Subject: news from the northland

I have just finished reading a doctoral dissertation which is being defended here in Uppsala tomorrow. It should be of considerable interest to Early Russianists, Balticists, etc. They publish the dissertations here as regular books ahead of the defense. I am not sure the best bet for acquiring a copy (here on campus they give them away), but you can try Akademiska bokhandeln in Stockholm. The data:


The author is already much published on the subject. She ranges over a huge landscape of archaeological material and texts. A sizeable section (although not necessarily the most original or discriminating in the book) deals with the Svear (Swedes from Central Sweden) on the Eastern river routes. There is bound to be a lot of controversy about a major part of her thesis, which focuses on political and social organization in Central Sweden in the Late Iron Age (ending ca. 13th c.). She argues for maritime activity and its associated supporting mechanisms and representations as the fundamental organizational principle for the political and social order.

I find some of the most interesting parts of the dissertation deal with maritime technology, where she draws on the archaeological record, ethnoarchaeology and experimental archaeology (reconstructions) to develop rather convincingly a picture of the kinds of boats that were critical for those long distance Viking ventures, the boats not being the big heavy ones akin to the ones such as the Gokstad ship. The construction technology which was employed enabled the very sophisticated builders to develop light-weight boats that were fast, adept to moving in shallow waters and easily portageable. Apart from the information on boat construction, among the most interesting parts of the dissertation are the ones discussing the portages and the actual testing of speed of portaging using properly reconstructed versions of the boats.

In connection with reading this, I came across the online Runic Database, which is the work of a Ph.D. in computer science, Lars Engebretsen, who now works for Google in Switzerland. You can find the links at: http://www.engebretsen.se/run-konk/, where you want to click on "the text of the inscriptions" to bring up the actual inscriptions. What you get here is the Old Norse, arranged in the order of the regional publication of the inscriptions (a big, ongoing series). The concordances he has compiled would let you locate particular names and
words; they are in separate files. All of it is in pdf format files. There are no translations.

Regards from Uppsala,