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Sources of the First Printed Scandinavian Runes

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the sources that were used for the first printed Scandinavian runes. These runes appear in works published in Italy between 1539 and 1555 either by or in connection with Johannes and Olaus Magnus. The books and the information about runes and runic inscriptions they contain are presented first. A closer look is then taken at the shapes of the runes used and at the roman letters they represent according to the books. It will be shown that these runes and their sound values can in part be traced back to a mediaeval runic tradition, while others were created to provide at least one rune for every roman letter. The forms of the newly “invented” runes can be explained to some extent by the influence of the shape of the roman letters they represent, whereas others were taken from a source that contained runes but did not provide any information about their sound values, namely the runic calendars.

Keywords: Olaus Magnus, Theseus Ambrosius, Bent Bille, Renaissance, printed runes, *q*-rune, *x*-rune, *belgþór*-rune

Introduction

Work with post-reformation runic inscriptions has long been a neglected area of runology.¹ A glance through the most common introductions to the study of runes reveals our lack of certainty as regards when runes stopped being used and how knowledge of runes was preserved (cf. Moltke 1985: 24, Düwel 2008: 3 or Barnes 2012: 2). We also do not know where the information about runes that is presented in 16th-century books comes from. This article will try to shed some light on these matters, beginning with the first printed books that contain information on Scandinavian runes. Essentially, these are works published by or in connection with Johannes and Olaus Magnus.

To do this, two approaches are used. The first looks at the information about runes and runic inscriptions that is presented in the books. The second compares the shapes of the runes to those known from runic epigraphy and runic manuscripts, and in a second step, compares the roman characters those runes represent in the three sources.

¹ The most recent study covering a whole country was presented by Jonas Nordby 2001; the latest summary of post-reformation runic study can be found in Barnes 2012, where a whole chapter is dedicated to this area (Barnes 2012: 129ff.).

As their biography has some bearing on the content of their works, a very short survey of the life of the Magnus brothers will be provided here.² Johannes Magnus was born in Linköping in 1488, two years before his brother Olaus. Both embarked on an ecclesiastical career, and both studied in continental Europe in the early 16th century. After their studies, they both worked for King Gustav I on diplomatic and political missions. But in the 1520s, the relationship between the king and Johannes Magnus in particular became worse, finally leading the brothers to emigrate to Gdańsk. This became a base for further travels through Europe, with Olaus working as a secretary for his brother. In 1537, the brothers were called to the Council of Mantua, and in 1538, they moved to Venice where, one year later, Olaus' famous *Carta Marina* was printed. They left Venice in 1540 and moved to Rome, where Johannes died in 1544. Olaus became his brother's successor as Archbishop of Uppsala, which led him to the Council of Trent. Some years later, Olaus became the director of "Birgittahuset" in Rome, where he installed a printing press, enabling him to publish his brother's history of the northern kings in 1554 and his own history of the northern people in 1555. Olaus died in Rome in 1557.

Printed sources

To investigate how much knowledge the brothers had of runes, four printed sources will be used.³

The first source we have for their runic knowledge is not found in one of their own books but in Theseus Ambrosius' *Introductio in chaldaicam linguam, Syriacam atque Armenicam, et decem alias linguas* which was printed in Padua in 1539. This work, as the title states, is an introduction to a dozen languages, including a collection of foreign alphabets. There is, for example, an Anglo-Saxon runic alphabet on fol. 204v, which is described as a "Saracen" alphabet. More important for this article is the alphabet printed on fol. 206v, which is called "Alphabetum Gotthicum" (sic). The surrounding text, beginning on fol. 206r, tells the story of how Ambrosius came into possession of the alphabet, the most important part being:

² The survey is based on the articles on Johannes Magnus (Lindroth 1973–75) and Olaus Magnus (Broberg 1992–94) which can be found in *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*.

³ The alphabet printed in Ambrosius' *Introductio* can be found in Schück (1932: 55). A version of both the *Carta Marina* and the German description of the map, *Ain kurze Auslegung*, can be found in the digital collection of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München. Pictures from the works of Johannes and Olaus can be found in the facsimile of Olaus' *Historia* (Granlund 1972) and in the modern translations into Swedish (Granlund 1976) and English (Foote 1996–1998).

[fol. 206r] Bona sors, ad Vincentinum Generale Concilium proximis his mensibus profecturus, Reuerendissimus Ioannes Vpsalensis Archiepiscopus, genere Gotthus, Bononiam venit. Casu à Iulio Canobino visitatur, interloquendum post multa hinc inde inuicem dicta (vt fieri solet) etiam de literis Gotthicis sermo habetur. Rogatus interim Archiepiscopi scriba, Gotthicum alphabetum, cum latinis sibi respondentibus literis, suppresso tamen elementorum nomine scripsit. [... fol. 206v] Alphabetum vero illud tale erat.

‘A lucky coincidence! The highly dignified Archbishop Johannes of Uppsala, a born Goth, came (here) during the last months on his way to the Vincentinian General Council. By chance, he was visited by Julius Canobinus; after some mutual ‘this and that’ (as is common), they started talking about the Gothic letters. In the meantime, being asked to do so, the Archbishop’s scribe wrote down the Gothic alphabet with the respective Latin equivalents, but he did not write down the names of the single letters. [...] This is what the alphabet looked like:’

The text gives several hints as to where the alphabet came from. First of all, Johannes Magnus is described as “Gotthus”, a ‘Goth’. Second, it is explicitly stated that the “Archiepiscopi scriba”, the ‘Archbishop’s scribe’, wrote down the letters. As we have seen earlier, the Archbishop’s scribe was Johannes’ brother Olaus. So the first printed runes came from Olaus and not from his brother. The third, very interesting piece of information in the text is that Olaus wrote down the letters, but not their names. Of course one would like to think that the names referred to are the rune names known from the Scandinavian runic poems, but as they were not written down, this is far from certain.

To summarize, there are two things we learn from this short text: Knowledge of runes was most likely Olaus’ domain; of course, we do not know whether or to what extent Johannes knew the runes too. Furthermore: the runes had names.

The second source is Olaus Magnus’ famous *Carta Marina*, printed in 1539. His short description of the map, which was published in accompaniment with it in German and Italian, should also be included in any interpretation thereof. Part C of the *Carta Marina* contains a depiction of a person holding two items with a runic inscription. The description of this part is, to quote the German *Ain kurze Auslegung* (fol. 3v):

Hie ist ainer uon den alten rysen Starcatherus genannt hat zuay staine tafeln zu ainer gedechnuss das in den landen seindt uil streitperlicher menner geuesen und manhait mit gettischen buchstaben beschriben uor uil hundert iaren angezaigt.

As *Ain kurze Auslegung* explains, the person is the giant Starcatherus holding two stone tablets with an inscription in Gothic letters, which were written many centuries ago and record the fact that there were many militant men there. The map itself also has a reading of the inscription next to Starcatherus, “translating” the inscription as STARCATHERVS PVGIL SVETICVS, ‘Starcatherus, (a) Swedish warrior’. What can be learned from this short text is that when Olaus writes ‘Gothic letters’, he means runes and that runes were written a long time ago on stone to commemorate important men.

In his description there is another occurrence of a passage that may refer to runes, although we cannot be sure of this. In part “A a” of *Ain kurze Auslegung* (fol. 2r), Olaus describes Iceland and the surroundings of Helgafell, writing: “Darumbe steen uil grosser staine taflen bschriben mit selzame buchstaben uas die alten kemfer thonhaben”, ‘Around it, there are many large stone tablets, inscribed with strange letters about what the old heroes did’. This part is problematic as he calls the letters ‘strange’ rather than ‘Gothic’, although this could be due to the strange rune shapes that can be found in Iceland. Still, one cannot be sure that Olaus is referring to runes here.

The third source is Johannes Magnus’ *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sveonumque regibus*, posthumously published by his brother in 1554. There are four instances where runes occur in this book. The first is the text on page 24, directly before the runic alphabet on page 25, which states that the *Gothi* had their letters long before the Romans and the Greeks had theirs. The text is immediately followed by the well-known depiction of the “Alphabetum Gothicum”. The third instance is another picture of Starcatherus on page 171, which is similar to Starcatherus on the *Carta Marina* with the slightly deviating inscription **starkaterus pugil sueticus**. The fourth occurrence of runes is on page 220, where it states that when Filimerus founded his kingdom, he was looking for magic women called “Adelrunas”. This continues: “The Gothic language calls this art ‘Runa’, or sometimes magic: and that is why until today the numerous stones in Gothia that are inscribed with Gothic letters are called *Runasten*” (italics in original).

To summarize, Johannes’ *Historia* does not contain a great deal of information on runes beyond the fact that they are old. On the other hand, Johannes writes about a connection between runes and magic, an idea that is found neither in Ambrosius’ *Introductio*, nor in Olaus’ *Historia*.⁴ It is said

⁴ There is, however, a hint in a story (re-)told by Olaus which shows a magical use of runes, cf. below.

that women who are able to do magic are called “Adelrunas” and that “Runa” means some kind of magic. This magic has something to do with letters as the stones that contain Gothic letters are called “Runasten”.

The fourth source for this article is Olaus Magnus’ *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, the History of the Northern People. As this work contains an extensive amount of information on runes which cannot be presented in detail, some examples will have to suffice.

There are several pictures containing inscriptions in runes and rune-like letters. The first is a stone monument on page 48 with the inscription **antikua s*rua**, which most likely means *antiqua serva*, ‘save the ancient’.⁵ The next picture is on the following page and depicts an obelisk. The inscription reads **gothi**, although the runes are slightly different from the first ones. On page 52, there is a picture of two clocks with a semicircle between them. The semicircle is inscribed with **abcdefgh**, the first eight letters of the roman alphabet written in runes. On page 54 we find a picture with four persons holding three staves that feature runes and rune-like symbols which unfortunately cannot be deciphered. Similar staves are held by two men in a picture on page 56, but the runes and rune-like symbols are impossible to read. On page 57, we find the runic alphabet that had already been printed in Johannes Magnus’ *Historia*, and on page 90 we have a picture containing three rune-stones, again with illegible inscriptions. There seems to be another depiction of a rune-stone on page 94, yet again with an inscription that cannot be read. On page 124 is a picture of a wizard from Visingö who is fettered with two rune staves. Gebhardt (1900: 565), who looked closely at the runes in Olaus’ *Historia*, suggests that the upper one could in fact say “runsta[f]”. On page 161, we again meet Starcatherus in an image identical to the one printed a year earlier. The beginning of the eighth book shows a picture of the Mora stone with a newly elected king standing on it. The stone bears the inscription **mora sten**. The last picture can be found on page 457 and shows some containers, two of them inscribed with runes. The first one can be read as ***anna**, for which Gebhardt (1900: 566) suggests **tanna**, for Swedish *tunna*, ‘barrel’.⁶ The second container is inscribed with **gryta**, ‘pot, cauldron’.

In addition to the pictures, there are also ten chapters that deal with runes and runic inscriptions. In Chapter 29 of the first book, it is said that in the

⁵ The transliterations are based on the runic-to-roman correspondence presented in the runic alphabet on page 57 of Olaus’ *Historia*. Runes that are used in the pictures but that cannot be found in the alphabet are represented by an asterisk.

⁶ During my presentation, Henrik Williams suggested **canna**, ‘can’, which seems to be the likeliest reading.

olden days, monuments were erected for fighters, including inscriptions intended to perpetuate the memory of these men's names and exploits. Olaus explains that there are stones both with and without inscriptions and discusses the meaning of the stones' arrangement. He even describes the order of the letters on the monument: according to Olaus, the inscriptions usually begin in the lower right corner of the stone, continue to the top, and end at the left side of the base. We also read that the letters are as thick and long as a man's middle finger. The chapter even covers the problem of erosion and damage caused by rain or mud that is often encountered when reading rune-stones. At the end of the chapter, Olaus gives examples of the content of the inscriptions: "I, Uffi, fighting for my country, slew thirty-two champions and at last was slain by Rolf, the champion, and lie here at rest" (Foote 1996: 66). Of course the inscriptions are invented, but the names in the inscriptions can be found on rune-stones. Except, of course, for Uffi.

In the next chapter, Olaus continues describing the monuments. He states that there is a very great number of standing stones, and in the case of Östergötland, they are found around fortresses belonging to rulers: "and their lofty markings in Gothic letters give instruction, as if at the command of some ruler then alive, of what is to be pursued and what shunned by their successors, that is, they are to embrace virtue and abominate vices, etc." (Foote 1996: 67). At the end of the chapter, Olaus tells us that the monuments of "virtuous princes were marked with the sign of the Cross" (Foote 1996: 68), centuries before the Catholic faith was brought to Scandinavia.

Chapter 31 of the first book deals briefly with commemorative inscriptions that were carved for famous people who had been killed by rivers, storms, lightning, and whirlwinds.

One of the most important sections is Chapter 34 of the first book, where Olaus describes the use of staves inscribed with Gothic letters to foretell the future. The description of this tool continues: "The staff is adapted to the height of a man, with the number of weeks in a year on each side, and for each week seven Gothic letters, by which the golden numbers and, after the acceptance of Christianity, the dominical letters are marked off in the vernacular by characters" (Foote 1996: 73). Here Olaus is undoubtedly describing runic calendars. Knowledge of the calendars was, according to him, very common among peasants even before Christianity reached the North and there was allegedly a great interest in *computus* which was of course also shared by the priests. Olaus also states in this chapter that there are several books written in Gothic letters in Uppsala and Skara.

Chapter 36 of the first book also contains some important information on

runes. Runes are, as was already mentioned in Johannes Magnus' *Historia*, a very old system of writing, older than the roman letters. Rune-stones serve as evidence for this claim. Like letters written on paper, messages were sent incised in wood or the bark of trees.

In Book two, Chapter 32, Olaus mentions that the deeds of ancient kings are inscribed in stone. This use of runes is repeated in Book five, Chapter one. Runes are also mentioned in the twentieth chapter of Book three, where Olaus tells the story of a wizard who was bound by his teacher with a small staff engraved with Gothic or Russian letters.

Another interesting fact is mentioned in Book seven, Chapter 24. It is said that in the area of Lake Mälaren, in the city of Strängnäs to be precise, stones recounting the feats of champions were built into the walls of churches. The deeds were of course written in runes, and they are "longo atque obliquo ordine", which is usually translated as "in a long loop" (Foote 1998: 342). More information on runic calendars is provided in the twentieth chapter of Book 16. Olaus reiterates what runic calendars were used for and he even tells us the Swedish name for one: *Rimstaf*.

Rune forms

The next section is devoted to taking a closer look at the runes, their forms and their roman equivalents, starting with the last line of runes in the Ambrosius alphabet, the diphthongs. The alphabet features six diphthongs, which seems strange at first, since the Swedish language had lost all diphthongs by the Viking Age (cf. for example Widmark 2001: 80). But there is another language with six diphthongs that perfectly match those shown here: Latin. What can be observed here is the need to provide a runic equivalent for every letter that occurs in the roman alphabet, a tendency which is well known from mediaeval runic inscriptions. Except for the runes for <ei> and <oi>, which can be found in epigraphic sources, the runes seem to have been made up when Olaus was asked to write them down.

The basis for the runes seems to have been a late-mediaeval futhorc. The runes for Latin <c, f, g, h, i, k, m, n, o, p, r, s, t, u> can be found in runic epigraphy. There are some elements of the shapes of those runes which might hint at roman influence, for example the serifs on some of the runes mentioned. Furthermore, it is possible to exclude some runes from the search for runic sources if it is acknowledged that staves can be angular rather than vertical. There are then six runes left that could help in identifying a source:

the **b**-rune, the **q**-rune, the **x**-rune, the **y**-rune, the **z**-rune and the strangest rune here, the “ampersand”-rune or **et**-rune. Again, I will concentrate on only two examples, the **q**-rune and the **x**-rune.

The **q**-rune is a mirrored **p**. According to Samnordisk runtextdatabas ‘Pan-Scandinavian Runic Text Database’, there are 13 inscriptions containing a symbol for <q>. Of those 13 inscriptions, eight use both roman and runic characters. In those inscriptions, the <q> occurs only in the parts written in roman letters. Of the five remaining inscriptions, two do not seem to have linguistic meaning (N 641 and N B421). The remaining three inscriptions are the lead amulet from Blæsinge, Denmark (DR Aarb1987;205 / Sj 50), the lost inscription †N 547 and the tree-amulet from Kilaarsarfik in Greenland (GR 43).

†N 547 is also called “(King) Olaf’s wafer iron”. In the drawing that survives of this object, we can see a runic alphabet running from right to left. Between the rune for <p>, which appears in its mediaeval shape **K**, and the **r**-rune, we find a rune that looks like a normal **k**-rune. Compared to the other two **k**-runes in the alphabet which represent **g** and **k**, the twig seems to be slightly more rounded. Still, it does not match our rune for <q>.

The runic sequence on the tree-amulet from Kilaarsarfik, which contains the rune for <q>, renders it as a mirrored **k**-rune, but it is not translated in Samnordisk runtextdatabas and, in the absence of a good interpretation for this part of the inscription, we cannot be certain that there really is a rune for <q> here.

The lead-amulet from Blæsinge contains a Latin inscription written in runes. The **q**-rune appears three times, always in the word *neque*. To judge from the drawing which is available in the Danish Runic Database, the rune for <q> has the shape **P**.

The Blæsinge inscription also contains a sign for <x>, but it is written with a roman **X**. †N 547 also has a rune for <x>, if we accept that the rune between the **u**-rune and the **y**-rune should represent the Latin <x>. Its shape is that of a normal **h**-rune of the younger fupark, with the two branches crossing the stave in the middle. The other **h**-rune in this inscription has its branches above the middle of the stave. The rune following the **y**-rune has the shape **h** with a short horizontal line in the middle of each vertical element, and is supposedly meant to be a rune for <z>, which we find on two Danish inscriptions, on the lead-amulets from Odense (DR 204 / Fyn 23) and Kävlinge (NOR 1999;21 / Sk 20). In those inscriptions, this rune is used to represent Latin <x>, as in the 14th-century manuscript Clm 276 folio, held at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München (fol. 96v). There are four more

inscriptions from Norway (N A77, N A115, N B582, N B596) where a rune is used for <x>, but none of them uses the rune found in the Magnus alphabets; they all use a Viking-Age **h**-rune.⁷

The first step was to start with the sound values and to compare the epigraphic runes used for a particular sound value to the ones representing the respective sound in Ambrosius' alphabet. Of course, it is also necessary to reverse this process, meaning that one has to look for runes that are similarly shaped and see what sound they represent.

For this purpose, the so-called *belgþór*-rune Φ , which appears mainly in Icelandic inscriptions, will be used. In those inscriptions, it is used to represent an <e> (cf. Bæksted 1942: 50f.). It also occurs in an inscription in Maeshowe, Orkney, and its sound value is discussed at length by Michael Barnes in his edition of the Maeshowe inscriptions (Barnes 1994), as well as in a separate paper (Barnes 1989). This rune can also be found in the Stavanger I inscription (N 250) where it represents a long e [e:]. According to Óláfr hvítaskáld's *Third Grammatical Treatise*, moreover, the rune represents [y] (cf. Barnes 1994: 49f.). There are also some inscriptions containing this rune where it appears to have no sound value at all, for example the Bårse font (DR 224 / Sj 78).

It has hopefully become clear that there seem to be no true parallels for certain runes in mediaeval runic epigraphy or manuscripts, since some runes shaped like the ones found in Ambrosius and Magnus never have the sound value given in these books. The next step is to widen the search to include inscriptions and manuscripts contemporary to the Magnus alphabets. From runic epigraphy, a famous example from this era comes to mind: actually two inscriptions in the cathedral of Lund (DR 312 / SkL 1 and DR 313 / SkL 2). Both in fact contain runes that are similar to the second <y> in the *Historia*-alphabets and the <y> in the Ambrosius alphabet, but in these inscriptions they are clearly **h**-runes.

Luckily, there is one manuscript from this period which also contains a rune representing roman <x>: notes made by Bent Andersen Bille between 1543 and 1545. For this purpose, Bille used a rune shaped like an Φ with the stave rotated circa 45° clockwise. It is used in fol. 12v in the sequence **þæn sæ Φ spænæ dak, ten sextene dag**, 'the sixteenth day'. The similarity to the rune printed in Ambrosius is remarkable. But although there are other similarities in the shape of the runes, it seems impossible to connect the sources; moreover, there is at least one considerable difference: the *tvímaðr*-rune $\mathbb{X}$, which is used by both Ambrosius/Magnus and Bille, represents a <y> in

⁷ N B582 also contains a runic alphabet that uses a **k**-rune for <q>.

the first case, whereas Bent Bille uses this rune as a variant of <m> (cf. Hagland 2006: 156).

Conclusion

As was shown earlier, Olaus Magnus was familiar not only with runic epigraphy, but also with runic calendars. He knew exactly what these looked like and he gives a detailed description, far more detailed than his description of the rune-stones. As regards his alphabets, he may have felt the need to compare the runes to the roman alphabet, going so far as to add runes for diphthongs in the case of the Ambrosius alphabet. In the *Historia*-alphabets, Olaus likewise uses the roman alphabet and the Latin language as a basis, omitting typical Scandinavian letters such as æ and ø/œ. For those roman letters that had no runic equivalent, he used other runes which he took from one of the sources he knew: the runic calendars. The symbols he uses for <x₁> (Φ), <x₂> (↑) and <y₂> (✕) are all found on runic calendars as there was a need to reach the Golden Number 19 in Christian calendars.⁸ Those symbols were added at the end of the 16 runes of the younger futhork, making it possible to use runes instead of roman letters (cf. Hallonquist 1994: 185). Still, the *Historia*-alphabet shows that he was familiar with late-mediaeval runic writing, as he uses an inverted ↑ for <c> and K for <p>. Given his obvious familiarity with runes, however, his use of the *yr*-rune for <z> is quite baffling.

Olaus Magnus obviously knew a great deal about runes and their use and it should now have become clear that he used different sources for his book. On the other hand, having travelled in Europe and lived in Italy, he was not merely influenced by the European renaissance, but was fully part of it. By combining different approaches, we can reach conclusions and build hypotheses with some degree of certainty. Still, there remain some unanswered questions, so that a quote by Gebhardt (1900: 566) that is more than one hundred years old still maintains its validity:

Überhaupt möchte ich an dieser stelle darauf hinweisen, dass sowol Olaus Magnus' grosse karte des nordens, Venedig 1539 als auch seine *Historia*, Rom 1555 eine unversiechliche fundgrube für die kulturgeschichte des nordens darstellen, die noch lange nicht genügend ausgeschöpft ist.

⁸ In the case of the **q**-rune, it seems to have been an invention of Olaus Magnus based on the lowercase roman letter q. He does not use this rune in the one instance where it could and should be used, in the picture on page 48. Like the mediaeval runecarvers, he uses a **k**-rune to denote roman <q> in the word **antikua**.

Postscript

At the time this paper was written, I was unfortunately not aware of an article by Carla Cucina that had already dealt with this subject:

Cucina, Carla, 1999: *Le rune in Johannes e Olaus Magnus fra prospettiva antiquaria e tradizione etnica*. In: *I fratelli Giovanni e Olao Magno. Opera e cultura tra due mondi*. Ed. by Carlo Santini. Rome. Pp. 33–100.

Manuscripts

Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München: Clm 276 folio. http://daten.digital-sammlung-en.de/bsb00069152/image_204 (2015-01-04).

Rigsarkivet København: Bille, Bent Andersen: *Afskrifter og diverse optegnelser 1543–1553*.

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