The runic inscriptions in Scandinavia from the Late Roman Iron Age (A.D. c. 160–375) form a well-defined group, chronologically as well as geographically. The function of these earliest runic inscriptions has often been discussed. Do they have a magic purpose, are they the products of illiterate artisans, or should they be interpreted as mere imitations of Latin script, which the Scandinavians had been in more or less direct contact with for most of the Roman Iron Age? Several scholars have discussed this problem, some of them from a philological point of view (e.g. Krause and Jankuhn 1966; Antonsen 1975; Düwel 1981; 2008), and others stressing more the contexts of the inscriptions in addition to the textual content (e.g. Stoklund 1995; Hines 1997).

When considering the function of runic inscriptions, it is important to keep both the philological and the archaeological approach in mind, i.e. to examine the texts with an eye to their chronological, physical and spatial contexts. Moreover, it is of fundamental importance for our understanding of the inscriptions to compare them with contemporary writing in other kinds of script from roughly the same area.

In the following I shall give an example of a contextual analysis of a group of runic inscriptions and Latin imprints from the Late Roman Iron Age in Scandinavia. Using chronology as the means of classifying the inscriptions is important for the investigation, because the function of the inscriptions may easily have changed over time.

Latin inscriptions and imprints in the Early Roman Iron Age

Writing was not unknown to the Scandinavians at the time of the invention of runic writing. In the Early Roman Iron Age (A.D. c. 1–160) at least forty-nine Latin inscriptions and imprints are known from the Scandinavian area,
the majority of them are manufacturers’ marks on Roman bronze imports (Table 1). In this period, Roman imports to Scandinavia were generally concentrated in Denmark and on the island of Gotland. Mainland Sweden had a smaller number of finds, while Norway only represented 10% of the total (Lund Hansen 1987, 127, maps 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6). The distribution of bronze imports with manufacturers’ marks reflects this overall picture very well (Map 1).

The bronze objects (saucepans, ladles, and strainers), which are objects of Roman tableware, are only found in rich grave contexts and are interpreted as being the result of trade with the Romans or as Roman gifts. By far the greater number of them are not stamped, but in the few cases where they are, the imprints consist of Latin capitals, giving names in the genitive, or in the nominative followed by an F for *fecit* ‘made’, or in some cases abbreviations for ‘NN made’. The names are either Roman or Gallic (Lund Hansen 1987, 153). Heinrich Willers (1907, 85 f.) divided them into three different groups: (1) Names in the genitive, known from Pompeii and consisting of *pronomen, nomen* and *cognomen* (*tria nomina*). (2) Names in the genitive, not known from Pompeii, both *tria nomina* and single names. (3) Names in the nominative sometimes followed by an F for *fecit*.

Some of the earliest examples of writing in Iron Age Scandinavia are the inscriptions on the two silver cups from the grave at Hoby on Lolland, dated to the first half of the first century A.D. On the side of each cup and between the pictures, the Greek inscription *Chirisophos epoi* ‘Chirisophos made’ is punched in, one with Greek letters, the other with Latin letters. Cheirisophos was a Greek silversmith, who probably worked in Rome or Campania at the time of Augustus. Furthermore the Roman name “Silius” is carved on the base of each cup (Werner 1966, 7 f.). Silius is probably the former owner most likely to be identified as *Caius Silius*, who was stationed in Mainz, in A.D. 14–21, as the commander of the upper Rhine army (Storgaard 2003, 112). Underneath the base of each cup the exact weight is punched, in Latin

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Table 1. The number of different Roman imports with fabrication stamps in the Early Roman Iron Age (A.D. c. 1–160)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saucepans</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladles</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strainers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckets</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver beakers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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_Futhark_ 1 (2010)
letters, probably information given by the workshop. Calculations of the weight of the two cups have been carried out by Frands Herschend (1999).

The practice of inscribing the weight of the object was quite common in the Roman Empire, and it is possible that the problematic inscription on the potsherd from Osterrönfeld in Northern Germany, also dated to the first century A.D., should be interpreted in this way. The object carries three characters that Edith Marold has interpreted either as runes or as Latin letters (Dietz, Marold, and Jöns 1996), but when considering this inscription in the light of the silver cups from Hoby and the inscriptions on the silver ingots from the hoard of Kaiseraugst, Switzerland (Martin 1984, 386–92), it seems more likely to be a Roman weight designation (Fig. 1). The inscription
on the potsherd, P-I=, might be interpreted as ‘P(ound) one plus two units of the pound’, i.e. ‘One pound and two uncialae’ in accordance with the interpretations of the Hoby cups by Herschend. Weight designations on ceramics are, as far as I am aware, not very common, but one might suggest that this particular piece of pottery was used as a weight in connection with the weighing of other objects.

In the Early Roman Iron Age most inscriptions found in Scandinavia are placed on objects and in contexts that indicate a connection with the elite. The question is whether the Germanic peoples of Scandinavia could read the inscriptions on these objects and whether they had a grasp of Latin and Greek writing at all? The majority of the inscriptions were placed on the objects in the process of manufacture, but the potsherd from Osterröinfeld must come from a Germanic product, and therefore it is possible that it was inscribed in Germania.

Inscriptions in the Late Roman Iron Age

From the Late Roman Iron Age about fifty runic inscriptions are recorded, whereas more than a hundred Latin inscriptions and imprints have been found in Scandinavia. The material on which the Latin inscriptions occur shows a greater diversity than in the previous period. Roman swords with manufacturers’ marks comprise a new and overwhelmingly large group of finds in the Scandinavian area, while terra sigillata are less well represented (Table 2 and Map 2).

In this article we shall take a quick look at the Latin inscriptions and imprints which are recorded in the Late Roman Iron Age, and then
concentrate on the manufacturers’ marks on swords in order to prepare for a comparison with the runic inscriptions on weapons from the same period.

Roman coins

Roman coins form by far the largest group of objects with Latin inscriptions found in Scandinavia from the Roman Iron Age. The texts on these coins give the names of Roman emperors and occasionally the name of the place where they were minted. From Scandinavia about 12,000 Roman coins are known, primarily single finds and hoards (Horsnæs 2008). The bulk of these are silver coins (*denarii*), struck in the period A.D. 69–192 (Horsnæs 2003, 335). In 1995 about 3000 of these coins, dating from the first century B.C. to the sixth century A.D., were found in Denmark (Kromann 1995, 347), although the chronology is quite difficult to interpret. The majority are struck in the Early Roman Iron Age, yet these coins, when found in archaeologically datable contexts, belong to the Late Roman Iron Age. This means that the coins must have been in circulation for a very long time (Horsnæs 2003, 336 f.), without doubt longer than most of the other artefact types. Now a total of c. 4600 Roman coins have been found in Denmark, the large hoards of Râmosen and Smørenge containing almost 500 coins each (Horsnæs 2003, 336). Some of the coins are single finds, and the question therefore arises: How were the coins used and by whom? In Illerup Ádal one of the biggest groups of *denarii* consists of single coins and small groups of finds. One of the largest groups was found in close association with one of the richest warrior equipments in this weapon deposit, which suggests that the coins indicate high social status (Horsnæs 2003, 334). Coins are only

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Table 2. The number of different Roman imports with fabrication stamps in the Late Roman Iron Age (A.D. c. 160–375)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swords</td>
<td>c. 92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bandoleer fittings</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samian ware (<em>terra sigillata</em>)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckets</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armlet</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shield boss</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fibula</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman coins</td>
<td>c. 12,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
rarely found in grave contexts. Some twenty of the thousands of graves in Denmark from the Roman Iron Age contain coins. The majority of these belong to the elite (cf. Nielsen 1988, 149–65), and this confirms the picture from Illerup Ådal that coins are indicative of high social rank. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that one of the largest assemblages of coins in Denmark is the approximately 1000 single-find coins from the settlement and trading centre of Gudme-Lundeborg on Fyn (Lars Jørgensen, personal

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communication). Whether these were used in trade imitating Roman tradition is yet to be determined.

**Terra sigillata**

The Roman tableware *terra sigillata*, or Samian ware, was a very common object within the Roman Empire. In the early first century A.D. the workshops of *Terra sigillata* were placed in the Roman provinces of Gaul, Germania, and Britain where thousands of pieces were produced, and this continued until the middle of the third century A.D. Despite this intense production, very few examples of *terra sigillata* reached the Scandinavian area, the period of import being limited to the Late Roman Iron Age. Only three of the imported pots carry manufacturers’ marks, i.e. two pots from graves at Møllegårdsmarken, Fyn, and one from a grave at Valløby, Sjælland. The ones from Møllegårdsmarken are early imports (second half of the second century) produced at the workshop of Cerialis III and Cerialis V at Rheinzabern, and the one from Valløby is a later product (first half of the third century) from the workshop of Comitialis at Westerndorf (Lund Hansen 1982; 1987, 179–84).

**A shield boss from Thorsbjerg**

In the weapon deposit of Thorsbjerg a Latin inscription was found on the front of one of the shield bosses of Roman provenance (Engelhardt 1863, 33; Raddatz 1987, 43). The inscription AEL·AELIANUS is an abbreviation for *Aelius Aelianus*, a Roman name meaning ‘Aelius, son of Aelius’. The inscription is punched, as the Hoby cups and the armlet from Boltinggård (see below), and should probably be interpreted as an owner’s inscription. Owner’s inscriptions of this kind are quite common on Roman military equipment.

**A fibula from Øvre Stabu**

When examining some runic inscriptions and their contexts in the archives of the Museum of Cultural History (incorporating Oldsaksamlingen) in Oslo, I coincidently came across a bronze fibula from Øvre Stabu with some marks on the back of the plate. These marks have not been noted before (cf. Rygh 1895, 127 f.; Schetelig 1914, 5 f.; Herteig 1955, 23 f.); on the drawing in Schetelig’s publication (1914, fig. 1) some scratches are very discretely marked on the plate, but it is obvious that they are not interpreted as intentionally
cut symbols of any kind. In my opinion these marks are not merely scratches or errors resulting from the production of the fibula. On the contrary they are very distinct characters applied to the fibula either in the casting process or immediately after the production, when the bronze was still hot (Fig. 2). This procedure is also seen on Roman fibulae with inscriptions, which are known in quite large numbers on the Continent (Behrens 1950). The question remains, how the characters on the fibula from Øvre Stabu should be read: XL or XI meaning ‘40’ or ‘11’, if Latin. Alternatively the marks could be runic, gi... or ...ig, but such an inscription does not seem to correspond to other known runic inscriptions. The inscriptions on the Roman fibulae from the Continent are often placed on the plate as on the fibula from Øvre Stabu, these inscriptions being the manufacturers’ names. The abbreviations should probably be interpreted in the same way (Behrens 1950, 2). Referring to these Roman fibulae it is possible that the inscription or the symbols on the fibula from Øvre Stabu should be interpreted as the manufacturer’s name, the only identified example of this kind of inscription on fibulae in Northern Europe. On the other hand the inscription on the Øvre Stabu fibula looks very much like a Roman number as mentioned above. Numbers on fibulae are not yet known, and the interpretation of the inscription is therefore uncertain.
In 1905, half an armlet of the Germanic Kolben type was discovered, probably belonging to the hoard of Boltinggård. Other artefacts from the hoard are fifteen Roman aurei and solidi from the fourth century A.D., most of them struck in Trier, and a golden necklace (Henriksen and Horsnæs 2004). This type of armlet was used for a period of almost 300 years from A.D. c. 200 to c. 500, the most well known probably being the ones from Himlingøje, dated to the first half of the third century A.D., and from the Frankish King Childeric’s grave from A.D. c. 481. The armlets were probably worn by the highest-ranking leaders of Germanic society (Lund Hansen 2001, 180 f.). On the armlet from Boltinggård a Latin weight specification P-Ⅲ is punched (Fig. 3). Henriksen and Horsnæs have interpreted this as three Roman pounds, but it can hardly be the actual weight of the armlet, as the sum of three Roman pounds would be 972 grams. The original weight must have been about 80 grams. Henriksen and Horsnæs then suggest that the value of the golden armlet corresponds to three Roman pounds of silver (Henriksen and Horsnæs 2004, 134). Frands Herschend (personal communication), on the other hand, suggests a slightly different interpretation. The Roman pound was divided into twelve unciae. The sum of three unciae is 81,792 grams, which corresponds very well to the actual weight of the armlet. It is possible that the dash after the P indicates that the vertical strokes should be interpreted as units of a pound.

An armlet from Boltinggård

Fig. 3. The Kolben armlet from Boltinggård, Fyn. From Henriksen and Horsnæs 2004, fig. 13.
The bucket from Valløby

A ribbed bucket was found as a part of the rich grave equipment from a man’s grave at Valløby, Denmark (Engelhardt 1873). The grave also contained an example of terra sigillata with a manufacturer’s mark. In 1884 George Stephens in his book on the Old-Northern Runic Monuments suggested the inscription on the ribbed bucket to be runic, a man’s name ‘Wisa’ (Stephens 1884, 138). According to Willers (1907, 52), Bohn interpreted the inscription as an abbreviation of the owner’s name, Res[titutus], written with Latin letters. The latter interpretation was based on a drawing that Engelhardt sent him (Fig. 4), and it must have been the horizontal scratch that goes through the inscription which led Bohn to interpret the first letter as an r. I had a chance to look at the bucket in the summer of 2005, and it was quite evident that the scratch has a clearly different character than the letters on the bucket. In my opinion, the inscription gives neither a runic nor a Latin name. It is more likely the weight of the bucket, P II S I, i.e. two Roman pounds and one semis.

Fig. 4. The drawing of the weight specification on the ribbed bucket from the grave of Valløby in Denmark. From Engelhardt 1873, 305.
Scandinavia in the Late Roman Iron Age

In the Late Roman Iron Age, i.e. at the time of the earliest recorded evidence of runic writing, Roman influence on the barbaric North was massive. From the middle of the second century onwards, Scandinavian society went through political changes, which caused a fundamental transformation in the structures of for example farmsteads and agricultural production. Moreover, trading centres such as the Gudme-Lundeborg complex appeared as a new type of settlement, where trade superseded agriculture as the primary function. On sites like these specialised craftsmen had their business, and the economy of these sites might have been very similar to the economy of the Roman Empire when we consider the large amount of stray-find coins. It might be significant to note that the carrying of arms might be seen as a specialised skill as opposed to the previous more or less unsystematic army equipment (Storgaard 2003, 108 f.). It is also in this social context that the larger part of the weapon deposits in Denmark and the southern parts of Sweden takes place. The depositing of large quantities of booty was a new type of votive offering that began in the Roman Iron Age as opposed to the previous offerings of humans and smaller deposits of army equipment. The weapon deposits reflect a highly specialised and standardized army structure, which among other things indicates that the production of domestic weapons like lances, spears and shields took place at centralized workshops. This was the case within the Roman Empire as well as in the barbaric North. In the first half of the third century the primary weapon for a Germanic soldier was a lance; the Roman double-edged sword, the *spatha* and the spear being secondary weapons (Xenia Pauli Jensen, personal communication).

Swords

The swords used in battles between the different Scandinavian regions were produced within the Roman Empire, either in Italy or in the Gallic provinces. In the Late Roman Iron Age, swords from these Roman and
provincial workshops appeared in large numbers in the Germanic area, as a result of legal or illegal trade with weapons or as Roman gifts to Germanic allies. The majority of the swords are found in the large weapon deposits in Denmark (Illerup Ádal, Vimose, Hedelisker, Illemose, Ejsbøl, and Nydam), which are interpreted as the result of either Danish defence or Danish attacks on neighbouring regions, or they are the result of neighbouring allies sacrificing their war equipment together (Ilkjær 1993; Jørgensen 2001; Pauli Jensen 2008, 296–302). In the bog of Thorsbjerg only a few swords are preserved owing to the chemical composition of this bog, which does not preserve iron (Christensen 2003, 347). It should be emphasized that the swords from the bog finds have probably not been used in the Danish area before the deposition, but have been imported and used in the neighbouring hostile areas, i.e. Norway and Sweden (cf. Ilkjær 1993).

The practice of applying manufacturers’ marks onto the swords lasted for some centuries only. In the beginning of the first century A.D., manufacturers’ marks are recorded on swords from the Polish area, and from the late third century and onwards no manufacturers’ marks are known on swords at all, the youngest example being a spatha from Ejsbøl bog with the encrusted letters ALF from the second half of the third century (Biborski 1994, 173–76).

The geographical distribution of manufacturers’ marks on swords is shown in Map 2. The circles in the Danish area represent the weapon deposits and

Fig. 5. Round and rectangular stamps on swords. From Biborski 1994.
thereby probably swords of non-Danish origin. In Denmark, swords with manufacturers’ marks are not represented in the graves, primarily due to the generally poor preservation of artefacts. In contrast, such swords are present in the weapon graves of Norway and Sweden with four and two examples.

The imprints can be divided into two categories: round imprints with or without letters and rectangular imprints with letters (Fig. 5; Biborski 1994, 171–73; Biborski and Ilkjær 2006, 296–309). The letter imprints consist of names, parts of names or abbreviations. Sometimes, the letter F or M for *fecit* or *manu* follows the names or abbreviations, just as with the bronze imports in the Early Roman Iron Age. At present more than eighty names can be distinguished, most of them Celtic indicating that a great deal of the weapon production took place in Gaul.

Only in two cases have identical imprints been found on more than one sword. The imprint DORVSF appears on two swords from Illerup Ádal, and BORICCVS-F appears on the sword from the grave at Gullen in Norway and on the sword from the weapon deposit at Hedelisker in Jutland.

The manufacturers’ marks on the imported Roman swords are mainly placed near the shoulder of the sword or on the tongue. Sometimes the imprint is placed in such a way that it must have been invisible when the handle was attached (Fig. 5). We must bear in mind though, that most of the swords were imported as blades only, which means that the handles were attached only after they finally had been chosen by the buyer (Pauli Jensen, Jørgensen, and Lund Hansen 2003, 322). This indicates that the manufacturers’ mark was important primarily at the moment of changing hands in trade, and that it has been a sort of certificate of the quality of the sword blades.

### Summing up

The overall impression of Latin script from the Late Roman Iron Age in Scandinavia is that most of the inscriptions are manufacturers’ marks or inscriptions applied to the object in the process of manufacture. The imprints consist of names and abbreviations like F and M for *fecit* and *manu*, and what is particularly interesting is that the manufacturers’ marks are often concealed when the weapon has been supplied with a handle. In the following we shall turn our attention to the runic inscriptions that are found in the same chronological and spatial contexts as the swords with Latin imprints.
The runic inscriptions

In a contextual analysis of runic inscriptions and Latin imprints in the Late Roman Iron Age, it is necessary to include all artefacts with writing from the period and look for similarities and differences in the material in relation to their spatial context, the type of artefact on which the runic inscription is applied, the position of the inscription, and the textual contents. It is evident that fabrication marks can be placed on almost any kind of object, but because of the limits of this article, I am going to emphasize the Scandinavian runic inscriptions on military equipment, which are most likely to be interpreted as imitations of Latin imprints. Other runic inscriptions, like owner’s inscriptions, are treated elsewhere (Imer 2007).

Lances and spears

In the Late Roman Iron Age, as opposed to in the Viking Age, the difference between a lance and a spear is quite remarkable. Both are produced at large weapon factories, and for some types of lances, for example the Vennolum type, there are more than 400 examples throughout Scandinavia, with the widest distribution in the Swedish and Norwegian areas (Ilkjær 1990). It is worth noting though, that the function of the two weapons is very different. The lance is used in close combat only, as the primary weapon, and can be used several times. The spear, on the other hand, is used as a throwing spear at some distance from the enemy and can, naturally, be used only once.

The lanceheads from Vimose and Illerup Ådal

Three of the lances of the Vennolum type carry the exact same inscriptions, the *wagnijo* inscriptions that have become quite well known among runologists (Fig. 6). One of the inscriptions (on the lancehead from Illerup Ådal, no. FHM 1880 IMZ) is actually not an inscription as such, but an imprint executed with runes. With the Latin imprints on the swords in mind,
it seems very likely that this kind of manufacturers’ mark has been applied to the weapons of attack that have been produced in the Scandinavian area. The two other wagnijo inscriptions might be interpreted as imitations of this particular imprint. The Scandinavian elite had seen these imprints in great numbers on for example the imported Roman sword blades, and might have wanted to apply these quality marks on weapons that they have produced at their own factories. This has also been noted by Marie Stoklund (1995, 335), who has suggested that the name Wagnijō should be interpreted as the name of the weapon smith. Klaus Düwel accepts this interpretation and adds that the name Wagnijō can also refer to the function of the lance and the sound of it when sailing through the air towards the enemy. Wagnijō is interpreted as ‘the rushing’ or ‘the whizzing’ (Düwel 2008, 27). This is hardly the case though, with this type of weapon. As mentioned above, the lances are for use only in close combat as the primary weapon and hence not meant to be thrown at the enemy as a spear. Bearing in mind that the identical name is used on three lances, one of them imprinted, it seems reasonable to interpret it as the name of the weapon smith, alternatively the name of the weapon factory owner. In this respect, it might also be worth noting that runic inscriptions are generally placed on lances. The only spearhead with a runic inscription is the problematic example from Rozwadów in Poland (Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 81 f.), and one might question whether the marks on this artefact are runic or not. In my opinion runic inscriptions were mainly placed on lances because they were used as the primary weapon of attack. Once you have thrown your spear away, you can make no use of it anymore, whereas the lance is kept close and can be used several times.

The lanceheads from Øvre Stabu and Mos

Two other lances, Øvre Stabu from Norway (Fig. 7) and Mos from Gotland (Fig. 8), have runic inscriptions, which are interpreted as names. The lance from Øvre Stabu is a Vennolum type, and the inscription on it is executed
in tremolo-stitch technique, as is the ornamentation on the blade. The runes on the lancehead from Mos are decorated with tin or silver inlay, as is the ornamentation on this lancehead.

In earlier interpretations, the inscriptions have been taken to be the names of the weapons on which they are written, and this reading becomes the evidence for the function of these weapons of attack. Raunijaz means ‘tester’ and should refer to the characteristics of the lance as a tester of the enemy (Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 76). Gaois (if this is the correct reading of this inscription) means ‘the barking one’ and should refer to the lance barking at or intimidating the enemy (Düwel 1981, 147–50; 2008, 24). The problem with interpreting the lancehead from Mos as Gaois is in the reading order of the runes. The runes are written from the right to the left—sioag—but are interpreted from the left to the right as gaois. As far as I am aware, this is the only runic inscription from the period where the interpretation does not follow the reading order. In my opinion, the interpretations of the lanceheads from Øvre Stabu and Mos are quite speculative and might be the product of a desire to read the runic inscriptions on the basis of the information given in the Old Icelandic saga texts, where the custom of naming weapons of different kinds is common. The problem of comparing artefacts from the third century A.D. with written texts from the Middle Ages is obvious. It is important to bear in mind that society went through enormous changes in the first millennium A.D., and comparisons of artefacts from the Iron Age with medieval texts should be avoided.

One could suggest the inscriptions to be owner’s inscriptions, but as the inscriptions are carried out in the same way as the ornamentation of the blades, it is very likely that the inscriptions are applied to the lances in the process of manufacture. Moreover, by comparing the lances to the sword blades and to the wagnijo lances from Illerup Ädal and Vimose, it seems

Fig. 8. The lancehead from Mos in Sweden. Drawing by the author.
more plausible to interpret them as manufacturers’ names or as the names of the weapon factories’ owners.

The shield boss from Thorsbjerg

Another possible parallel to the Latin imprints on swords is the shield boss from Thorsbjerg (Fig. 9). The runic inscription anşgz (previously read aisgzh; new reading by Lisbeth Imer in 2006) is placed on the back of the object; consequently the inscription is concealed when the shield boss is applied to the wooden shield (Imer 2007, 134 f.). The inscription, and the position of it, has puzzled many scholars (Düwel 1981, 136 f. with further references), partly because of the unnatural ending of the inscription with the letter h. The expected ending of the word would be z, as is the normal ending of masculine words in the nominative. Furthermore, the sequence anşgz (or aisgz) cannot be compared to any known words or parts of words. Düwel (1981, 136; 2008, 17 f.) holds this inscription to be uninterpretable, while Krause (in Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 56) and Antonsen (1975, 30) considered the runes to have a magical purpose because of their position at the back of the object. Stoklund (1995, 327) suggests the inscription to be a runic imitation of the Latin owner’s inscription on the other shield boss from Thorsbjerg (see above), and finally Moltke (1985, 99) considered the inscription to be the bad job of an illiterate artisan.
In my opinion the Thorsbjerg inscription is more likely to be interpreted as a runic copy of the Latin manufacturers’ marks that are registered on so many Roman swords found in the same kind of spatial context. If we transliterate the inscription in two sequences anṣgz h, we end up with an inscription which in its form very much has the appearance of a Latin imprint, only runic. If we divide the inscription like this, the first sequence ends with the letter z, which would be expected for names in the nominative. This could be interpreted as an abbreviation of the manufacturer’s name, which is also seen in many cases on the Latin manufacturers’ marks. The latter sequence—the h—might be another abbreviation; just as the M or the F are the abbreviations of manu and fecit. One might suggest the abbreviation for ‘from the hand’, which corresponds the Latin manu. Of course, this interpretation implies that the producer of the shield was able to read and understand the Latin imprints, and capable of translating them into a Germanic language. This I find quite likely in a period where Roman contact was very strong.

A new runic inscription from Gudme

In the spring of 2005 a new runic artefact was discovered by the use of a metal detector at the Gudme-Lundeborg complex on Fyn. The object is probably a fragment of an ornament for a shield boss very similar to the
one from Gommern in Germany or the ones from Illerup Ádal, which are dated to the third century A.D. (Becker 2000,142–47). It could also bear some resemblance to the ornamental belts from Ejsbøl bog and Neudorf-Bornstein from the late third century (Carnap-Bornheim 2003,242 f.) and to the officer’s belt from Nydam from the early fourth century (Jørgensen and Petersen 2003,266–68). However, I am inclined to accept the former interpretation because of the significant resemblance in size, the position of the gilded silver foil, and the position of the small silver rivets. Additionally, the rivets seem too small to be able to fix the fitting onto a heavy, military leather belt.

Because of its similarity to the military objects from the third and fourth centuries, this new inscription from Gudme must be dated to the Late Roman Iron Age.

The inscription on the back is fragmented, …epro (Fig. 10), but can probably be compared with the very similar name on the back of the necklace from Strårup in the southern part of Jutland. It is very tempting to suggest that the objects are fabricates of the same person. The execution of the runes is much alike; with the very open r-runes, the þs with quite small pockets and the very similar form of the o-runes.

The position of the runes on the back of the object is comparable with the shield boss from Thorsbjerg. When attached to a wooden shield or to a military belt, the inscription from Gudme must have been concealed when the object was in use. To my mind, this can be interpreted as an imitation of the Latin imprints which were also concealed on the imported swords when the objects had been furnished with handles. We must imagine that manufacturers’ marks had their primary function as quality marks when objects changed hands in trade.
The knife from Møllegårdsmarken

In 1992 a runic inscription was discovered on an iron knife from a cremation grave at the large graveyard of Møllegårdsmarken, Fyn. The 14-cm-long knife belonged to a weapon grave containing, among other things, a lance, a smaller knife, and a pair of scissors. According to the equipment of the grave, it should be dated to the latter part of the second century A.D. or to the first half of the third century A.D. The knife was found in a grave that contained weapon equipment, and the knife should probably be interpreted as a weapon knife (Henriksen 2009, 168 ff.).

The inscription is very corroded and difficult to read due to cracks and lines in the surface of the object, and was first published by Stoklund in 1993 with the following reading in two sequences: hth shko (Stoklund 1993, 255–57; 1995, 340). When the opportunity arose for her to look at the artefact again, Stoklund agreed that the inscription might instead be read hann? s??ko (Fig. 11). The inscription is still difficult to interpret, but the latter sequence might be interpreted as a name beginning with s- and ending, like many other early runic names, with -o. The first sequence might be the remaining parts of a word that has something to do with ‘hand’, although the ending of this sequence is so corroded that this cannot be decided. Due to the corrosion, theoretically runes could have been placed in the empty space between the two sequences, as well as on other parts of the knife. It nevertheless seems logical to interpret the inscription on the knife as a manufacturer’s mark like many others on weapon equipment from the Late Roman Iron Age.

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Final remarks

Having analysed a number of texts from the Late Roman Iron Age, it seems apparent that the importance of the Roman Empire is crucial for our understanding of the runic inscriptions and the society in which they functioned. Analysing the inscriptions on the basis of their chronological and physical context is important for any consideration of the function of the earliest runic inscriptions. Concealed inscriptions are not necessarily magic, as has been put forward by Krause, Antonsen, and others, and it seems logical to interpret at least some of the earliest runic inscriptions as imitations of Latin manufacturers’ marks (Table 3).

The Romans had great influence on Scandinavian society in gift exchange, trade and even economy. Bearing this in mind, it is only natural that the importance of applying manufacturer’s names onto domestically produced artefacts had been adopted from the Romans and turned into a Scandinavian tradition.

Bibliography


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