one inscription were partially damaged or ambiguously read, the presence of corroborating inscriptions would guide reconstruction and preserve identity continuity.

The case of Holmi is particularly significant. His death is independently referenced in connection with activity in Italy, specifically in the Lombardy region, providing an external point of reference that extends beyond the local inscriptional context.

This additional layer of corroboration further stabilizes his identity, linking the runic corpus to broader historical events and demonstrating that the individuals named are not products of interpretive ambiguity but historically grounded figures.

In this way, the Vallentuna micro-corpus illustrates how network redundancy functions as a constraint on interpretation. Identity is not dependent on a single inscriptional instance but is distributed across multiple attestations, each reinforcing the others. The result is a system in which the emergence of fictitious identities is structurally inhibited, as any proposed reading must be consistent with the broader network of inscriptions.

Network Function

The stability of identity within the Vallentuna micro-corpus is not solely the result of individual inscriptions, but of the networked relationships that connect them. This network function operates through the interaction of three primary mechanisms: repetition across inscriptions, explicit kinship identification, and geographic clustering.

Repetition across inscriptions ensures that key individuals are attested in multiple contexts, allowing their identities to be confirmed through independent yet overlapping commemorative records. A name that appears in more than one inscription is not interpreted in isolation but in relation to its other occurrences, reducing the likelihood of misidentification or interpretive error.

Explicit kinship markers further reinforce this stability by embedding individuals within clearly defined relational structures.

Terms such as “son,” “father,” and “brother” do not merely identify relationships; they anchor individuals within a social framework that is repeated across inscriptions. These relational links create chains of identification in which multiple individuals are connected through consistent and recognizable patterns.

Geographic clustering provides an additional layer of constraint. Inscriptions located within the same region—such as the Vallentuna–Sigtuna area—form a localized network in which recurring names and relationships can be cross-referenced within a shared spatial context. This proximity increases the density of connections between inscriptions, further limiting the range of plausible interpretations.

Taken together, these mechanisms transform the corpus from a collection of discrete texts into an interconnected system of mutual verification. Identity is not derived from a single inscription but emerges from the convergence of multiple, reinforcing data points. As a result, interpretation is constrained by the network itself: any proposed reading must remain consistent with the broader pattern of repetition, kinship, and geographic association. This networked structure significantly reduces the possibility of ambiguity and effectively prevents the emergence of fictitious identities within the runic corpus.

3. Vallentuna Church Micro-System

The concentration of inscriptions at Vallentuna Church provides a particularly clear example of how structural visibility and network redundancy operate at a localized level. Within this micro-corpus, multiple inscriptions coexist in close spatial proximity, forming an interconnected system in which meaning is reinforced across diverse inscriptional types.

The corpus includes inscriptions associated with political authority, such as U 212, which commemorates Jarlabanki and asserts elite status and social position. Other inscriptions introduce narrative elements, as in U 214, which records a drowning, and U 217, which commemorates bridge-building as both a practical and religious act.

Additional stones, including U 219–220, provide artisan attribution, identifying the individuals responsible for carving the inscriptions, while U 412 presents a dual memorial structure in which multiple individuals are commemorated within a single text.

Despite this variation in content, the underlying structural framework remains consistent. Each inscription adheres to recognizable patterns of commissioning, memorialization, and relational identification, ensuring that the introduction of new themes—political, narrative, economic, or religious—does not disrupt interpretive clarity. The diversity of inscriptional types thus operates within, rather than outside of, a stable structural system.

The Vallentuna corpus therefore functions as a micro-system in which meaning is maintained at the level of the network rather than the individual inscription. Structural visibility, combined with geographic clustering and prosopographic reinforcement, ensures that interpretation remains stable regardless of variation in content. In this environment, meaning is not contingent on a single inscriptional form but is sustained across the system as a whole.

Non-Kinship Identity

While kinship relations play a central role in many runic inscriptions, they are not the sole mechanism through which identity is stabilized. Inscriptions lacking explicit familial markers nevertheless maintain clear and consistent identification through structural features alone. The guild inscription U 379 provides a particularly instructive example.

Unlike typical commemorative stones that emphasize lineage and familial relationships, U 379 identifies individuals within a collective, non-kinship framework.

Despite the absence of genealogical anchoring, the inscription preserves clarity of reference through established structural elements, including recognizable formulaic phrasing and coherent segmentation of semantic units. The identity of the individuals involved is not derived from their position within a family network but from their placement within a structured and intelligible inscriptional context.

This example demonstrates that while kinship can reinforce identity, it is not a necessary condition for semantic stability. Structural visibility—manifested through consistent formulae, clear segmentation, and predictable organization—provides a sufficient basis for maintaining interpretive clarity. Even in the absence of relational markers, meaning remains stable because it is constrained by the structural properties of the inscription itself.

The implication is significant: identity stability within the runic corpus is fundamentally a product of structural design rather than social content. Kinship, where present, enhances this stability, but the underlying constraint on interpretation is generated by the visibility and regularity of the inscriptional system.

V. The Oligamus Case Study

1. Segmentation Failure

The phrase traditionally interpreted as “Oligamus Stella, dux” can be traced to a sequence of letters lacking explicit segmentation, such as nosoligamusstelladux. In the absence of visual markers indicating word boundaries, this sequence permits multiple plausible readings depending on how it is divided.

One possible segmentation yields nos obligamus (“we bind ourselves”), consistent with known Latin formulaic expressions found in documentary and legal contexts. An alternative segmentation produces “Oligamus Stella, dux,” which appears to identify a personal name accompanied by a title.

Crucially, both readings derive from the same uninterrupted sequence of letters; the difference lies not in the text itself, but in the segmentation imposed by the reader.

This constitutes a case of segmentation failure, in which the absence of structural constraints allows multiple grammatically viable interpretations to emerge. Unlike the runic inscriptions examined above, where structural visibility and redundancy limit interpretive variation, the Latin sequence provides no internal mechanism for determining the correct division. As a result, interpretive choice is not constrained by the text but is instead projected onto it.

The implications of this ambiguity are significant. Whereas in the runic corpus ambiguity leads to reduced interpretability or interpretive caution, here it enables the generation of a coherent but potentially erroneous reading. The transformation of a formulaic phrase into a putative personal identity is therefore not evidence of historical presence, but the product of segmentation applied within a structurally underdetermined textual environment.

Mechanism:

From Mis-Segmentation to Phantom Identity

The emergence of the figure “Oligamus Stella, dux” can be understood as the result of a three-stage interpretive process initiated by structural ambiguity within the source text. This process begins with the loss of segmentation. In the absence of clear word boundaries, a continuous sequence of letters such as *nosoligamusstelladux* no longer presents an internally determined structure, leaving the division of the text open to interpretation.

In response to this ambiguity, readers impose familiar linguistic and onomastic patterns onto the sequence. Faced with an uninterpreted string, the interpretive tendency is to identify recognizable units—whether grammatical constructions or personal names—based on prior expectations. In this case, the segmentation “Oligamus Stella, dux” reflects the imposition of a name-title structure that conforms to known patterns of medieval nomenclature, even if such a reading is not dictated by the text itself.

Once established, this interpretation may undergo a process of reification, in which the proposed reading is treated as a reference to a historical individual. Through repetition in secondary sources, indices, or historiographical traditions, the initially tentative segmentation acquires the appearance of factual status. What began as an interpretive resolution of ambiguity thus becomes stabilized as an accepted historical identity.

This sequence—from loss of segmentation, to interpretive imposition, to historiographical reification—demonstrates how structural ambiguity within a textual system can generate persistent but unfounded historical figures. The case of “Oligamus Stella, dux” is therefore not an isolated anomaly, but a predictable outcome of interpretive processes operating in the absence of structural constraints.

Absence of Structural Constraints

In contrast to the runic inscriptions examined above, the sequence underlying “Oligamus Stella, dux” lacks the structural features necessary to constrain interpretation. It contains no formulaic markers that would signal its function within a conventional textual pattern, no relational structure linking the elements to identifiable individuals or social roles, and no network of parallel attestations through which its meaning might be externally verified.

The absence of formulaic markers removes the possibility of aligning the sequence with known linguistic patterns, leaving its interpretation dependent on the reader’s selection among competing segmentations. Similarly, the lack of relational structure eliminates the contextual anchors—such as kinship or social designation—that, in the runic corpus, serve to stabilize identity across inscriptions. Without such anchors, there is no internal framework against which to test the plausibility of a proposed reading.

Most significantly, the phrase exists in isolation, without the benefit of network reinforcement. Unlike the Vallentuna micro-corpus, where identities are confirmed through repetition and cross-reference, the sequence provides no external points of comparison. As a result, once a particular segmentation is adopted, there are no structural constraints to challenge or correct it.

The combined absence of these features creates a textual environment in which interpretive choice is effectively unconstrained. Under such conditions, the emergence of a coherent but unfounded identity is not only possible but structurally enabled.

The figure “Oligamus Stella, dux” thus arises not from the preservation of historical memory, but from the interaction between ambiguous textual form and the absence of mechanisms capable of limiting interpretive variation.

Continued

Threshold Model of Structural Visibility

The contrast between the runic corpus and the Latin case examined above can be formalized as a threshold model of structural visibility. This model proposes that the stability of meaning within a textual system is directly dependent on the degree to which structural features—such as segmentation, formulaic markers, relational identifiers, and network redundancy—remain visible to the reader.

When these features are present and clearly articulated, as in the Uppland runic inscriptions, meaning remains stable. Structural visibility constrains interpretation by limiting the range of plausible readings and by reinforcing semantic units through repetition and cross-reference. In such systems, ambiguity is reduced, and where it does occur, it leads to interpretive caution rather than the generation of new meanings.

By contrast, when structural features are absent or insufficiently marked, as in the case of scriptio continua sequences lacking redundancy or contextual anchoring, meaning becomes generative. In these environments, the text no longer determines its own segmentation, and multiple grammatically viable readings may emerge. Without internal or external constraints, interpretive choices can produce coherent but unfounded constructions, including the formation of apparent personal identities.

The threshold between these two conditions—visible structure and structural absence—defines the boundary between semantic stability and semantic generation. The case of “*Oligamus Stella, dux*” illustrates what occurs when this threshold is crossed: a shift from constrained interpretation to unconstrained meaning production. As such, the model provides a framework for understanding not only this specific instance, but the broader conditions under which textual ambiguity may give rise to persistent historical misinterpretations.

VI. Conclusion

Structural Visibility and the Limits of Interpretation

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that “*Oligamus Stella, dux*” is not the preserved name of a historical individual, but the product of mis-segmentation within a structurally ambiguous textual environment.

The sequence from which it derives permits multiple plausible readings, none of which is internally constrained by visible structural markers. As a result, the identification of a named individual emerges not from the text itself, but from the interpretive framework imposed upon it.

By contrast, the runic inscriptions of Uppland exhibit a system in which meaning is stabilized through structural visibility. Segmentation, formulaic repetition, relational markers, and network redundancy operate together to constrain interpretation and prevent the emergence of unfounded identities. Even under conditions of complexity or partial fragmentation, the system maintains semantic coherence, either guiding interpretation or halting it altogether where insufficient information survives.

The comparison between these two textual environments supports the threshold model of structural visibility proposed in this article. Where structure remains visible, meaning is stable and resistant to distortion; where it is absent, meaning becomes generative, allowing interpretive choices to produce coherent but potentially erroneous constructions. The case of “Oligamus Stella, dux” illustrates the consequences of crossing this threshold, demonstrating how ambiguity within an unconstrained system can give rise to persistent historiographical artifacts.

More broadly, this study suggests that the reliability of medieval texts as carriers of historical meaning cannot be assumed, but must be evaluated in relation to the structural conditions under which they were produced and transmitted. Texts lacking visible segmentation, redundancy, and contextual anchoring are inherently more vulnerable to interpretive distortion, particularly when later readers impose familiar patterns onto ambiguous sequences. The implications extend beyond the specific case examined here. The threshold model provides a framework for reassessing other instances in which uncertain textual forms have been treated as stable historical data. By foregrounding the role of structural visibility in constraining interpretation, it becomes possible to distinguish more clearly between preserved historical identities and those generated through the interpretive processes of transmission and reception.

VII. Conclusion

Runic inscriptions demonstrate that meaning is preserved through the interaction of structural visibility, formulaic repetition, and network reinforcement. These features operate together to constrain interpretation, ensuring that semantic units remain identifiable and that identities are stabilized across multiple attestations.

Even under conditions of complexity or partial fragmentation, the system maintains coherence by guiding interpretation or, where necessary, limiting it.

Continued

By contrast, Latin textual environments lacking these features are inherently more vulnerable to interpretive reconstruction. In the absence of visible segmentation, relational structure, and external reinforcement, meaning is no longer determined by the text itself but emerges from the interpretive decisions imposed upon it.

The case of “Oligamus Stella, dux” illustrates the consequences of such conditions, in which a continuous sequence of letters permits multiple readings, one of which has been reified into a putative historical identity.

The comparison underscores a central principle: meaning is not an inherent property of textual transmission, but a function of structural constraint. Where structure is visible, interpretation is limited and meaning remains stable; where it is absent, interpretation becomes generative, allowing ambiguity to produce coherent but unfounded constructions.

The figure of “Oligamus Stella, dux” is therefore best understood not as a preserved historical actor, but as the product of interpretive processes operating within a structurally underdetermined textual system.

Footnotes:

1. M. B. Parkes, **Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West** (Berkeley, 1992), 1–10.
2. Paul Saenger, **Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading** (Stanford, 1997), 45–60.
3. Rundata, entries U 133 and U 141 (Samnordisk runtextdatabas)
4. Judith Jesch, **Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age: The Vocabulary of Runic Inscriptions and Skaldic Verse** (Woodbridge, 2001), 80–95.
5. Birgit Sawyer and Peter Sawyer, **Runestones: Texts and Contexts** (Oxford, 2000), 25–40.
6. Lena Peterson, **Nordiskt runnamnslexikon**, 5th ed. (Uppsala, 2007)

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- Malcolm Parkes

