Evidence of Runic and Roman Script in Contact in Post-Viking Age Norway

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Runes were invented in close contact with the roman alphabet, somewhere in Europe, probably during the first century of the Christian era. Over the centuries runic script spread and changed, until it once more came into contact with the roman alphabet. In Norway the two writing systems met again after almost a thousand years. The earliest runic inscription found in Norway (the lancehead from Øvre Stabu) dates from as early as A.D. 180 (Düwel 2008, 24). We can only guess how widespread knowledge of runes was among the population, but enough people must have been involved in the writing and reading of the script for its use to have been perpetuated over the centuries. Exactly who the people concerned were is unknown, but they probably either belonged to or served a social elite. Towards the end of the Viking Age, not later than the eleventh century, the roman alphabet was brought to Norway by the Christian church and its clergy. As far as we know, the missionary bishops and priests active in Norway came mainly from England.

Naturally, this new alphabet must have come into contact with the native runic script in some way or other. The runes did not flee the country; people continued to make runic inscriptions. In fact, from what has survived it seems that output was increased. At the same time some members of the native population gradually learnt to read and write the Latin language, and became acquainted with the roman alphabet. They were probably sons of the well-off, ready for positions in the new church organisation and eventually in the king’s growing administration. Exactly when the roman alphabet was first used to write the vernacular—Old Norwegian/Old Norse—we do not


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know. The oldest surviving vernacular manuscripts are from the middle of the twelfth century, but most scholars think the practice goes back to the middle of the eleventh (Haugen 2004, 177–79).

Thus two different alphabets were used in the same area and in the same period of time to write the same language: medieval Norway had become a two-script society. We know little about the interaction between those representing the old runic literacy and the new literate elite. One may wonder whether they were in fact the same people, or if different groups of people used different alphabets for different purposes. There exists, however, conspicuous evidence of direct contact between, indeed even intermixture of, the two scripts, so there must have been people who knew both. This assumption gains added credibility from the not infrequent occurrence of inscriptions written in acceptable Latin.

In this paper I am going to present evidence of contact between runic and roman script in post-Viking Age Norway. I will start with the texts that most easily catch the eye, i.e. those written with letters of both scripts, and I will call them mixed texts whether they are roman-alphabet manuscripts with occasional runes, or epigraphical material with a mixture of roman letters and runes. Evidence of contact can, however, also be more indirect, accessible only through interpretation of certain features of a text or of the writing system, the one system showing possible influence from the other. In the second part of my paper I will concentrate on the various indirect ways in which the roman alphabet influenced runic writing.

The first mixed texts to consider are Old Norse vernacular manuscripts. The roman alphabet itself as used to write Norwegian contains traces of influence from runic script. The letter Þ is in origin a rune, but it was added to the roman alphabet in Anglo-Saxon England. It is unlikely the Norwegians repeated the process and borrowed it anew; almost certainly Þ followed the roman alphabet from England to Norway (Haugen 2004, 181).

In both England and Norway the occasional rune may be used as an abbreviation sign in roman-alphabet manuscripts, whereby the runic character stands in place of its name. The idea is certainly English, but the actual runic form found in Norwegian manuscripts is not. While English scribes use English d and m as abbreviation signs for dæg ‘day’ and man ‘man’ (Page 1999, 77 f.), their Norwegian counterparts adopt the Norwegian m, Þ, for the word maðr ‘man’. This abbreviation is found in e.g. AM 315 e fol. and NRA 1 b (manuscripts of The Older Gulaþing Law) and AM 619 4to (The Old Norwegian Homily Book). These manuscripts are either from the beginning of the thirteenth century or possibly a little earlier. At least some Norwegians with a roman-script education knew enough of the Norwegian
rune row, its characters and their names, to be able to select its m as an appropriate abbreviation sign.

The Norwegian epigraphical material containing letters from both scripts is usually grouped with “runic inscriptions” in museums and collections, and labelled as such. And when published, such material tends to appear in editions of runic inscriptions. That does not, however, imply a preponderance of runic characters. It is simply a reflection of the fact that runes and runic inscriptions have attracted more attention and been more thoroughly studied in Norway than their roman-alphabet counterparts. An unpublished inscription with eleven roman letters and a single rune from the excavations at Bryggen (the Hanseatic Wharf) in Bergen is thus registered as runic and given the number B 454 in the catalogue of the Bryggen runic material. It consists of two sequences, one with six roman letters: AVROVE, the other with five roman letters and one rune: AVRÍVE, i.e. an o in place of roman O.

Other artefacts show a more equal distribution of runes and roman characters, but as Aslak Liestøl points out in his edition of the runic inscriptions in Latin from the Bryggen excavations, such mixed texts are not very frequent (NIyR, 6: 69). That is true not only of the Bergen material but Norwegian epigraphy as a whole. I have found only eleven objects with mixed inscriptions published in the six printed volumes of the corpus edition Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer (NIyR). These volumes contain about 670 inscriptions of post-Viking Age origin, i.e. those normally termed “medieval”. A further 600 or so such inscriptions have yet to be definitively published in the corpus edition. Without claiming exhaustive knowledge of the material, it is my impression that mixed inscriptions occur no more frequently in this collection than in the printed material.

Not all eleven mixed inscriptions from the corpus edition exhibit the same type of mixture. Three of the texts switch from one script to the other and back again in the middle of a word or sentence, like B 454 mentioned above. One of them, looking relatively unprofessional, is on a church bell (N 268), another is cut into the wooden cover of a Psalter book belonging to a church (N 553), the third is pricked into a gold ring of low quality workmanship (N 635). All three are quite short, two of them in Old Norse, the third (on the ring) containing only the names of the four evangelists. The mixture of scripts and the quality of these three inscriptions bear witness to people poorly trained in the art of writing. They clearly knew characters from both alphabets, but were perhaps unable to tell the two apart. Surprisingly, at least two of the inscriptions are connected to a church and may have been designed by clergymen. The dating of these inscriptions in the corpus edition is rather vague, but they probably belong to the thirteenth and fourteenth
centuries and thus spring from what had undoubtedly been a two-script society for at least two hundred years.

A mixed inscription of a different type stands on a gravestone from Trøndelag: N 457, dated to the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century. It is in Old Norse and quite long, the characters are evenly cut, and the layout gives a pleasing impression, even if the surface is now very worn. The inscription starts with roman letters, which proceed round the edge for most of the way. Suddenly, in the middle of the word faðir, the carver switches to runes: ... FAþer ..., and continues in this script for the most part, right until the end—probably eleven additional words that are now no longer easy to read. The sudden shift in the middle of a word may be the result of bad planning: the carver suddenly realising he was running out of space. As runes are normally slimmer than roman letters, he simply turned to the other alphabet he knew, and completed his work. The result looks quite natural and elegant. We can imagine such a person being well trained in both alphabets and capable of keeping them apart, perhaps offering to carve gravestone texts in either script depending on the wish or requirement of his customers. This is the only Norwegian medieval gravestone known today with a mixed inscription, but several purely runic gravestones have survived as well as a number in roman script.

The other seven objects with mixed inscriptions have their runes and roman letters kept strictly apart, with two separate lines or texts—one in runes, one in roman—on the same object. In most cases, however, a single carver was probably responsible for both, and we can only speculate on why he changed from the one script to the other as he moved from line to line or side to side. Two of the objects are church bells, each carrying two inscriptions entirely or chiefly in Latin, a long one written with runes, a shorter one with roman letters. Both bells are now lost and known only from old drawings, so we cannot be absolutely sure how the inscriptions were made. But the workmanship seems considerably superior to that of the thoroughly mixed-script bell text mentioned above.

A few church bells come with inscriptions purely in runic script. Together with the gravestones mentioned above they show that runes were not shunned by the Church. On the contrary, it clearly deemed them suitable for several purposes, including dedication inscriptions and builders’ signatures on church walls. In Tingvoll church in Nordmøre a man called Gunnarr has left a long and beautifully made runic inscription in Old Norse on a marble ashlar above the altar (N 446), telling us that he “made” the church. Whether he actually did some manual labour himself or just commissioned the building is uncertain, but he addresses yþr lærþa menn ‘you learned
men’ as well as ‘all those able to read’ his inscription. He clearly expects the ‘learned men’, i.e. the clergy, to be able to read his runes.

Returning to the mixed inscriptions that keep the two scripts apart, we have N338, written on a small wooden stick found under the floor of Urnes stave church in Sogn. On one side there is a nearly complete roman alphabet, on another traces of the last part of a fuþark. The purpose of the object is unclear, but the two lines supply further evidence of a person or persons who mastered both scripts, using them side-by-side, probably for the same purpose.

In addition to those published in the runic corpus edition, there is a small but interesting group of mixed inscriptions on seals attached to medieval diplomas or charters, chiefly from the fourteenth century. Their existence has not been widely known and they are ignored in the literature on runes, but recently they have received attention in a hovedoppgave (M.A. thesis) written by Jan Christian Nilssen at the University of Oslo (2005). The particular seals that Nilssen presents have a legend with the name of the owner in roman letters, together with one or two runes placed in the middle of the seal, giving the first or the first two sounds of the individual’s given name. A few other seals from the same period have one or two roman letters in the middle instead of runes, but with the same function. Seals are definitely part of the literate, roman-script side of the two-script society, attached as they are to diplomas, and the personal name with roman letters in the seal’s legend usually appears in latinised form. With their added runes these seals are a link to the other side of the two-script society, hinting at the name of the owner to those who might not be fluent in roman script.

Leaving the cases of direct contact between the two alphabets, I now turn to the more indirect evidence. In Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer scholars such as Magnus Olsen, Aslak Liestøl and James Knirk have drawn attention to a few runic inscriptions which seem to reveal misunderstanding of an original written in roman letters, possibly even in Latin. It is assumed that it was primarily the abbreviation signs used in roman-alphabet texts that were problematic or unknown to the runic copyists. An inscription from Bergen, quoting a few lines from the Psalter, has some misspellings that Liestøl suggests in the corpus edition are the result of an uninformed rune-carver’s copying of a roman-script original. The inscription is N628, and its b line runs as follows: dihssidominosdomiossedeadæhstrismeoe, i.e. Dixit Dominus Domino meo: Sede a dextris meis. Liestøl points in particular to the second do, which must stand for domino. He assumes that this word was abbreviated by contraction in the original, i.e. do + an abbreviation sign, and that the sign escaped the attention of the rune-carver. Nevertheless, he
must have been able to read and copy roman script to a certain extent, even when the language was Latin (NLyR, 6:44–47).

Some of the rune-carvers may also have seen, understood and even tried to copy the problematic abbreviation signs of the roman-script original when they made their runic transcript. Aslak Liestøl has suggested (NLyR, 6:55–62) that some remarkable runes with unusual branches in another Latin-language inscription from Bergen (N 632) may be the result of such an attempt. The inscription throws up so many problems and contains so many apparent errors that Liestøl had to propose it was a copy of a copy in runes of a roman-script original. He could well be right, but certainty in such matters is hard to come by. Liestøl also drew attention to two exceptional runes in the same inscription. He is probably right in claiming that they are modelled on the roman letters \( w \) and \( q \). The first is literally a double \( u \), one inside the other (a runic form not totally unknown in Danish inscriptions; N 632 has a few other features that point to Denmark). The second looks like a combination of a roman minuscule \( q \) and an ordinary \( k \)—the latter to indicate the sound of the character. This hybrid \( q \) also occurs twice in a bind with \( u \) (in the word "quinque").

N 632’s \( q \) and \( w \) were not part of the inventory of characters that most Norwegian rune-carvers had at their disposal—as far as we can tell from surviving inscriptions, where \( k \) usually stands for \( q \) and \( u \) for \( w \). Somewhat commoner is the use of distinct runes for \( c \) and \( z \). Norwegian carvers often employed long-branch \( s \) (\( \text{H} \)) for these two, while reserving short-twigs \( s \) (\( \text{T} \)) for \( s \) (the opposite of practice in Denmark and Sweden). A likely explanation of the choice of \( \text{H} \) for \( z \) is the similarity of form. That probably also lies behind the occasional use of plain \( \text{k} \) or modified \( \text{k} \) for \( x \).

Consideration of these attempts to provide runic equivalents for most or all of the roman letters brings us to the question of the expansion of the runic writing system from sixteen to over twenty units. This expansion and the concomitant transition from runes with several phonemic values to less ambiguous characters seem to have started at approximately the same time as the first contacts between runes and the roman alphabet. Thus it is possible it was the roman alphabet which provided the impetus for the modernisation of the Viking Age runic writing system, carvers adopting from the new alphabet the idea of roughly one letter for each phoneme. Unfortunately there are not many Norwegian inscriptions extant from this transitional period, and thus the various stages in the expansion cannot be dated at all accurately. In the surviving material, for example, all dotted runes except \( e \) occur in what appear to be twelfth-century inscriptions; \( e \) is
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found in eleventh-century inscriptions from Trondheim and on runic coins from the same century.

Although the writing system was thus refined, the fuþark with its sixteen runes in their traditional order remained intact throughout the medieval period—as over seventy medieval Norwegian fuþark inscriptions bear witness (Seim 1998). There is thus a dichotomy in the post-Viking Age runic system: the fuþark remained the basic alphabet, and while additional distinctive characters were used in writing, they never became an integrated part of the runic alphabet.

The discrepancy between the extended runic writing system and the traditional fuþark of sixteen characters must have been noticed by runecarvers and been compared to the roman system where all the characters used in writing also had their place in the alphabet. One product of this comparison was undoubtedly the so-called extended fuþark inscriptions, a group of twelve fuþarks with one to five extra runes added to the basic sixteen. There is no indication of a fixed order among these additional characters. Indeed, one of the inscriptions concerned (A24b) has its four extra runes placed within the fuþark, two of them immediately following the runes from which they are derived. Thus e (i.e. dotted i) comes after i, while p follows b.

In some of these extended fuþarks, and some of the unextended ones as well, a small but conspicuous change in the traditional order of the characters can be noticed. Instead of ml we find lm, possibly in imitation of roman-alphabet order. Among sixty-eight medieval Norwegian fuþarks that contain both m and l, twenty-five have l preceding m (Seim 1998, 116). The reason the roman model did not inspire further changes in the fuþark order—if that is indeed what happened—may be the fact that apart from ml, only s and t are neighbours in both the fuþark and the roman alphabet. And of course this latter pair follows the same order in both systems.

A really conspicuous Norwegian example of the influence of the roman alphabet on the runic are the abc-inscriptions. These list the runes in roman-alphabet rather than fuþark order, and in order to fill all the slots they give runic equivalents for c, q, x, z. While the extended fuþark inscriptions seem to be feeble attempts at imitating the roman script practice of listing all the units of the writing system, the abc-inscriptions are more or less full-scale transliterations of the roman alphabet. But this is not at all typical of the way runes were presented and transmitted: the abc-inscriptions number only four, while we have more than seventy fuþarks with the traditional order intact (Seim 1998, 149).
The traditional *fuþark* order is also found in runic inscriptions containing sequences of syllables, interpreted as syllabaries of the kind that were used in the Middle Ages (and even earlier) in the teaching of elementary reading and writing in the roman script and Latin language. The idea of using syllabaries seems to have been borrowed from this type of school training into the probably more unorganised teaching of runic script, and is thus evidence of contact between people from both sides of the two-script divide—people interested or involved in elementary teaching. But while the original syllabaries used in the teaching of roman script were structured according to the order of the roman alphabet (*ba*, *be*, *bi*, *bo*, *bu*, *ca*, *ce*, *ci*, *co*, *cu*, *da*, *de*, *di*, *do*, *du* ... or *ab*, *ac*, *ad*, *af* ... *eb*, *ec*, *ed*, *ef* ...), most runic syllabaries are entirely or partially based on the *fuþark* order, even if they do not extend very far (Seim 1991). The relevant parts of a couple of inscriptions from Bergen run: *fu:fo:fi:fy:uf:uþ:u*— (*B* 100), *fufafifopapibu* (*B* 647a). None of the Norwegian runic syllabaries follows the order of the roman alphabet.

**Bibliography**

A + number = Preliminary registration number of runic inscriptions found in Norway outside Bryggen in Bergen.

B + number = Preliminary registration number of runic inscriptions found at Bryggen in Bergen.


*NlyR* = *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer*. By Magnus Olsen et al. 6 vols. to date. Oslo 1941 ff.


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