The Older *Futhark* and Roman Script Literacy

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Introduction

The origin of runic script is a constantly recurring theme among runologists and others interested in runes and runic inscriptions. The view of the matter that seems to have the strongest support is “the Latin theory” in some variant or other: a conviction that the invention of the older *futhark* was to a large extent inspired by roman script. The main evidence for this is the fact that several of the runic characters seem to be direct copies of Latin letters. The genesis of runic script is therefore assumed to be the result of close encounters between a non-literate Northern Europe and a literate Roman Empire.

My intention with this paper is not to discuss the different theories about the origin of runes; in what follows the Latin theory is taken for granted. Instead I want to put forward some ideas about how the cultural meeting between a non-literate Germanic and a literate Roman world might have taken place and how this meeting may have stimulated the Germanic peoples to create their own vernacular script.

It is an oft-neglected fact that whoever conceived the older *futhark* must have been familiar with the script that inspired it, and also with texts written in that alphabet—from my point of view, Latin. The originators of the runes must have been able to write and read Latin; they must have witnessed the script in action and observed how texts were used, i.e., the pragmatic function of written texts. If they did not know how to use this means of communication and were not convinced that writing represented
social progress of some kind, they would not have bothered to copy it and adapt it for their own language and uses. In short: runic script originated in a literate context.

The concept of literacy

“Literacy” has become a key word among scholars dealing with the different uses of script. Even so, many do not attach more to the notion than a certain ability to read and write. If one does not ascribe more to literacy than a way of measuring reading and writing capabilities among a group of people, the study of written communication is unlikely to progress. The new perspectives the concept of literacy might offer are dependent upon a definition that goes much further. It is essential that it focuses on the social implications of reading and writing and the uses of texts. Rosamund McKitteric emphasises that literacy in any society is not just a matter of who could read and write, “but one of how their skills function, and of the adjustments—menta, emotional, intellectual, physical and technological—necessary to accommodate it” (1990, 5).

Most scholars today make a distinction between various kinds of literacy, as for example M. B. Parkes in “The Literacy of the Laity” (1973). He differentiates between “professional literacy”, i.e. that of the scholar or the professional man of letters, “cultivated literacy”, i.e. that of recreation, and “pragmatic literacy”, i.e. the literacy of one who has to read or write in the course of conducting any kind of business.

Brian Stock added to the definition the notion of “textuality”—that written texts have to function within a “textual community”. A textual community is made up of a group of people who demonstrate a parallel use of texts, “both to structure the internal behaviour of the group’s members and to provide solidarity against the outside world” (1983, 90). As I understand Parkes’s specification of the three different aspects of literacy, Stock’s textuality might be included in each one of them. Professional, cultivated, and pragmatic literacy all call for an overt use of texts.

Stock, however, makes a distinction between literacy and textuality, claiming that the one does not equate with the other. One can be literate without the explicit use of texts, and one can use texts extensively without evidencing genuine literacy. This implies that both the literate and the non-literate might make use of texts. For Stock, then, there is a fundamental distinction between the creation and dissemination of texts on the one hand.
and their reception on the other, and the reception of texts does not require knowledge of reading.

Roman literacy

These definitions of the concept of literacy are part of a theoretical framework developed for the study of reading and writing and the dissemination of texts in the Middle Ages. The scholars referred to above are all prominent medievalists, and their works—among many—have elaborated the concept of medieval literacy as a common denominator for the proliferation of script and the uses of texts in the Middle Ages. Even if there are substantial differences between the textual genres of this period and those of Antiquity, the concept of medieval literacy is universal or general to the extent that the same definitions should be applicable to both. Despite the genre distinctions, there should be no fundamental difference between medieval and ancient literacy, when these are understood as the social implications of reading and writing and the uses of texts.

In his book *Ancient Literacy* William V. Harris restricts the term “literacy” to those who could read in the Graeco-Roman world. His main question is (1989, 3): “How widely were the capabilities of reading and writing diffused among the inhabitants of the classical Greek and Roman worlds, the rich and the poor, the free and the slaves, men and women, town-dwellers and country-people?” To draw a line between the literate and illiterate population he refers to UNESCO’s attempt to define an illiterate as someone “who cannot with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life”. Harris’s illiteracy corresponds to the condition of being “analphabetic”; an “analphabete” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “one who is totally illiterate or unable to read”.

Harris introduces two subcategories of literacy: “scribal literacy”, i.e. “literacy restricted to a specialised group which uses it for such purposes as maintaining palace records” (1989, 7), and “craftman’s literacy”, i.e. “not the literacy of an individual craftsman but the condition in which the majority, or a near-majority, of skilled craftsmen are literate, while women and unskilled labourers and peasants are mainly not” (1989, 8). The association with Parkes’s pragmatic literacy is evident. So, when I talk about ancient literacy I have a different understanding of the concept from Harris, and am forced to “translate” manifestations of his literacy to expressions of literacy as I comprehend the concept.
Where did the *Germani* come across manifestations of Roman literacy?

In his book Harris (1989) seeks to classify the different uses of script in the Graeco-Roman world in terms of:

- Trade and commerce
- Social and political matters
- Memorials
- Religion and cult
- Literature and teaching

Even if we do not take a definite stand on the question of the distribution of these diverse uses across the population, it should be evident that Parkes’s three different types of literacy are represented here. Script used in trade and commerce and social and political matters ought to reflect pragmatic literacy; memorials, religion and cult ought to imply cultural literacy; while literature and teaching would be manifestations of both cultural and professional literacy.

The key question from our point of view is then: to what extent were the Germanic peoples confronted with these different types of ancient literacy? Or, to put it more plainly: to what extent did the North Europeans come into contact with the different functions of writing enumerated here? There is every reason to believe that anyone in the Roman Empire taking part in one or more of the above activities would very soon come across manifestations of writing. And it is precisely situations like these that must have inspired the North Europeans to create a script for their own purposes.

The different uses of script that the North Europeans may have come across will have manifested themselves on wooden tablets, papyrus, earthenware, parchment, monuments, weapons or domestic objects, wherever it was appropriate to write. Each of the materials had its special connection to one or more of the specified writing functions. These different types of “manuscript” were not equally accessible to every member of society. Some were displayed so they might be observed by as many as possible, for example memorial inscriptions on monuments; others such as papyrus and parchment manuscripts had their audience among a restricted elite.

There are two main areas where North Europeans and Romans came into contact in ancient times: the city of Rome and the provinces west and north of the Empire and the frontier lines, the *limes*. The contact would in principle have been of two main kinds, trade and warfare. As regards the
latter, the North Europeans were either fighting against the Romans in order to protect their own territory, or serving as soldiers in Roman armies. The possibilities for cultural contact and cultural exchanges are obvious.

### Trade

It seems evident that the Romans made frequent use of writing in their business affairs. The running of an upper-class household, which could include both urban and farm property, required the use of documents and the maintenance of written records. Not only the proprietor but also those he was dealing with would be involved in acts of writing. In the time of Augustus, the Romans began to use documents in connection with the borrowing of money. This has been taken as an indication that in Rome, at least, the ability to write was growing more common. It was not always the proprietors and traders themselves who did the reading and writing, however, and it was not uncommon to have slaves performing both functions. In such cases we have a group of people making use of texts without themselves necessarily being capable of reading and writing. This would be an example of Brian Stock’s textuality without literacy.

It is precisely such textuality that must have been the North Europeans’ gateway to literacy and the art of reading and writing. They observed texts in action—either the various documents used in trade and commerce, or the more conspicuous public inscriptions in stone and bronze—monuments, records, etc.—that were often displayed in towns.

### Monumental epigraphy

Among the different manifestations of literacy found in the Roman Empire the most familiar and widespread is the monumental. The material collected in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* now runs to c. 250,000 items or more. Funerary stones probably represent about 170,000–190,000 of the total (Saller and Shaw 1984). The production of inscriptions varied over time, increasing in the first and second centuries of the Christian era, reaching a peak around A.D. 150, and declining sharply to a low point in the middle of the third century.

Roman monuments operated through images and inscriptions that were directed at the eye of the observer (Woolf 1996, 25). It is therefore reasonable to assume that any barbarian who came into close contact with the Romans and Roman culture, either in Rome itself or in the provinces, would notice
at least some of these texts. It should also be observed that the high-point of Roman monumental epigraphy coincided with the period in which runic script is supposed to have been created, i.e. the second century of the Christian era.

The most common types of monumental epigraphy were votive inscriptions and epitaphs. Votive inscriptions were not long, consisting normally of the name of the god, the name of the dedicator and a formulaic acronym like VSLM, standing for a version of *Voto solverunt libentes merito* ‘We fulfilled the vow willingly to the deserving god’/‘We fulfilled the vow willingly for the assistance’. Some additional information might be supplied, such as an expansion of the name of the dedicators or the phrase *pro salute* ‘in return for good health’, which would emphasise the deal made between the dedicator and the god. The stone bearing the dedication is often shaped like an altar, sometimes decorated with a pictorial representation of the god (Woolf 1996, 27).

The other main type of epigraphy consisted of funerary inscriptions on tombstones. A typical Roman funerary inscription did not only name the deceased. The name of the person erecting the stone, the commemorator, is also cited. The commemorator’s name is included in eighty per cent of extant funerary inscriptions from the western Roman Empire. The proportion varies from province to province, with the civilian population of Noricum (i.e. Austria) having the highest frequency (99.1%!). In all areas it was the military population that had the highest average of the groups studied (Meyer 1990, 75). What is important for us to observe is that funerary inscriptions which include the commemorator’s name are proportionally most frequent in an area where Germanic peoples were active and among the social groups they are supposed to have had contact with.

**Epigraphy on weapons, ornaments and everyday utensils**

In addition to making monumental inscriptions in stone, the Romans also cut, scratched, stamped, painted or otherwise “wrote” on metal, bricks, tiles, earthenware and glass. The artefacts concerned could be weapons, ornaments or everyday utensils. Despite the differences in writing material and writing techniques, and the functions of the artefacts, the inscriptions all have in common the purpose of communicating to the reader an intelligible message, long or short, formal or informal. The messenger might be a carpenter signing his work in some way or other, an owner expressing his ownership or naming the artefact. References to manufacture and ownership can be made in many ways: by simple naming of the owner,
by various formulas relating to manufacture and/or ownership, and by
different kinds of invocation of supernatural powers for the protection of
the artefact, manufacturer and/or owner.

Writing in the army — the Vindolanda tablets

Several scholars have emphasised the importance of writing in the Roman
army. According to Woolf (2000, 892) it was used in:

- managing the supply and movements of large numbers of men and goods, in
coordinating the activities of different units and in maintaining an intelligence
advantage over potential enemies. Frontier systems comprised complex
communication networks and writing played an important role, along with roads
and signal towers, in transmitting information along them.

Many of the military procedures required that a fair number of soldiers be
literate.

In an article entitled “The Literate Roman Soldier” Edward Best affirms
that knowledge of reading was necessary for soldiers participating in the
Roman military (1966–67, 122). Orders and information were often written
down on wooden tablets, so-called tessera (< Greek tessares ‘four’), to be
circulated among the soldiers. Whether every single man in a camp was able
to read the messages on the tessera is not clear, but the orders were certainly
addressed to all personnel from the tribune to the common foot soldier. Best
regards this as evidence that the written word was established as a means
of conveying messages in the Roman army. His conclusion is therefore that
by the first century B.C. the Roman soldier was expected to possess enough
knowledge to read a simple message (1966–67, 126).

The military use of writing observed by Best should not beguile us into
claiming the existence of mass literacy in the Roman army. Suffice it to say
that a competent soldier could not have been a complete analphabete. He
must have had some basic knowledge of reading, and perhaps writing as
well. There is also every reason to maintain that a Roman soldier would
have grasped the rudimentary implications of literacy during his service. The
incised wooden tablets represented texts in action; the soldiers observed how
these texts were produced, circulated and read out — aspects of pragmatic
literacy in miniature. And it might have been here, on the fortified Roman
frontier line, the limes, that Germanic mercenaries had their first encounter
with writing and the pragmatic use of written texts. And it could also have
been here that the initial idea of a vernacular Germanic script was born.

The wooden tablets discovered during the excavations at Vindolanda,
the Roman frontier post on Hadrian’s Wall in northern England, may shed light on these questions. These excavations began in earnest in 1971, and in March 1973 the archaeologists came across two small thin fragments of wood with some peculiar marks on them that appeared to be made with ink. The two scraps, measuring 16x3 cm, proved to be fragments of a letter to someone serving at Vindolanda around A.D. 100. The reconstructed text reads as follows:

I

ram tibi paria udon[um
t ab Sattua solearum[
duo et subligariorum[
duo solearum paria du[o

II

jum salutare.[
]ndem Elpidem Iu[
],enum Tetricum et omn[es
c]ontibernales cum quibus[
o]pto felicissimus uiuas.[

‘... I have sent (?) you ... pairs of socks from Sattua, two pairs of sandals and two pairs of underpants, two pairs of sandals. ... Greet ...ndes, Elpis, Iu..., ...enus, Tetricus and all your messmates with whom I hope you live in the greatest good fortune.’ (TV I 38, in Bowman and Thomas 1983.)

Today the number of individual texts runs to approximately 1200. The tablets are dated to the period A.D. 90–120. The writing is done on a smooth surface with pen and ink, the ink made from carbon, gum arabic and water. The subject matter of the texts is varied. There are military documents and reports, accounts and records of commodities that relate both to the military and domestic organisation of the camp; there are also large numbers of personal letters. The documents, reports and accounts clearly originated at Vindolanda. When it comes to the correspondence, there are drafts or copies of letters written by people in the camp. There are, however, also letters sent to people at Vindolanda from correspondents living elsewhere, within the occupied area of Britain or north-western Gaul or even in Rome itself (Bowman 1994, 109–25).

From our point of view there is one issue that must be stressed in connection with garrison life at Vindolanda. The troops stationed there were Batavians and Tungrians, and these are Germanic peoples. In his book Garrison Life at Vindolanda (2002), Anthony Birley claims that about 200 of the individuals named in the writing tablets may be identified as Batavian or Tungrian garrison-members—roughly half of the total number. Birley
emphasises that almost all of these people have a single name, and were clearly not Roman citizens. They would have had to wait for this privilege until they had served twenty-five years (2002, 99). In letters, names will naturally occur in references to sender and addressee, and these could have been literate individuals in the strict sense of the word, ones who knew how to read and write Latin. Alternatively they may have had someone else to do the reading and writing for them. If a person is simply mentioned by name in a letter or in accounts and lists, we can know nothing about his ability to read and write. It would, however, be reasonable to draw the conclusion that the persons named on the Vindolanda tablets lived and worked in surroundings where the use of written texts—a certain degree of literacy—must have been a dominant factor.

Another point that should be stressed is that this form of communication does not seem to have been restricted to the higher ranks in the garrison. Even slaves appear to have been active members of the textual community of Vindolanda. The slave Severus, for example, sent a letter to his colleague Candidus about the cost of some items to be purchased for the great festival of Saturn, the Saturnalia:

I  S[euer]ur[s] Candido suo
    salutem
    souxtum saturnalicium
    (asses) iiii aut sexs rogo frater
    explices et radices ne mius (denarii) s(emissem)

II  uale frater
    Candido Genialis
    praef(ecti)
    a Seuero
    ...i seruo

‘Severus to his Candidus, greetings. Regarding the ... for the Saturnalia, I ask you, brother, to see them at a price of 4 or six asses and radishes to the value of no less than one-half denarius. Farewell brother. To Candidus, slave of Genialis the prefect, from Severus, slave of ....’ (TV II 301 in Bowman and Thomas 1994.)

The Vindolanda tablets have given us new and substantial evidence about reading and writing in the Roman army. It is, however, difficult to estimate the extent of these skills among the soldiers. It could be that there were a small number of skilled writers and readers who wrote and read the various documents for the people involved. The important point is that these
tablets offer evidence of a society in which the use of texts must have been a common feature; every member of the society must at least have observed script in action, not to mention witnessed the pragmatic use of texts. Even analphabetic barbarians must have seen some of the tablets and gained an impression of their communicative functions, an impression they could have taken back home with them, which might in turn have inspired them to invent a similar means of communication of their own. So the degree of literacy, as I use the term, must have been quite extensive.

Reflections of Roman literacy in the early Scandinavian runic inscriptions

The Vindolanda tablets represent the most widely used type of portable, everyday document in the north-western provinces and perhaps beyond. Everyone who has studied the use of writing in medieval Scandinavia will be familiar with the type of written communication manifested by these tablets. The similarity to the rune-sticks deposited in the soil of medieval Scandinavian towns some 1100 years later is striking. The basic material is much the same, that is, pieces of wood pre-prepared to a greater or lesser extent for writing, but pen and ink have given way to the knife, and the technique is now incising or carving. The subject matter and function of tablets and rune-sticks are, however, not merely similar but identical. Indeed, the letters and accounts from Vindolanda could just as well have been carved in runes on a stick in medieval Bergen, and vice versa. The letter from Severus to Candidus about purchases for the Saturnalia has much in common with the eleven-hundred-year younger runic letter found at Bryggen in Bergen: porkæll myntær senter þer pipar ‘Þorkell mintmaster sends you pepper’ (N651; NɪyR, 6: 118 ff.)

It has always been difficult to find substantial evidence for the theory that wood was the primary material for writing in runes. Proponents of the idea have had to resort to an argumentum ex silencio: since wood is not as resistant as stone and metal the oldest inscriptions on wood have yielded to the ravages of time. The main argument in favour of the theory has been that the angular shape of the runes indicates that they were designed for inscribing in wood. If stone and metal had been the primary materials there would have been no reason to restrict their form in this way. When hundreds of rune-sticks began to emerge from the medieval Scandinavian soil in the latter half of the twentieth century, adherents of the “prevalence-of-wood theory” found new arguments to bolster their belief. The new finds seemed to show that runes were being used for fundamentally the same purposes in the

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Middle Ages as when runic writing originated in the Roman period. Similar inscriptions are known from the Viking Age. In Hedeby archaeologists came across wooden sticks with runic inscriptions very much like those dug up in medieval Scandinavian towns. And the stick from Staraja Ladoga, from the early Viking period, is also of the same type (Liestøl 1971). The Viking Age rune-sticks are far fewer in number than their medieval counterparts; we are counting in tens rather than hundreds. Viking Age soil does not seem to have preserved wood as well as the medieval ground. Nevertheless, if we are allowed to use our sources retrospectively, the distance between the medieval and the assumed original practice becomes shorter if we take the Viking Age material into consideration.

We should also keep in mind literary references from Antiquity to what may be runes carved in wood. We have Tacitus who in Germania, ch. 10, reports how the Germani drew lots using twigs marked with certain signs, notis, and we have the sixth-century poet and bishop of Poitiers, Venantius Fortunatus, sending a letter to his friend Flavus, reproaching him for not answering his letters. The message is: there are no excuses for not writing to me, write in any language you want, any script you like.

barbara fraxineis pingatur rhuna tabellis
quodque papyrus agit virgula plana valet

‘barbarian runes might be painted on ash tablets,
what papyrus serves as, a plane twig manages as well’
(Carmina VII.18, “Ad Flavum”; Leo 1881, 172 f.)

How strong these literary references are as evidence for the use of runes is open to question. There is reason to believe that neither Tacitus nor Venantius Fortunatus had first-hand knowledge of the use of runic script; their statements were probably based on hearsay. On the other hand, if we view these statements in the light of the preceding discussion, they offer circumstantial evidence in support of the theory that runes were originally intended to be inscribed in wood, inspired by Roman literacy as it is manifested on the tablets from Vindolanda.

Archaeological evidence

Most scholars agree that the runes and runic script originated in a cross-cultural context; the Germanic inventor(s) must have got the idea from someone or somewhere, and someone or something must have convinced them of the advantages of literacy. If this cultural inspiration came from
the Romans, there ought to be evidence of the Roman background in the oldest inscriptions. There can be no doubt that those who created the runic alphabet, the older *futhorc*, were familiar with Roman script and knew the Latin language. If they had no knowledge of Roman speech and writing, they would not have been able to understand the general theoretical principles alphabetic script is based on, and they could not have appreciated the utility of literacy. In other words, the inventors of runic script must have been bilingual. One fact that supports that argument is that the Germanic alphabet creators did not simply copy what they saw around them. They observed alphabetic script in action, they understood the principle behind it, and once they had grasped the concept they released themselves from strict adherence to the model and made adaptations such as the special characters, the idiosyncratic grapho-phonological correlations and the *futhorc* order of the alphabet. The older *futhorc* reflects various linguistic considerations, the most conspicuous of which is the seemingly one-to-one relation between phoneme and grapheme. This would have been impossible had the originators not been bilingual.

One crucial question that has to be asked in this connection is: how long did the cross-cultural and bilingual basis for the runic script last, and to what extent did it extend outside the Roman Empire? I would not go as far as Kurt Braunmüller (2004) who seems to suppose that the kind of “Zweisprachigkeit” or “Mehrsprachigkeit” envisaged here lasted in Scandinavia from late Antiquity to the beginning of the Middle Ages. His explanation of syntactic peculiarities in the Eikeland brooch inscription as manifestations of Latin influence stemming from the bilingualism of the carver seems to me far-fetched. It is not plausible that a local rune-carver in Jæren on the south-west coast of Norway in the last part of the sixth century was bilingual in Scandinavian and Latin to the extent that he was influenced by Latin syntax when writing in the vernacular using the native alphabet.

It is, however, possible to rephrase the above question: when the Germanic inventors of the runes set about creating their own script, did they do so while still in physical contact with the Romans within the borders of the Empire, thus bringing this cultural innovation home with them, or did they return to their homelands and when settled there once more come to think about the reading and writing they had become familiar with while abroad and so start to construct a script for their own use? For my part I think that runic writing originated among bilingual Germanic people while they were still in physical contact with the Romans and Roman culture on the Continent. After the introduction of the new alphabet, it very quickly spread
northwards, in particular to Scandinavia. Then the umbilical cord to the source became looser, or could have been cut completely, and runic script started to live its own independent life. The people who brought the script back home with them may have been bilingual, but after some generations knowledge of Latin no longer remained an essential part of Migration Age Scandinavian runic literacy. It is certainly possible that one or more of the forefathers of the person who made the Eikeland inscription knew Latin from the time they were serving in the Roman army or trading with the Romans, but the Eikeland rune-carver himself need never have seen a Roman or heard any other language than the sixth-century dialect of Jæren.

I am in no way claiming that the cultural connections with the Continent were cut during the Migration Age. On the contrary, people went back and forth in Europe at the time, and the same was doubtless true of cultural impulses. What I am trying to say is that the influence of Roman literacy on the development of runic activity in Scandinavia changed; it was no longer as strong as when the Germanic peoples were taught the secrets of alphabetic writing by the Romans. Even though runic script was created in contact with Roman literacy, it was brought into use within the Germanic sphere. That might explain the distinctive characteristics of the script that cannot be reflections of the Latin alphabet. We must assume that after runic writing was introduced, contact with its Roman origins became tenuous, allowing it to develop independently of the model.

Even if we reject Braunmüller’s “Zweisprachigkeit der Runenmeister” as a source of influence on Migration Age Scandinavian, and we grant the older runes a certain independence vis-à-vis the context in which they were created, we might still look for reflections of Germanic-Roman contact in the oldest runic inscriptions.

There does exist some concrete evidence of contact between runic script and Roman literacy. The iron lancehead from Øvre Stabu is the oldest runic artefact found in Norway. The inscription reads RAUnIJA·raunijaR, corresponding to Old Norse reynir, meaning ‘tester, trier, prober’. The term must refer either to the artefact itself or its owner or bearer. The grave where the lancehead was deposited is dated to A.D. 175–200 — on the basis of a Roman sword also deposited there. According to Asbjørn Herteig (1955, 21) this must be a Roman or provincial-Roman product, since the workmanship is of a very high standard. The sword has a figure encrustation of the goddess Victoria with two roman capitals underneath: SF. The letters clearly represent a craftsman’s signature with S an abbreviation of his name and F the first letter of the word fecit ‘S. made [this sword]’. On a bronze casse-role from Wiesbaden is the signature SILVANVSF, which Herteig (1955, 18)
equates with the inscription on the Øvre Stabu sword. How a Roman sword came to Toten in Norway is impossible to say. The owner must have been the man buried in the grave, and whether he had come into direct contact with the manufacturer himself while visiting Rome or the Roman provinces, or had obtained it from someone else who brought the sword to Norway, we shall never know. What is important in the current context is that our man had been in possession of two objects with two different types of writing, Latin and runic. Both the material on which the writing is found and the function of the script are similar. If we are right in assuming that the runes were created by people who saw roman script in action, then the Øvre Stabu finds may provide an example of just such a scenario.

We have a parallel example from Einang in Valdres, not too far removed from Øvre Stabu. In an area with numerous grave mounds we find one of the two Norwegian runestones from the Migration period that still stand in the place they were erected. The mounds surrounding the Einang stone are dated to A.D. 340–400. The inscription is commonly read \[ek gu/o\] dagastirrunofaihdo ‘I, GodagastiR, painted/wrote the inscription’. In a grave nearby archaeologists came across a Roman sword with a rectangular stamp in Latin capitals that may represent a name: RANVICI. The sword would appear to be evidence of direct or indirect contact between people in Valdres and the Romans. There is every reason to believe that Godagastir belonged to an upper social class in Einang—and he knew how to read and write runes. From where did he get that knowledge? Both the rune carver from Øvre Stabu and Godagastir from Einang might have had direct or indirect dealings with subjects of the Roman Empire who in turn had been in contact with Roman script culture. The Einang stone and the grave find from nearby offer further evidence of the possibility of close contacts between literate Romans and Scandinavians.

There is one further type of artefact that should be mentioned in this connection: the bracteates. There can be no doubt they were inspired by Roman (and Byzantine) coins and medallions.

Textual Evidence

The most conspicuous manifestation of ancient literacy that the Germanic peoples came across in their encounters with the Romans must have been the stone epigraphy. The publishing of statements on stone is regarded as a characteristic element of the Roman way of life. In the provinces, including north-western Europe, it is reckoned to be a practice acquired from the conquerors (MacMullen 1982, 238). There is every reason to believe that the
Scandinavian habit of erecting runestones was also copied from Roman practice; the production of Roman stone inscriptions is estimated to have peaked in about A.D. 150, the period when the older *fuþark* was being developed. Another 200 years elapsed, however, before the Scandinavians started to erect stones and establish an epigraphic tradition of their own. When we compare the appearance of a Roman stone monument with that of an early Scandinavian runestone, the similarity is not striking. The Roman model is far more elaborate, the texts more extensive, and at first sight it can be difficult to see any connection between these two diverse epigraphic traditions. Roman epigraphic literacy appears more developed or more sophisticated than its early Scandinavian counterpart. We must however keep in mind that the Roman monuments that might have inspired the Scandinavians to erect runestones represent a well-established epigraphic tradition, while the extant early Scandinavian runic monuments manifest an epigraphic tradition in its initial stage. It is also a rather short tradition, for it lasted but a couple of hundred years—the fourth and fifth centuries. In the sixth, it disappeared almost entirely, and did not really burst into bloom until the last part of the Viking Age. It would therefore be reasonable to say that the habit of erecting runestones was inspired by Roman epigraphic tradition; the Scandinavians, however, adapted this cultural import to their own situation.

There is one typical feature of Roman stone epigraphy that it is worthwhile looking for in the early Scandinavian variant of the tradition. That is the tendency to include the commemorator or sponsor on memorial stones. The strong urge to mention oneself when raising a monument in honour of a deceased kinsman is often supposed to be a characteristic of the conceited Scandinavians. The Athenians had been erecting tombstones in considerable numbers for four centuries before the Romans adopted the custom; however, to name the commemorator was not an Athenian custom. The classical Athenian tombstone centres on the deceased and only rarely mentions the commemorator. Roman tombstones from the republican period display a strong tradition of the deceased + commemorator pattern, although the very earliest funerary inscriptions were simple names, as was the case in Athens. Whatever the ultimate origins of the Roman practice, it cannot be ascribed to outside influences but must have answered to particular Roman needs (Meyer 1990).

The question is then whether the Scandinavian commemorator + deceased pattern which predominates on Viking Age runestones, ‘X raised this stone in memory of Y’, has its origin in the deceased + commemorator pattern of Roman tombstones. If so, we should expect to find manifestations of this
influence in the early Scandinavian material as well. However, a search for vestiges of the Roman deceased + commemorator pattern among the earliest runestones yields very meagre results. Krause and Jankuhn (1966) operate with the term *Gedenksteine*, which seems to cover all memorial stones. Numbers 71–94 in their corpus are *Gedenksteine*, a total of twenty-four. These they split up into two subgroups: *doppelseitige Gedenkschriften* “in denen der Name des Toten neben dem Namen dessen, der den Stein setzte, oder dem des Runenmeisters eingemeißelt ist” (pp. 128 f.), and *einselige Gedenksteine* “auf denen—mit oder ohne Beitext—nur ein einziger Name im Genitiv oder Nominativ oder zwei parallel geordnete Namen im Nominativ erscheinen” (p. 129). Here we are supposed to have the name(s) of the deceased, or, in the case of the single nominatives, either the deceased or the “Runenmeister”.

It is among the *doppelseitige Gedenkschriften* we should look for a commemorator + deceased or deceased + commemorator pattern or formula. There are not more than seven such inscriptions, numbers 71–77 in the corpus. These are By, Tune, Rô, Reistad, Kjølevik, Opedal, and Myklebostad. One clear example of a commemorator + deceased formula among the seven is Tune, which says *ek wiwar after woduride witadahalaiban worahto [runor]* ‘I Wiwar after WoduridaR, the bread-ward, wrought [runes]’. In addition, Hagustaldar on the Kjølevik stone tells that he buried his son, without it being clear whether the second name in the nominative is indeed that of the son. In the remaining five inscriptions there is no explicit expression of a relationship between deceased and commemorator, it is merely implied.

We must make certain reservations when it comes to Krause and Jankuhn’s grouping of the early Scandinavian runestones. There could well be commemorative inscriptions concealed among those placed in other subgroups. The Blekinge stones are singled out as a special category, but it seems clear to me that the Istaby stone, at least, is a *doppelseitige Gedenkschrift* as both the deceased, HariwulfR, and the commemorator, the runecarver HaþuwulfR, are mentioned. I also wonder whether some of the inscriptions grouped as “magische Formeln” might not be of commemorative type, as for instance the fragmentary lines on the Vetteland stone, where it is stated that someone was the victim of a deceitful attack (Antonsen 2002, 174), or of supernatural powers (Høst 1976, 86 f.). The object is referred to as “my son’s stone” and we also learn that someone whose name is lost painted or made (the runes). So here we have both a deceased and one or two commemorators. But even if we can

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add the odd example to the group of stones that mention both deceased and commemorator, we are nowhere near the proportion documented from the Roman Empire.

It should therefore be clear that the Roman practice of including the commemorator’s name on funerary tombstones had only percolated through in a small way to the raisers of the early Scandinavian rune-stones. As for the commemorator + deceased formula ‘X raised this stone in memory of Y’—almost ubiquitous on Viking Age runestones—there is only one example in the extant early Scandinavian material. The evidence for assuming this formula goes back to the earliest runic memorial stones is thus very slight. What one might wonder, however, is whether the seemingly formulaic expression $ek/X \ rūnōR\ faihidō/faihidē$ has its equivalent in the Roman votive inscriptions’ VSLM; ‘I fulfilled the vow’ > ‘I carved the runes’.

If we are right in assuming that the early Scandinavian custom of erecting inscribed stone monuments owed its origin to Roman tradition, then we should expect at least some similarities in epigraphical layout. At first glance the characteristic feature of the Roman layout seems completely absent from the Scandinavian material. In Roman epigraphy the letters are placed horizontally on the stone; the early Scandinavian rune-carvers in contrast set their texts vertically. In some cases this discrepancy may be due to natural causes; the shape of the Scandinavian stones demands vertical rather than horizontal texts. It is, for example, difficult to see how the carver of the Kjølevik inscription could have followed the Roman layout. There are however stones a-plenty in Scandinavia that could have provided early Scandinavian rune-carvers with appropriate surfaces for horizontal runic texts.

We should keep in mind, though, that stone raising was not a custom the Scandinavians inherited from the Romans. The tradition of erecting $bauta(r)steinar$—stone monuments associated with graves—goes back at least to the pre-Roman Iron Age or even the Bronze Age. The first element of $bautarsteinn$ (or $bautaðarsteinn$) is considered to be related to ON $bauta$ ‘[to] beat, strike, pierce, stab’. A supposed derivate is $beytill$ m. (< Germ. *$bautila$- ‘thruster’ ‘pusher’) meaning the penis of a horse. On this basis it has been suggested that $bautarsteinar$ originally functioned as phallic symbols and therefore needed to be tall and slim. According to Fritzner (1973, s.v.) a $bautaðarsteinn$ is “en Sten af samme Skikkelse som et Spyd eller andet Redskab som bruges til dermed at stikke, støde” (‘a stone with the same appearance as a spear or other instrument used for stabbing or piercing with’). What the early Scandinavians inherited from the Romans
was therefore not the custom of erecting memorial stones, but the custom of equipping such stones with inscriptions. And given the traditional shape of the *bautarsteinn*, the vertical layout of the texts was almost inevitable.

There are however several instances of squarer stones being used by early Scandinavian rune-carvers with the possibilities this offered for placing the inscription horizontally. In some cases they stuck to their vertical *bautarsteinn* tradition (e.g. for the longer name on the Berga stone, though the second, shorter name runs horizontally; KJ 86), in others they took the opportunity to follow the Roman pattern and set the text horizontally (e.g. on the Skärkind stone, KJ 87). This leads one to wonder whether the carver of the transitional Björketorp inscription (KJ 97) might be one of those who followed Roman tradition when the opportunity arose. But we must also bear in mind that rune-carvers may have been inspired to adopt a horizontal layout by other types of written source than stone monuments—manuscripts, books or even wooden tablets of the Vindolanda type.

One more thing has to be said about the vertical versus horizontal layout of runestone texts. Let us cast a glance at the Stentoftsten stone, height 118 cm, width 77 cm, lots of space for a horizontal positioning of the inscription. Nevertheless the runes run vertically. There are, though, reasons for believing the stone lay flat on the ground when the carver did his work. And if we put the stone in that position, we get—for the most part—a horizontally oriented text. That is quite possibly the image the carver had in his mind as he set to work, but when the stone was erected, the horizontal text had become vertical.

**Conclusion**

There is every reason to suppose that the older *fuþark* was developed after Germanic peoples had encountered Roman literacy around the first century of the Christian era. However, once they had adopted the idea of alphabetic writing, the *Germani* rather quickly distanced themselves from the model and gave runic script its own characteristics. There is some evidence of close contact between Roman and runic when it comes to loose objects such as weapons and bracteates. The erection of stone monuments, on the other hand, was a custom the Scandinavians, or their Germanic ancestors on the Scandinavian peninsula, seem to have established independently. The placing of inscriptions on these monuments, however, was a feature inspired by knowledge of Roman stone epigraphy. When it comes to runic inscriptions in wood, the evidence—such as the Vindolanda tablets or references in literary sources—is chiefly indirect. Those wishing to plead
the case for wood are thrown back on an argumentum ex silencio. Absence of evidence, however, is not necessarily evidence of absence. And whether runic inscriptions in the older futhark represent a written culture that could be called literate—whether there existed something we might term older futhark runacy—is a discussion that must be left for another occasion.

Bibliography


KJ + number = inscription published in Krause and Jankuhn 1966.


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