Gothic Runic Inscriptions in Scandinavia?

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Abstract

Runologists from Sophus Bugge (1866–67) to, most recently, Edith Marold (2010) have claimed that there was a Gothic (East Germanic) linguistic element amongst the older futhark inscriptions of Scandinavia. In the present paper, this claim is viewed against a horizon of nineteenth-century Danish and Swedish nationalism, where “Goths” and “Gothic” became politically sensitive terms in view of the purported emigration of the Goths from a homeland in Scandinavia. This is followed by a discussion of the linguistic assumptions underlying the classification of some of the early Scandinavian inscriptions as Gothic, assumptions which (with Peterson 1998) are all rejected—including Marold’s recent insistence on the final -a of the Etelhem clasp form wrta ‘created’ being a Gothic 3 pt. sg. ind. ending, cf. Gothic wairhta ‘worked’. It is argued that this -a is as likely to reflect an Old High German (or even West Germanic) suffix, cf. OHG frumita ‘(he) furthered’.

Keywords: Gothic, Goths, Early Runic, older Scandinavian futhark inscriptions, Etelhem clasp, Gurfiles bracteate, Mos lancehead, linguistic variation

In a historical work entitled De origine actibusque Getarum (Getica) from A.D. 551 Jordanes pointed to the island of Scandza as the ultimate Gothic place of origin. From this information combined with the onomastic evidence provided by such place-names as Gotland and Götaland in present-day Sweden it was only natural that scholars should conclude that the Goths originally lived in Scandinavia before emigrating to northern Poland and beyond.

One of the founders of comparative philology, Rasmus Rask, even employed the label gotisk ‘Gothic’ as a name suitable for referring to what is now known as the Germanic language family, because the Goths were
the only tribe evidenced both north and south of the Baltic (Rask 1811, vii f. n.: 1818, 64 f.). In letters to Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm dated 20 August 1811 (Schmidt 1885, 93–95), Rask stressed the wider applicability of gotisk in comparison with germanisk ‘Germanic’ or tysk ‘German’, extending his argument by saying that gotisk is not the name of any specific dialect: in addition to what in Rask’s terminology was called möso-gotisk (i.e. Biblical Gothic), there was vest- og östgötisk in Scandinavia. In fact, in Sweden at this time, the Goths of Jordanes’s island of Scandza were identified with the Swedish götar (Lindroth 1961, 35–38; Paul 1998, 461–66), a historic speculation (now called göticism) which was boosted during the romantic era in Sweden—even if in fact it harked back to the late Middle Ages, cf. Lind 2006, 64–69.

The early nineteenth century in Denmark was a period of growing nationalism, and with the loss of Norway in 1814 Danish national feeling focused on establishing a national state that included Slesvig as far south as the river Eider. Rask, himself an outspoken nationalist, stuck to his terminology for the rest of his life, rejecting all attempts by Jacob Grimm and others to replace his gotisk by germanisch or deutsch as the generic term. In Denmark Rask’s most prominent followers were Wimmer (1867), Thomsen (1869) and Olrik (1916). Up in Norway P. A. Munch ([1846] 1873, 225–27) employed germanisk in a generic sense, but it is interesting that in 1847 Munch ([1847] 1873, 402–05, 413) bracketed the runic language of the Gallehus horn as Gothic, taking γ to render a dat. plur. masc. ending -m in -gastim similar to that found in Biblical Gothic.

I think that all of this background information should be borne in mind when the proposals made by later scholars for runic items to be categorized as Gothic are considered. (For more details, see Nielsen 2004, 309–23.) Without following the Rask-Wimmer terminology, and without following Munch in labelling the Gallehus idiom as Gothic, Sophus Bugge (1866–67, 223 f.; 1891–1903, 148–52) nevertheless felt that one of the older Scandinavian futhark inscriptions should be regarded as Gothic, namely the Etelhem clasp from Gotland. In a lengthy article from 1929, Carl Marstrander granted that the total number of Gothic inscriptions was usually believed not to exceed three, namely the Kowel lancehead, the Dahmsdorf lancehead and the Pietroassa gold ring (all from central and eastern Europe), but that in his conviction (1929, 26) several of the older Scandinavian futhark inscriptions “har seilet under falsk flagg” (‘have sailed under false colours’). In addition to the Etelhem clasp Marstrander admits eleven other inscriptions to his inventory of Gothic or East Germanic runic residues in Scandinavia (1929, 65–141) spanning a geographical area from Gotland over southern Sweden to Fyn,
Jutland and Norway. In 1953 he added yet another supposedly Gothic item to his list, namely the Vimose sheathplate (1953, 60–63). Marstrander ascribed the presence of Gothic language material in Fyn and (the south of) Jutland to the Erulians, who in his view were East Germanic tribesmen that were eventually superseded by the Danes (1929, 92–101). It is interesting that Bugge, although he took the Etelhem clasp to be Gothic, regarded the Erulians as speakers of North Germanic (1905–13, 186–218), and so did another of Marstrander’s predecessors, namely von Friesen (1924, 145–81).

In these circumstances it is noteworthy that Wolfgang Krause (Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 40, 59 f., 80 f., 253) took over five of Marstrander’s thirteen Gothic items despite the fact that he agreed with Bugge and von Friesen in bracketing the Erulians as a North Germanic speaking tribe. The five legends accepted by Krause were the Etelhem clasp, the Mos lancehead and the Gurfiles bracteate from Gotland and the Vimose buckle and sheathplate from Fyn. Two of these were retained by Klaus Düwel in the second edition of his Runenkunde (Mos and Etelhem, cf. Düwel 1983, 22, 96), whereas in a paper published in NOWELE Wolfram Euler (1985, 10–12) accepted three (Etelhem, Vimose buckle and sheathplate). Kai-Erik Westergaard (1990, 18 f.) proved less selective in that he took over all five items accepted by Krause. In his runic grammar from 1975, Elmer Antonsen included the Vimose sheathplate and the Næsbjerg clasp from Jutland in his list of East Germanic inscriptions (1975, 73–75). The Næsbjerg bracteate, but not the Næsbjerg clasp, had been part and parcel of Marstrander’s Gothic inventory (1929, 118 f.). In a very recent paper Edith Marold (2010, 88) has classified the three Gotland finds Mos, Gurfiles and Etelhem as Gothic, using both linguistic and non-linguistic arguments.

In her “Critical Survey of the Alleged East Germanic Runic Inscriptions in Scandinavia” read at the Fourth International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions at Göttingen in 1995 and published in 1998, Lena Peterson harshly criticised all previous attempts to posit Gothic runic residues in Scandinavia. It is noteworthy that in the third and fourth editions of his Runenkunde and with reference to Peterson’s paper Düwel is no longer prepared to uphold the notion of a Gothic, an East Germanic nor, for that matter, an Erulian runic element in Scandinavia (Düwel 2001, 14 f.; 2008, 14 f.). I am, of course, in general sympathy with Peterson’s and Düwel’s recent conclusions. In this paper I shall briefly go through the linguistic assumptions underlying the purported existence of East Germanic runic inscriptions in Scandinavia and proceed to an assessment of the East Germanic character of Bugge’s, Marstrander’s, Krause’s, Düwel’s (1983), Euler’s, Westergaard’s and Marold’s Gothic Etelhem clasp in the light of
my discussion of some very early finds in Denmark (Nielsen 2000, 160–64). When later in this discussion I avail myself of the term Early Runic, I refer to the language of the runic inscriptions of Scandinavia encompassing the period 160–500 A.D.

The linguistic criterion most widely used for labelling a runic inscription as “Gothic” is the nominal nom. sg. masc. case-ending -s evidenced by, e.g., Biblical Gothic dags ‘day’ and the Kowel form (lancehead from north-western Ukraine) tilarids ‘goal-pursuer’ (< Gmc. *-az, cf. Antonsen 1975, 74, Grünzweig 2004, 28–31, and Nedoma 2010, 14–16, 20; for a thought-provoking discussion of the possible non-Gothic, or even non-runic, character of the Kowel inscription, see now Snædal 2011, 233–37). By reading the Mos lancehead inscription as an agent noun gaois, Krause (Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 80 f.), Marold (2010, 74–77) and others have taken the ending to be identical to the nominative suffix of Gothic *gaujis ‘barker, howler’, a precarious interpretation in that the legend may equally well be read siøøg (and that it may not even be complete, as Krause himself realizes). And as Imer (2010, 56) points out, only a reading from right to left (siøøg) is in accordance with the reading order of the Mos runes. An argument in favour of a left-to-right reading (gøøis) is that it would put the Mos legend on a par with the Kowel, Dahmsdorf and Rozwadów lance- or spearhead inscriptions, which all run in the direction towards the point of the lance or spear, cf. Nedoma 2010, 14–24.

The nom. sg. masc. -s ending was also the criterion used by Marstrander (1953, 60–63), Krause (Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 59), Antonsen (1975, 73), Euler (1985, 12) and Westergaard (1990, 19) for diagnosticizing the Vimose sheathplate as Gothic or East Germanic, the last rune of the legend awøøs being thought to reflect the nom. sg. masc. ending of a personal name (Bibl. Goth. *Awiggs). But as Marie Stoklund (1994, 103) has pointed out (see also Nedoma 2010, 9 f., 48),

Marstranders Rekonstruktion der teilweise zerstörten Runen stimmt ... nicht mit den tatsächlichen Spuren überein; das letzte Zeichen kann keineswegs s sein, und damit muß die Möglichkeit eines ostgermanischen (gotischen) Namens mit -s im Nominativ wegfallen.

Similarly, Stoklund (1994, 99) considers the attempt by Antonsen (1975, 73) at categorizing the Næsbjerg clasp legend warøønis ‘caring friend’ as an East Germanic nominative to be unwarranted owing to all the uncertainties with which the reading of this particular inscription is associated (cf. Nedoma 2010, 10).

Two linguistic reasons have been adduced for declaring the Vimose buckle
Gothic, namely the dat. sg. masc. u-stem suffix -au (< Indo-European *-ōu) in asau ‘god’ (cf. Bibl. Goth. sunau ‘son’) and the 1 pres. sg. ind. ending -a in wiija ‘dedicate’ (cf. Bibl. Goth. giba ‘(I) give’ vs. North Germanic/West Germanic -u)). Neither of these arguments would seem to hold water: -au (< Indo-European *-ōu) is reflected also in dat. sg. masc. u-stem Old English suna and Old Saxon suno (cf. Seebold 1994, 66, and Nielsen 1998, 544), and the relevance of wiija in this context is questioned by Wulf (1994, 37), who has pointed out that the loss of medial h would be hard to explain if wiija is to be taken as a Gothic verbal form, cf. Bibl. Goth. *weihjan, weihan ‘to sanctify’ (see also Nielsen 1998, 548, with further references, and Nedoma 2010, 10, 48).

If once again we return to Gotland, the Gurfiles bracteate has been called Gothic because the final vowel of laþa differs from that of the well-established bracteate form nom. sg. fem. laþu ‘invitation, summons’ (Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 253–57; Marold 2010, 80). However, the reading of the fourth Gurfiles rune is not incontestable, and is believed by Lena Peterson (1998, 567) perhaps to have been intended as a u (cf. also Nedoma 2010, 10).

Finally, the Etelhem clasp from Gotland has been thought to contain a Gothic weak 3 pt. sg. ind. form in its legend mkmrlawrta, which Krause (Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 39 f.) reads m(i)k M(ē)r(i)la w(o)rta ‘mich stellte Merila her’. With its final -a, 3 pt. sg. ind. wrta ‘created’ (see also Euler 1985, 10) is put on a par with Bibl. Goth. waúrhta — even if the possibility cannot be ruled out that wrta is a misspelled 1 pt. sg. ind. form. However that may be, the discussion of the linguistic and ethnic assignment of the clasp may have been given a new lease of life with the discovery of some very early inscriptions in Denmark with weak 3 pt. sg. ind. forms.

The Early Runic language — as it was known up to about thirty years ago — exhibited two variant 3 pt. sg. ind. suffixes: -e, cf. tawide ‘(he) made’ on the Garbolle (Stenmagle) box from the fourth century, and -ai, cf. talgidai ‘(he) carved’ on the Nøvling clasp from A.D. 210–60. A natural conclusion to be drawn from these forms and datings was that in Early Runic unaccented syllables *-ai had been monophthongized to -ē and that subsequently both -ai and -e could be used for designating the monophthong, cf. Early Runic dat. sg. masc. a-stem forms such as hahai ‘horse’ (Møjbro stone) and wage (personal name, Opedal stone) whose endings derive from Gmc. *-āi. However, one of the new Illerup finds (from A.D. 210–60) also has tawide (Illerup silver shield mount 2) and the Udby (Skovgårde) clasp (from A.D. 210–60 as well) has talgida, and there was thus no longer any empirical evidence for claiming that in the weak preterites the suffix -e represents a later spelling than -ai (or -a).
In his book from 1994, Martin Syrett, after investigating the unaccented vowel system of Early Runic, came up with the proposal that -e, -ai and -a are all graphic attempts to render the long sound unit [æː]. Although I find Syrett’s proposal an ingenious one, I am hesitant about it for two reasons:

1. a variation between -e, -ai and -a has not been extended to the dat. sg. masc. a-stem suffix, which is nowhere rendered by means of -a in Early Runic (cf. also Nedoma 2005, 167 f.)

2. Syrett sets up unaccented vowel subsystems with three short vowels /i, a, u/ and four long ones /iː, [æː], oː, uː/ (in addition to one diphthong /iu/). There is no evidence elsewhere in Early Runic that -a in unaccented position represents a long vowel, cf. e.g. nom./acc. sg. masc. a-stem stainaz, staina ‘stone’ with short thematic a (Nielsen 2006, 258 f.; for a different view, see Andersson 1995, 30–32, and esp. Nedoma 2005, 156–58, 162–73).

In my opinion, the Early Runic forms must be investigated within a wider Germanic context, which would have to include also the endings of dat. sg. masc. a-stem forms in the various Germanic languages.

If we start out with Old Norse, the suffix vowel of the weak 3 pt. sg. ind. (talði ‘counted’) is identical to that of the dat. sg. masc. a-stem (degi ‘day’). Early Old English has -æ (>-e) in both forms, cf. 3 pt. sg. ind. fremede (<-æ) ‘furthered’ and dat. sg. masc. a-stem early OE hrōfæ ‘roof’. Old Saxon vacillates between -e and -a in both instances, cf. fremida, -e ‘furthered’ and hobe, -a ‘courtyard’, but in Old High German there is a clear distinction made between -a in 3 pt. sg. ind. frumita ‘furthered’ (pre-OHG -da, cf. Nedoma 2005, 166, 178 f.; 2010, 10) and -e in dat. sg. masc. a-stem tage ‘day’. In Gothic, the suffix is -a in both the verb (nasida ‘saved’) and the nominal form (daga ‘day’).

Superficially, the West Germanic forms seem to be at variance with one another, but this need not be so. As shown by Thomas Klein (1977), the North Sea Germanic languages developed unaccented four-unit vowel systems out of a system consisting of five phonemes. The reduction to four, which can be seen in early Old English and in Old Saxon, took place in consequence of the (independent) fronting of -a to -æ, which merged with the reflex of Gmc. *-ai, which also was æ; this led to the following system in early Old Saxon:

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
\text{i} & \text{u} \\
\text{æ} & \text{o}
\end{array}
\]

in which the fronting of -a to -æ was followed by a drag-chain process,
whereby -ɔ became -a. Old High German did not take part in the fronting of a, keeping the distinction between the two reflexes intact in its short five-unit system /i, e, a, o, u/. The Old High German weak 3 pt. sg. ind. ending -a is thus fully compatible with early OE -æ and with the Old Saxon vacillation between -e and -a, which was due to the application of Old High German scribal conventions to the different phonemic system of Old Saxon and especially to the rendering of OS /æ/, which had no direct counterpart in Old High German. But the Old High German suffix distinction suggests that at the West Germanic level (if taken to include also pre-Old Saxon and pre-Old English) the vowels of the two suffixes may not have been identical.

How about early Norse? Is there any runic evidence stemming from the period spanning the gap between the oldest runic inscriptions and the emergence of the earliest Old Norse manuscripts to suggest that the suffix vowel of the weak 3 pt. sg. ind. was different from that of the dat. sg. masc. a-stem? The triangular vowel system /i, a, u/ of Old Norse seems to have been well underway as early as in the seventh century. One of the Blekinge stones, Gummarp, has the weak 3 pt. sg. ind. form sate ‘set’, cf. EN satti, Olcel. setti, and an e-spelling is also seen in Björketorp weladaude, presumably a dat. sg. masc. a-stem form meaning ‘insidious death’ (Antonsen 1975, 87 f.); dat. sg. masc. a-stem forms are also attested in the legend on the Eggja stone: sakse ‘knife’ and huni ‘mast tub’, e and i being variant spellings of the same unaccented phoneme. In other words, a merger between the reflexes of two Germanic suffixes would appear to have taken place.

Moving on to Gothic 3 pt. sg. ind. nasida and dat. sg. masc. daga (cf. above), the unaccented vowel -a cannot go back to Gmc. *-ai, which is retained as -ai in Gothic, cf. dat. sg. fem. ō-stem gibai ‘gift’. In both endings under discussion, Goth. -a is usually thought to reflect Gmc. *-ē(-), daga being an old instrumental.

It might be tempting to see the suffix of Udby (Skovgårde) talgida as an indication of Gothic provenance, cf. Bibl. Goth. nasida ‘(he) saved’. A parallel to such an assumption would indeed be the purported Gothic or East Germanic provenance of the Etelhem inscription from Gotland, if the sequence wrta is interpreted as a weak 3 pt. sg. ind. form as most recently done by Edith Marold (2010, 77 f.). To my mind, however, the Old High German weak preterite in -a (and the significance that this ending has for the interpretation of the early Old English and Old Saxon weak preterite suffixes) suggests that -a may have had a much wider distribution. In his study of the phonological development of final syllables in Germanic from 1980, Hollifield did not take the form talgida into account, because the
Udby clasp had not yet been found. But Hollifield (1980, 160 f.) explained the endings of 3 pt. sg. ind. *talgidai, tawide* as reflexes of the old middle voice suffix, Indo-European *-*toi, Gmc. *-*ðai, *-*ai* and *-*e* being graphic renderings of the monophthongized diphthong, cf. the spelling of the monophthongized dat. sg. masc. *a*-stem suffix in *hahai, wage*. What Hollifield could not know, of course, was that a 3 pt. sg. ind. form (*tawide*) identical to that attested in the Garbølle (Stenmagle) inscription subsequently surfaced in a Scandinavian runic find (Illerup) roughly contemporaneous with the Nøvling clasp legend (A.D. 210–60), and that therefore the final vowel of *tawide* might well be a reflection of Indo-European *-*ēt, Gmc. *-*ēđ, cf. Krahe 1969, 1: § 124, 2: § 90.

However this may be, there is comparative Germanic evidence to suggest that the origin of the suffix of *talgida* (*-a*) may differ from that of both *talgidai* and *tawide* (*-ē*). It is true that the final vowel of *talgida* would seem to be an exact counterpart to that of Bibl. Goth. *-a*. But since the vowel parallels also that of the weak Old High German 3 pt. sg. ending and may agree with even the early Old English and Old Saxon 3 pt. sg. ind. endings, it would be unwarranted to see *talgida* as a weak 3 pt. sg. ind. form underpinning the Gothic character of Etelhem *wrta* championed by, e.g., Bugge, Marstrander, Krause and Marold. On the contrary, if taken to be a weak 3rd person preterite, the Etelhem clasp vowel would have to be treated in a manner similar to that of the *-a* of *talgida* (cf. Nedoma 2010, 10; cf. also Nedoma 2005, 167 f.).

By way of conclusion I would like to stress that, like Edith Marold, I have always been sensitive to the possible existence of linguistic variation in Early Runic (and other early Germanic languages). In fact, one result of my study from 2000 was that such variation could be demonstrated for the early and late parts of the Early Runic period (Nielsen 2000, 286 f.). But note should be taken of the fact that *talgida* is attested much earlier—and the Old High German suffix much later—than the fifth-century Etelhem form *wrta*. It would seem, therefore, that the Gothicness of neither the Etelhem clasp nor the Udby (Skovgårde) clasp can safely be established on the basis of linguistic criteria.

**Bibliography**


*Futhark* 2 (2011)


ERGA = Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde.


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