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WOLFGANG BECK

Reading Runes in Late Medieval Manuscripts

Abstract

Whilst the *runica manuscripta* of English tradition, the Scandinavian rune poems, and the occasional use of runes as writers' signatures and in the Old High German glosses have been comparatively well-researched, this does not apply to the same extent to the use of runes in late medieval (German) manuscripts. Runes and runic alphabets are found far less frequently in these, for example in the foreign alphabets in the Voyages by Sir John Mandeville or in a manuscript with medical remedies and an invocation of the devil; finally also in a magical treatise relating to the hermetic tradition. However, the use of runes in late medieval manuscripts cannot properly be explained by the functions usually attributed to the *runica manuscripta*. On the understanding that discussion of *runica manuscripta* is not just a runic problem in the narrow sense, but can also contribute to an understanding of medieval culture, the specific implications of the use and pragmatics of the late medieval *runica manuscripta* will be explored. The function of runes in late medieval manuscripts should be determined at the same time with reference to secret written forms, readability and illegibility.

Keywords: Medieval runes, *runica manuscripta*, cryptography

1. Introduction

The *runica manuscripta* have played a continuous role in runology, although never a dominant one (Derolez 1951: 40). Research into manuscript runes has prioritized those of the English (Derolez 1954, 1991) and the Scandinavian (Heizmann 1998) tradition simply because of the amount of material. Runic alphabets and rune poems naturally attract the greatest interest in runology because of their informational value for the names of the runes. However, within the tradition of manuscript runes, runic alphabets and rune poems are classified as exceptional because the individual runes do not fulfil an orthographic function but instead are merely explained or named. Otherwise, manuscript runes perform different functions, which Bauer (2003a: 9-11, 2003b: 601) has recently systematized following the preparatory work of Derolez (1954) and Heizmann (1998): (1) In Icelandic and English manuscripts, manuscript runes were used as supplementary characters to record Germanic phonemes such as /w/ and /p/ that are not represented by the roman alphabet. (2) Runes were used as ideographic runes (*Begriffsrunen*).

The rune is the so-called signifier and the name of the rune, referring to the extra-linguistic object or referent, is the signified. Here, the runes serve as “abbreviations in the context of Latin script” (my translation of Heizmann 1998: 514, in reference to the roman, rather than the Latin, alphabet). (3) In bookbinding, runes fulfilled the technical function of signature marks. (4) Runes were used to record monograms, names of writers, and marginal notes. Especially for (2) and (4), a decorative and cryptographic function can be postulated; medieval writers could also exhibit their education through the use of a foreign alphabet.

In comparison with the English and Scandinavian tradition, continental *runica manuscripta* are encountered far less frequently. They seem to belong mainly to the early Middle Ages. Apart from the famous rune poem *Abecedarium Nordmannicum*, their use corresponds to functions that can be found in the English and Scandinavian tradition. Runes were used as additions to the roman alphabet (as in *The Lay of Hildebrand* and *The Wessobrunn Prayer*), as signature marks or *Kustode* or for recording the names of writers like **cundpato** (München, BSB, Clm 6250, fol. 280r), **madalfrid** (München, BSB, Clm 6291, fol. 246r) or **ercanfrit** (Würzburg, UB, M. p. th. f. 47, fol. 71r). Runes were also used to record Old High German stylus glosses (Nievergelt 2019). All of these aspects of early medieval *runica manuscripta* usage have been fairly well studied. In contrast, the existence of manuscript runes in late medieval continental manuscripts has rarely been referenced. Runology hardly appears to notice the existence of late medieval continental manuscript runes. However, manuscript runes can be found more or less continuously in continental manuscripts in the High and Late Middle Ages, although in vestigial form. In the following, some late medieval *runica manuscripta* will be presented in detail.

2. The foreign language alphabets of Jean de Mandeville

The *Voyages* by Jean de Mandeville represent a literary construct in the form of a fictional travelogue which was probably written in the mid-fourteenth century. They have since been translated from French into almost all the European vernaculars as well as Latin, the language of scholars. Created as a comprehensive description of the world, the various versions of the *Voyages* include up to eight different foreign alphabets: Greek, Egyptian, Hebrew, Tartar-Russian/Saracenic, Persian, Chaldean, Chinese, and the alphabet of the land of Prester John. The alphabet designated as

Tartar-Russian in the group of manuscripts with eight alphabets (as Saracenic in the group of manuscripts with six alphabets) can be found at the end of Chapter 46 of the first book in the German Diemerungen version, in which a land route to Jerusalem via Germany, Libya, and Tartary is presented. The Tartar-Russian inventory usually contains 27 or 28 graphemes. According to Letts (1949: 157), “Mandeville’s Saracen forms are in fact Runic”; similarly Seebold (1998: 441) states that this alphabet presents “clear runic forms”, which were alphabetized and given names originating from the tradition of *Cosmographia* by Aethicus. While this finding holds true for the letter names, the characters must be relativized. In fact, some of the characters are runic. This can be explained by the tradition of the Aethicus alphabet, which is probably not a pure product of the imagination (Löwe 1976) but rather based on the Old Turkic runic script – or better, the Orkhon-Yenisei notched script. In Mandevillian research, the assertion of Letts and Seebold (i.e. that Mandeville’s alphabet contained runic characters) was accepted without reflection (Przybilski 2002: 310). Although this may apply, with reservations for a few manuscripts such as Brussels, Ms. 10420-10425, fol. 49r (Derolez 1951: 53, 1954: 276), the bulk of the tradition appears to follow Aethicus, which argues for scholarly knowledge of various scriptural traditions. For the study of *runica manuscripta*, such isolated records of forms of runes are of subordinate value, not least because they are not intended as runes but rather may have arisen through the contamination of various alphabetic traditions.

3. Liber Runarum

The *Liber Runarum* is a short treatise that has been passed down in four manuscripts (Dresden, SLUB, N 100, fol. 198r-200v; London, BL, Sloane 3854, fol. 97rv, 101rv; Rome, BAV, Pal. lat. 1439, fol. 346r-347v; Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. 12834, fol. 1r-6r) in the context of medieval Hermeticism (Hermes Latinus). In a further manuscript (Bamberg, SB, Msc. Nat. 7, fol. 410r-417v) that was unknown to the editor Lucentini (2001), it appears as *Ars Runarum*. The *Liber Runarum* provides a guide on how to engrave the name of planetary angels with runic characters in materials assigned to the planets (e.g. lead – Saturn; gold – Sun) for the purposes of magic. The magical principle is based on the notion of the entanglement of macrocosm and microcosm, more precisely on the notion that there is a sympathetic relationship between the planetary angels and the associated magically effective material, which can be enhanced by the use of special characters. Each zodiac is connected to

the adjacent one by a zodiac sign with a fantasy name, and each zodiac sign is assigned two elemental properties and two runes. The runes assigned to the zodiac signs are placed in alphabetical order so that the zodiacs of *Aries* and *Taurus* under the zodiac sign of *Salmadys* belong to **a** and **b**, while the zodiacs *Taurus* and *Gemini* under the zodiac sign *Lachlym* belong to **c** and **d**. The *Liber Runarum* denotes the graphemes as runes (*figure que rune nuncupantur*) and also mentions the names of the graphemes: *ar, berke, kon, yistungian, istungenis, foe, koen, hagel, lys, barke, lager, math, nother, other, bierde stungen, bierde blesena, rether, soel, tir, ur, xers, yos, zazir*. It is obvious that the *Liber Runarum* uses the common names of the Scandinavian runic tradition in a partially corrupt form. Here, the designations *yistungian, istungenis, bierde stungen, bierde blesena* refer to the tradition of dotted runes (*stungna runor*). Although the graphemes reproduced in the manuscripts mostly represent known runic characters, some characters can hardly be attributed to known runes (Burnett 1983: 428 f.). The use of runes and the mention of their names attest to a scholarly tradition in a special magical-hermetic context. The *Liber Runarum* provides a further example of use in the context of a love spell, whereby the name of the angel of Venus and of the Moon (*Behonydiun, Lyeleyl*) as well as the name of the girl to be enchanted should be engraved on a silver plate. In tabular form, the *Liber Runarum* also indicates the transliteration of various planetary angel names. At first glance, the runic transliteration of these names seems to be defective; the name of the moon angel *Lyeleyl* is reproduced in different forms: **lafksao, lafkfaohro, lafkkaao**. The writer obviously did not understand the complicated secret system of substitution explained in the treatise (Lucentini 2001: 417 f.). If I have correctly understood the complicated instructions, the correct transliteration would be **lxfixxo**. However, failure to follow one's own encryption algorithm is of interest only for cryptologists rather than runologists because the substitution process is character-independent – it also works well with roman characters. The use of runes is therefore simply another small step in the encryption process. This is of interest inasmuch as the use of runes refers back to the high medieval Scandinavian tradition of using runes in magical contexts. The Buslubœn from The Saga of Bósi and Herraud and several episodes from Egil's saga are the most prominent examples of this. However, the *Liber Runarum* remains deficient in its knowledge of runes. It belongs to the tradition of using runes as magical characters but features neither a complete and 'real' character inventory nor the 'correct' names of the runes. Nor do the transliterations appear to demonstrate a complete understanding of the cryptographic system and the runes.

In this respect, theoretical and scholarly knowledge and practical applicability of the runic characters diverge, which is not indicative of a living tradition of runes in late medieval continental manuscripts despite the attempt here to connect an autochthonous scriptural tradition with the late medieval Hermetic tradition of astrology and magical images.

4. Invocation of the devil and remedies

The *Liber Runarum* appears to confirm the thesis that the scholarly tradition of manuscript runes moved away from the correct use of runes as a system of graphemes and that the theory and practice of using runes therefore collapsed. A German manuscript from the middle of the 15th century nevertheless shows that correct application of the runic grapheme system was possible. The writer of a Macer manuscript (Prague, Národní knihovna České republiky, Cod. XXIII.F.129, fol. 39r-56v) in the so-called German vulgate edition partially resorted to using runes to record medical remedies. These characters, to judge by their form, originate from the Danish tradition. Beckers (1984: 139; my translation) notes that “[w]ithin the texts written entirely in bastarda, [he] encrypted only a few words in runic script, and these were mostly the names of the medicines used or the organs to be treated.” The writer, whose language appears to originate from the Upper German-Alemannic region, seems to be quite familiar with the specifics of runic orthography. The writer uses colons as word separators and bind-runes (**ch**, **en**, **er**), as can be seen in the following remedy against earache:

Item nim **fenchel** : **hus** wurtz, **retich** saft, milich uon einer frawen, dy einen knaben seiget der acht tag alt sy, vnd **emeissen eier**, **lor** : **ol**, **kaczen** : **harn** ein wenig, dar vß smier ein saft vnd ein wasser vnd tûe all mal 1 tropffen oder zwen in dyn or; wo dir dan we sy; so genist er an allen zwifel. [Take fennel, houseleek, radish juice, the milk of a woman breastfeeding an eight-day-old boy, ant eggs, bay leaf, oil, and a bit of cat urine and prepare it into a juice and a water and drip one or two drops in your ear where it hurts. It will then without a doubt be healed.]

Similarly, the writer copies down a Middle High German formula for invoking the devil (fol. 533v) which has a substantially higher proportion of runic characters than the Macer remedies. Here, the writer writes various satanic names (**boes gaist**, **diabolo**, **satana**, **schwartz huindlin**) as well as the performative aspects of the formula with runes: **rief** mit **lutter stim dise** wortt, ich will **dir zuo sprechen**; was du **in fragst**, **das** sagt er **dir** [call out

these words in a loud voice; I want to talk to you; what you ask him, he tells you]. One can interpret this process as an encryption strategy which aimed to “protect the dangerous text from unauthorized readers” (Beckers 1984: 144; my translation). However, the use of runes as an unfamiliar alphabet is a cryptographically weak encryption strategy; anyone who was acquainted with contemporary writing systems could read such texts by drawing on traditional lists of alphabets and runes, as found, for example, in the Munich manuscript Clm 276, fol. 96v (Derolez 1965: 35 f.), which contains a fuþorc with runic names: *fhe, vr, thors, os, rether, chon, hagat, nodh, ihs, ar, sol, thur, biorchi, madher, lagher, vir, solhengethe* and a runic alphabet. Like other (early) medieval secret writing systems such as the partial substitution *bfk*-, *cgl*- or point ciphers (Nievergelt 2019: 13 f.), these would hardly have existed to conceal the writing as this contradicts the very intention. As medieval thinking connected magic and medicine, and in consideration of the potentially magical nature of runes, the effect of auratisation, i.e. charging or potentiating the magical energy of the individual texts, was more likely.

5. Conclusion

The late medieval continental *runica manuscripta* provide an important link between the early medieval and the epigraphic tradition on the one hand and humanistic employment by Bonaventura Vulcanius and Wolfgang Lazius on the other. Wolfgang Lazius was the first to edit the section with 15 runic graphemes and rune names from the treatise *De inventione litterarum* in his book *De aliquot gentium migrationibus sedibus fixis, reliquiis, linguarumque, initiis (et) immutationibus ac dialectis*, printed in Basel in 1557. In his work *De literis et lingua Getarum siue Gothorum item de notis Lombardicis; quibus accesserunt specimina variarum linguarum*, printed in Leiden in 1597, Bonaventura Vulcanius presented runes and runic inscriptions in comparison with the Gothic language. It cannot be ruled out that Johannes Trithemius' knowledge of runes was acquired due to his contact with Johannes Virdung of Haßfurt, the writer of one of the *Liber Runarum* manuscripts (Rome, BAV, Pal. lat. 1439) (Láng 2008: 259 f.). With regard to the question of the relationship of manuscript runes to the epigraphic runic tradition, i.e. “One or Two Worlds?” (Derolez 1983), which Seebold (1991: 516) tried to answer by differentiating the two traditions (an ‘old’ tradition of epigraphic runes and a ‘learned’ tradition of manuscript runes), the answer is complex. One can neither confirm the early view that *runica manuscripta* were a phenomenon

that was largely decoupled from epigraphic tradition (Derolez 1954: 430) or “a bookish pursuit, first merely an orthographic convenience in the writing of the vernacular, but later an antiquarian pastime for its own sake” (Elliott 1989: 56) – nor the opposing view that there was a continual connection between the two traditions (Parsons 1994: 198). The late medieval tradition affirms both findings; however, a very different conclusion must be drawn: The existence and use of manuscript runes is highly specific to the type of text and depends on context. From an epigraphic perspective, neither the Mandeville alphabets nor the Liber Runarum represented runes correctly; on the other hand, the Macer remedies in the Prague manuscript display an advanced scriptural practice that appears to be based on epigraphic tradition and that documents the continued correct use of runes.

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