Runes in Action: Two South Germanic Inscriptions and the Notion of a “Literate” Epigraphic Culture

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Abstract
This article investigates two well-known South Germanic inscriptions, the iron sax from Steindorf and the silver disc brooch from Bülach. Detailed epigraphic analysis reveals such great uncertainties in readings for each of these that the previous interpretations of both must be re-evaluated. A subsequent contextual analysis of the function of the epigraphy considers technical features of writing and of layout and composition, as well as the material properties and function of each of the objects. Employing a broader approach to literacy which examines not only the writing itself but also the situational communicative setting, the author interprets the inscribed objects as a means of performance in various conceivable situations. The main conclusion is that greater attention should be given to the visual characteristics of runic writing.

Keywords: Continental runic inscriptions, South Germanic runic inscriptions, Steindorf sax, Bülach disc brooch, epigraphy, context, literate culture, non-lexical inscriptions, script imitation

Introduction
The title “Runes in Action” presupposes dynamic and active behaviour on the part of data that has been detached from its historical context and stored since the sixth century on artefacts in graves, or more recently in museum showcases or archives. Even though it is impossible to stir such data into action, there has been a tendency, especially in the present
century, to interpret runic inscriptions within a broader sociocultural context, and thus also as part of an active performance, cf. most recently Looijenga 2003, Fischer 2005, Imer 2007, Bianchi 2010 and 2012, Graf 2011. In these studies, runes are of course perceived and analysed as characters belonging to a writing system, but the material properties of the inscribed objects and if possible their cultural context (i.e. anthropological and historical data) are also considered, the aim being to re-evaluate the use of runes within past cultures.

Tineke Looijenga (2003), Svante Fischer (2005) and Lisbeth Imer (2007) all examine large geographical areas or long periods of time, or both. Looijenga and Fischer are additionally concerned with the question of the origin of runes. Fischer, for example, compares archaeological data and writing practices of Romans and Germanic people in late antique and early medieval times. He comes to the convincing conclusion that the invention of runes involved both imitation of and differentiation from Roman literate culture: Shaping their own writing culture, Germanic people imitated Roman writing practices but invented their own script system. Looijenga also includes — although not systematically — historical and archaeological data in her analysis. She states that Germanic people imported their epigraphic practices from the Romans but created a different writing system that more accurately matched Germanic phonology. Another important point in her argument is that writing was used as a symbol of social status rather than as purely linguistic communication. Imer has shown that an interdisciplinary approach that takes into account both archaeological data (such as dating, social status, typology, value and origin of the inscribed object) and the lexical interpretation of the inscription provides new insights into how runic writing was functionalised in Danish culture(s) in different archaeological periods.

Marco Bianchi (2010) also adopts a contextual approach, focusing on communication processes involving runestones from the late Viking Age in Uppland and Södermanland. Dealing with a narrow corpus, he provides detailed evidence that visual components of runestones, such as ornaments, loops and crosses, contribute to the communicative meaning. Martin Hannes Graf (2011), concentrating on the older runic inscriptions, further considers the influence and role of the actual script-bearing artefacts in the contemporary communicative interpretation of the texts. On the one hand, he assumes the performative writing process itself constituted the inscription’s meaning, comprising part of some “habitual-ritual” context (pp. 231f., 236). On the other hand, describing the constellation of object and inscription as “a medial system”, he states that the object exerted a
crucial influence on the decoding of the often very short texts and also of other symbols and ornaments co-occurring with runes (pp. 226, 236 f.). In his most recent study, Bianchi (2012, 33–37) takes the discussion of the semiotic influence of both stone as script-bearer and setting of the inscribed stone further. He assumes that the role played by the stone as script-bearer and possibly also its geographical placement were integral to the communicative process. As an example, he interprets the two-name inscription harija + leugar on the KJ 85 Skåäng stone as an elliptical form of a so-called text-norm of memorial inscriptions. This “text-norm” was conventionally linked to stones as script-bearers, and these might also have been placed at more or less narrowly defined places. Assuming that contemporary readers had some conventionalised knowledge of the context of memorial inscriptions on stones, he states that the elliptical expression could be understood as a memorial inscription simply because it was written on a stone.


The South Germanic inscriptions, with “South Germanic” understood as a geographic rather than linguistic term (Nedoma 2006, 110 f.), form the largest subgroup of the Continental runic inscriptions. Most of them were found in the modern states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg in southern Germany. They are quite closely grouped chronologically, as the majority of the eighty-three inscriptions1 date from the sixth century.

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1 The number is based on the corpus listed in the “Runenprojekt Kiel” as of December 2012. Excluded are instances of doubtful authenticity (Kleines Schuleroch, Maria Saaler Berg, Rubring), Nordic imports or bracteates (Donzdorf, Hufingen I and II) and inscriptions that cannot certainly be identified as runic (Bopfingen II [finger ring], Bopfingen III [locket], Gräfelfing, Hufingen I [sax], Kaltbrunn, München-Aubing III [disc brooch, grave no. 163], Peingen, Sirnau, Sorcy-Bauthemont, Stetten, Wehen, Weingarten III [amber bead], Weissenburg). The corpus is listed and in detail presented in Waldispühl 2013, 15–17, 249–327. For an evaluation of this corpus, see Oehrl 2014, 536–38. A new edition of the South Germanic runic inscriptions is currently in production where ninety-seven items are expected to be included, see Nedoma 2015.
Furthermore, nearly all the inscriptions occur on objects found in graves. The majority of these are brooches of various types (64%). The second largest group comprises belt elements (13%), followed by weapons (5%). Various other objects, for example a comb, a neck ring, other belongings and items of wood and bone, account for the remaining 18%. The social status of the people buried in these graves is, according to Roth (1994, 310; see also Düwel 2008b, 56), fairly homogeneous. Most of them were of relatively high social rank.²

The functional basis of the inscriptions has so far been deduced primarily from the lexical meaning, which in many cases is not entirely clear.³ Katrin Lüthi (2006) was the first to consider systematically the non-lexical South Germanic inscriptions as well. Her assertion that various examples of script imitation show similarities to what children produce in the course of writing acquisition is uncontroversial, although it applies to the non-lexical rather than to all the South Germanic inscriptions. Furthermore, the functional and contextual aspects of the writing of today’s children and those of pre-modern people are, of course, not comparable. In studies comprising part of the research project “Techniken und Praktiken mittelalterlicher kontinentalgermanischer Schriftlichkeit” (‘Techniques and practices of medieval Continental Germanic literacy’) at the University of Zurich,⁴ Martin Graf (2010, 2011, 2012) and I (Waldispühl 2011, 2013) have also included non-lexical inscriptions, but in these works, a broader contextual and socially embedded perspective was employed. In my dissertation (Waldispühl 2013), I interpreted the South Germanic inscriptions as components of possible social actions. This approach was based on the assumption that the inscribed objects had a concrete function in situations where people were interacting with each other. It originated in a broader concept of literacy where writing is seen in a sociocultural context (Grillo 1989, 15; McKitterick 1990, 1–6; Street

² The notion of “social rank” is controversial among archaeologists. For graves in which South Germanic inscriptions have been found, the evaluation of social rank has been based on Christlein’s method of establishing “quality groups” of the grave inventories (1978, 83–111). For criticism of this method, see e.g. Siegmund 2000, 316 f.; Fischer 2005, 164; and also Roth 1994, 310, and 1998, 182.

³ For one third of the inscriptions, a lexical meaning cannot be established. These are either cases with unidentifiable signs (imitations of runic writing) or non-lexical runic carvings (sequences of runes apparently lacking semantic meaning). For an overview, see Graf 2012 and Waldispühl 2013, 226–28.

⁴ The project was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation within the National Centre of Competence in Research “Mediality: Historical Perspectives” at the University of Zurich, Switzerland.
As a consequence, epigraphic documents do not stand alone but rather form part of oral interaction. Brian Stock uses the term “textual communities” to describe these situations (1983, 88–91; see also Spurkland 2005, 137–39). Such situations are always historical and embedded in a specific cultural context. Conclusions about an action that may have included an object inscribed with runes are reconstructions, of course, and therefore to a greater or lesser degree hypothetical. As we have hardly any data on the sociocultural factors acting on each instance of runic epigraphic writing for this time period, I focused primarily on the inscribed object itself.

In my dissertation, visibly discernible characteristics were analysed first: the writing and all the other inscribed features on the same object, such as ornamentation, auxiliary lines, delimiters and non-runic symbols, were epigraphically, semiotically and, where applicable, graphemically described. A large part of the inscriptions was personally examined, and characteristics were recorded according to a catalogue of epigraphic parameters which included technical features such as carving profile, depth and consistency of strokes, and features of layout and composition, e.g. consistency in height and width of the graphs, placement and arrangement of carvings on the object, and guide-lines. Thereafter, technical production (possible inscribing tools, technical skills) and the visual presentation (placement of the inscribed features on the object, ornamentation) were evaluated. Intentionally inscribed strokes were here distinguished from scratches. The inscribed elements were then graphemically and semiotically identified, and runic writing was separated from non-writing and script imitation.

If the runic signs occurred in a sequence, lexical meaning was established wherever possible. In this first analysis, the focus was on the static aspects of engraved elements, including writing.

Second, the object itself and its possible functions were analysed. The South Germanic inscriptions are engraved on artefacts such as fibulas or weapons that also had a material function and thus were not primarily

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6 For a detailed account of the theoretical distinction between writing, non-writing and script imitation, see Waldispühl 2013, 47–60. I also refer to that work for the theoretical background for the graphemic terminology used in this article (pp. 70–78).
script-bearers. This is in contrast to other objects such as wooden sticks, parchment and stones, which were most often produced as or simply assigned the function of script-bearer. This does not mean, however, that the latter category of object lacks contextual meaning (cf. Bianchi’s account of the Skåäng stone above). In the case of the South Germanic corpus, the artefacts themselves fulfil a practical function, such as a pin for fastening clothing or a weapon for stabbing. In addition, they manifest further semiotic codes resulting from their practical function. For fibulas, for example, it is assumed that they might signify (higher) social status (Peters 2011, 28 f., 62 f.). In this section of my analysis, archaeological data such as condition of material, typology, social status and dating were included (cf. Waldispühl 2013, 106–10).

The epigraphic document was thus analysed as part of a “mediated discourse”, where the semiotic potential of the inscribed artefact is embedded in interpersonal oral communication between actors. The dynamic and situational aspects of writing are of interest here. It must be considered that an inscribed item comprises several semiotic layers (writing, ornamentation, visual presentation, the object’s practical function) that can be accessed and also functionalised in a social action. All of these layers need not be simultaneously “activated”, nor must they be of equal importance. The durability of writing and the mobility of loose items raise the possibility that the same artefact was in use for many years, and that different conditions affected practices in both production and reception. It is therefore conceivable that there was variation in the situations an object was involved in.

The South Germanic inscriptions all appear on artefacts found in graves, as has already been mentioned. Since only very few of all the fibulas and weapons thus found are inscribed, the additional value writing lent to these items is of particular interest. Did inscribing affect the use of the object? Or rather, did a particular use determine the type of inscription and its possible function?

On the basis of two examples from the corpus of South Germanic inscriptions, the iron sax from Steindorf (Germany) and the silver disc brooch from Bülach (Switzerland), I wish to show the possible functions epigraphic writing could manifest in a situational context. Detailed analysis of the inscriptions with an approach based on personal examination7 will initiate a discussion on the different kinds of writing practices and their

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7 Personal examinations were carried out in the relevant museums, using a stereo microscope and external, flexible light sources.
possible embedding. In conclusion, I will explore the notion of a “literate” epigraphic culture in connection with the South Germanic inscriptions.

Writing as part of a visual composition: The iron sax from Steindorf, Germany

The iron sax (‘single edged sword’) from Steindorf (Bavarian State Archaeological Collection, Munich, inventory no. 1953,379; KJ 158) dates from the middle or end of the sixth century (Wernard 1998, 775 f.; Martin 2004, 185 n. 66) and was discovered as an isolated burial object in a man’s grave. Despite extensive corrosion, carvings are visible on both sides of the blade. The incisions were made by a technique involving the removal of metal. One side bears writing (runes and one non-runic sign) together with interlacing ornaments, the other only ornamentation. A third incised element, the fuller (also called “blood groove”), runs the length of the blade on both sides and is parallel to its lower edge. Interestingly enough, each of these three features, the writing, the ornamentation and the fuller, exhibits a particular carving profile. For the ornamentation on both sides, a chisel or stylus with a rounded head was used, resulting in a U-shaped carving profile. The fuller also shows a U-shaped profile, but is broader and deeper than the engraving of the ornamentation. The written characters, however, were carved with a more pointed instrument, as the carving profile is V-shaped.

Despite these differences, placement of the various components suggests that the ornamentation and writing on one side of the blade and the ornamentation alone on the other side make up a single composition. Both the writing and the ornamentation are carefully arranged in the space between the fuller and the blade’s upper edge.

The individual epigraphic parameters are not easy to judge in every instance due to corrosion. A few characteristics can nevertheless be observed.

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8 The following section is a summary of a chapter in Waldispühli 2013, 112–23. The epigraphic results and a different reading of the inscription are also mentioned in Graf and Waldispühli 2013, 50–54.

9 For the archaeological data, see Arntz and Zeiss 1936, 350 f. In the secondary literature, there is disagreement about the numbering of the grave (no. 8 vs. 10). According to Dr Brigitte Haas-Gebhard at the Bavarian State Archaeological Collection (Archäologische Staatssammlung), Munich (e-mail of 17 March 2010), it is definitely grave no. 10. I thank Dr Haas-Gebhard for this information.

10 The investigations are based on two personal examinations (8 October 2007; 8 August 2008) at the Bavarian State Archaeological Collection, Munich. I wish to thank Dr Brigitte Haas-Gebhard and everyone else for their friendly support.
in the inscription. Each vertical stroke begins some millimetres below the top edge and ends either slightly above or in the fuller. The graphs are thus of fairly consistent height, and the same applies to their width. Furthermore, the spacing between the graphs is largely consistent across the whole inscription (the exception being the space between graphs no. 6 and 7, marked red in fig. 1, close-up in fig. 2; see below). Finally, the most striking feature of this runic inscription in comparison with others is the doubling of the strokes. This has been carried out consistently in nearly all the graphs that can still be discerned. All in all, analysis of the technique, layout and composition suggests both painstaking design and professional carving of the runes. In my opinion, the same is true of the ornamentation.\footnote{This is in contrast to Heinz Zeiss (in Arntz and Zeiss 1936, 127) who considers the ornamentation to be “unbeholfen eingeritzt” (‘clumsily incised’), but neither supplies his criteria for this judgement nor expands on the point.}

Due to corrosion, the intersection between writing and ornamentation is, unfortunately, no longer visible. However, in view of the fact that the ornamentation on both sides was produced using the same technique and therefore probably by only one person, it is likely that the engravings on both sides were designed together. In other words, the runes were probably wittingly coordinated with the ornamentation on one side, and all

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the incisions might therefore be regarded as one unified composition. However, as the writing and the ornamentation exhibit different carving profiles, they must have been produced with different tools. A more flexible instrument would most likely have been needed to carve the curves of the ornamentation cleanly, and the change of tool could thus have been motivated by the desire to produce an aesthetically pleasing result. I do not consider the fuller to be a part of the composition as it is an element typical of saxes in general. It was most likely made in the course of the weapon’s fabrication and therefore already present when the runes and ornamentation were added, at which time it functioned as a guideline for their placement.

To sum up, the production of the engravings was a multi-stage process: The writing and the ornamentation were laid out in a single composition, which indicates that a design phase preceded engraving. Following the composition, the writing and the ornamentation were carefully inscribed using two distinct instruments.

In previous research, the inscription has usually been read as husibald
or husiwald and interpreted as a personal name: Husibald or Husiwald. Its function has therefore predominantly been seen as signifying the weapon’s owner, maker or some other person (Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 301; Düwel 1981, 158; Grünzweig 2004, 137; Nedoma 2004, 335–40). After a closer look at the epigraphic data, however, the interpretation as a personal name Husibald or Husiwald cannot be maintained for two reasons.

First, the problematic passage consisting of graph no. 6 (where the numbering includes the first sign, which is not a runic graph; see below) and the space between graphs no. 6 and 7 (marked red in fig. 1, close-up in fig. 2) has to be re-evaluated. Graph no. 6 has so far been read as either āb or w. As this part of the sax is badly corroded, it is impossible to be certain whether — apart from the clearly visible double-stroke stave — there were once more carvings at this point or not. A second stave can, however, be excluded. Furthermore, neither a āb- nor a w-graph is possible. The corrosion at the top of the stave is not particularly severe, which means that the beginnings of the diagonal element (branch) would be visible in both graph āb and w (see for a similar appraisal Arntz and Zeiss 1939, 354). The only possibilities from an epigraphic perspective are i and êþ. A non-runic sign, such as a variant of punctuation, is another option. But since none of the punctuation signs known from the South Germanic inscriptions shows anything similar to this form (Waldispühl 2013, 224), comparable examples are lacking and therefore this interpretation is dubious. After the double stroke (stave), it seems that an interspace is most likely.

Second, marks of two further graphs are visible after Md at the end of the inscription. These graphs can no longer be clearly identified but still have to be taken into account for any interpretation. Graph no. 10 could be an ĭi as it takes up so little space in width. For no. 11, remnants of diagonal strokes are visible near the edge of the blade, and these might indicate an ĭa.

As a consequence of these epigraphic findings, my new reading is:

→≡Ḥ‖〈→〉∑☆+])(≡husi☆ɑld☆(…)

12 Runes deviating from the prevailing direction (reversed runes) are marked individually by an arrow in parentheses before the character; = is a non-runic sign; * indicates a non identifiable runic form and (…) that the inscription may have continued. Graph no. 7 is an example of the graph-type ĭ (lowered branches) which itself is an example of the graph-type class ĭ. For a detailed description of the graphs, see Waldispühl 2013, 116–18.
I cannot provide any convincing linguistic interpretation on the basis of this reading. Some possibilities might be suggested, but none seems entirely satisfactory. If the problematic graph no. 6 is taken as a form of punctuation or separating sign followed by an interspace, the passage would read *husi*, a man’s name which is known in Old Saxon as *Husi* and Old English as *Hyse* (see Nedoma 2004, 336 and literature). However, a punctuation sign of this shape is implausible, as stated above. The reading *husii* does not give any lexical meaning. The final possibility is *husip*, *hūsip*, a 3rd pers. sg. pres. ind. form of the Germanic verb *hūsjan* ‘to house’. However, in view of the fact that there are actually no signs of possible branches, this interpretation is likewise implausible. Moreover, ‘he/she/it houses’ on a sax seems contextually unusual. The second part — after the interspace — could be a form of the Germanic adjective *alda-* ‘old’, perhaps as a cognomen ‘the old, the elder’. However, the ending is corroded at this point and the interpretation remains open.

A further problem is presented by the opening, non-runic sign (no. 1). Its symbolic meaning is obscure, although it has been interpreted as a “Kennzeichen, gleichsam ein Markenzeichen des Waffenschmiedes” (‘distinguishing mark equivalent to a trademark of the weapon smith’, Düwel 1981, 159) or as an element that was included “in arkanisierender oder aber auch beglaubigender Absicht” (‘for arcane purposes, or perhaps also for authentication’, Graf 2010, 104f.). The sign could also simply indicate the beginning of the inscription, functioning as an ingress sign (Düwel 1981, 159; Nedoma 2004, 335).

The fact that a convincing linguistic interpretation is lacking might be due here to the poor state of preservation of the surface of the blade. This means that the inscription could well have had a lexical meaning when it was in sound condition and thus originally had a linguistic communicative function even if this can no longer be determined. Another possibility is that the inscription is instead to be seen as non-lexical and only imitative of runic writing. The shapes of runic signs were clearly familiar, but the carver might have been ignorant of their phonemic values. Thus it cannot currently be determined whether we are concerned with a non-lexical inscription or a once lexical but now corroded one.

What is certain, however, is that the inscription and the ornamentation were both well designed and masterfully produced, and that visual aspects of the script were emphasised. This planned and skilful production, as well as the emphasis on appearance, might indicate that the sax was intended to be seen or shown. With its engravings, the sax was individualised and stood out from other saxes. This could have resulted merely from
a personal interest of the owner to increase the value of his weapon by having it engraved, although the possibility of its having been an individualised gift can also be considered. Saxes functioned in general as weapons for stabbing (Siegmund 1996, 701 f.; Steuer 2004, 589 f.). Being inscribed, the Steindorf sax could have had a special function in some particular activity, perhaps for hunting or in a ceremony of some kind. It should be noted that engraving weakens the blade, making a ceremonial use more likely.¹³

I do not conclude, however, that the main function of the writing was to distinguish the Steindorf sax from other saxes. Rather, the writing transmitted—besides a possible lexical meaning—a symbolic sense which has to be seen in a communicative context. In the textual community postulated, it was understood that writing on weapons fulfilled some function, although we can no longer determine exactly what this function was. The runes might have been a profane owner’s or donor’s message, or alternatively had a “magische Wirkung” (‘magical effect’) in combination with the ornamentation, as Graf (2010, 104) considers possible. To perform this communicative function, the lexical meaning of the writing was not of crucial importance. The formal, visible correspondence of individual signs to runic writing was sufficient.

Different inscriptions and different levels of writing skills: The silver disc brooch from Bülach, Switzerland¹⁴

The silver disc brooch with runic inscription (Swiss National Museum, Zurich, inventory no. 30849) from a woman’s grave in a row grave field,¹⁵ dated to the second half of the sixth century (Windler 2006, 10; KJ 165),¹⁶ has been widely discussed in previous research. Its three-line inscription has challenged and inspired many scholars, resulting in a range of possible interpretations.

For a long time, Bülach was popularly interpreted as a “love inscription” (Opitz 1977, 196 f.). J. M. N. Kapteyn (1934, 305) and later Wolfgang Krause (in Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 307 f.) interpreted the runes in line I frifrid

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¹³ I thank Bernard Mees (Melbourne, Australia) for pointing this fact out to me (personal communication, August 2010).
¹⁴ The main results for the Bülach inscription are also presented in Waldispühl 2013, 136–48.
¹⁵ For the archaeological data, see Werner 1953.
¹⁶ Datings vary in the literature between 525 and 600 (see Nedoma 2004, 297; Graf 2010, 146; and Findell 2012, 382).
as a male name related to Old High German (hereafter OHG) *frīdil* ‘lover, spouse’ in an affectionate form with reduplication. Line II was read as *du* representing a 2nd sg. nom. personal pronoun ‘you’, and line III *ftmik/ftmiu/*ftmuk/*ftmu* was emended by Krause (ibid.) to *f(a)t(o) mik* ‘[you] embrace (take) me’. He subsequently identified a horizontal *l*-graph at the end of line I and a further *l*-graph at the end of line III as ideographs (*Begriffsruben*) signifying ‘prosperity, fertility’. Heinz Klingenberg (1976) elaborated on this interpretation and even added an erotic dimension by regarding the horizontal *l* at the end of line I and the reversed *f* in line III as signs for retrograde reading, resulting in *lid* ‘penis’ (line I) and *fud* ‘vulva’ (lines III and II). He also decoded the “comb-like” symbol in line III as another *l* and regarded the whole inscription as a “planvolle Runenfiguration” (‘carefully planned runic configuration’, p. 320) which evidently expressed “einem zwingenden Wunsche nach Vereinigung” (‘a pressing desire for (sexual) union’, p. 325).17

In more recent studies, criticism of this interpretation has arisen from epigraphic, linguistic and pragmatic considerations (see also Graf 2010, 148 f.). Judith Schwerdt (2000, 205), for instance, rejects the idea that a woman would wear such an obscene inscription on her dress. She accepts Krause’s expansion *f(a)t(o)* but gives the verb a new sense ‘clothe’, resulting in the interpretation: ‘Frifridil. You dress/clothe me’. Nedoma (2004, 298) reads the inscription, based on his own personal examination:

$$\rightarrow \text{I Frifridil I du III } \text{ftd}/=\text{ ftdu}/=\text{ ftmi}/=\text{ ftmu}/= \text{ (≡ being a “comb-like” sign above line III)}$$

and concludes that only line I can be linguistically decoded, namely as a male personal name *Frifridil*.18 The rest of the inscription he considers to be uninterpretable. Furthermore, he could not identify any horizontal *l* at the end of line I. The meaning of the whole inscription and the use of the inscribed artefact are thus unclear according to current scholarly evaluation and cannot be assessed from a linguistic perspective.

However, if we shift attention from the graphemic and semantic levels of main interest in commentaries to date and instead undertake an epigraphic analysis, this artefact and its inscription reveal some interesting information about the writing, its different levels of complexity and its possible use. Most recently, Graf (2010, 146–55) undertook an analysis of

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17 It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all the previous readings and interpretations. For a good summary see Nedoma 2004, 298.

18 For the morphology and etymology of the name, see Nedoma (ibid.); for criticism of this etymology, see Findell 2012, 173 f., 260 f.
possible performative functions of the inscription originating in his focus on “paraschriftliche Zeichen” (‘signs in para-writing’), which in Bülach’s case concerns the “comb-like” symbol. Based on the simple observation that lines II and III are not only uninterpretable but also less accomplished than line I, he states that the complexes I, II and III do not necessarily have to be syntactically linked (pp. 150 f.). Rather than attempting any linguistic interpretation, he describes lines II and III (and therewith also the “comb-like” symbol) as results of a performative action of multi-dimensional communication.

This understanding coincides with my own, based on an action-oriented approach. In the following I will first present my own epigraphic analysis and then comment briefly on the reading. The analysis is based

Fig. 3. Deliberate carvings (traced in red) and encoding of the different signs (enclosed in yellow boxes) on the disc brooch from Bülach, Switzerland (reverse side). Photo: Swiss National Museum, Zurich; photo editing: Michelle Waldispühl.
on a personal examination\(^{19}\) and high resolution digital images. In fig. 3, the engraved strokes are marked in a red colour and the encoded symbols or graphs enclosed in yellow boxes. The different lines are identified with Roman numerals while Arabic numbers indicate the individual graphs or symbols.

The results of my epigraphic analysis support Graf’s view that the Bülach inscription cannot be regarded as a homogeneous “work”. The three lines clearly show different technical characteristics which I will describe here.

The strokes of the first seven graphs in line I, graph-typologically identifiable as \(	ext{frifrid}\), are perfectly straight and their beginnings and endings are clearly demarcated. The strokes are so meticulously made that I believe a supporting instrument such as a ruler must have been used in the carving process. The strokes in the second and third lines are not as straight, clear or well made.

Of particular note are the last two graphs, nos. 8 and 9, in line I (see the close-up in fig. 4). Although they are certainly not scratches but intentionally incised, they are far from as carefully and confidently executed as

\(^{19}\) This took place on 7 June 2006 at the Swiss National Museum (Schweizerisches Landesmuseum), Zurich. I thank Dr Heidi Amrein for her interest and support.
Their form is so unclear that the previously accepted reading of these two graphs as iḷ is uncertain. I suggest the readings ḷḷ or ṣḷ. On the basis of the divergence in technique in this first line, I consider these two graphs to have been executed in a separate process from the other seven. As a consequence, the first line cannot be seen as a single unit. For the linguistic analysis, I therefore take only the first seven graphs into account (see below). Whether the last two graphs are the result of unsuccessful execution of runic graphs or simply scribbles must remain unresolved. Their poor level of artistry might indicate not only a lower degree of carving experience but also a lack of knowledge of the runic writing system, resulting in indistinct graphs.

The last point from an epigraphic perspective concerns the layout of the three lines, a consideration also mentioned by Graf (2010, 150 f.). Regarding the “picture” of the whole inscription, it is striking that the first line is again distinctive in its linear arrangement and relatively consistent in the height of its graphs—if the first graph is ignored. In comparison with the first line, it is not even appropriate to call the group of graphs below the pin-holder a line. Several graphs deviate from a hypothetical line, and they also vary in height. This fact was probably the reason for Klingenberg’s (1976, 310, 315) and also Krause’s (in Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 307) grouping of the graphs below the pin-holder into not one but two lines.

The graphs in all three lines can be identified as:

line I:

→(→) FriFriDỊḷ or →(→) FriFriDṇḷ

frifridịḷ or frifridṇḷ

line II:

→M\n
dụ

line III:

→(→) M\ \n\nafṭṇụṣl

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20 This observation is not new. Both Arntz (in Arntz and Zeiss 1939, 170) and Looijenga (2003, 235) mention these irregularities but neither takes them into account in their interpretation.
As far as the reading is concerned, line I is — apart from the last two graphs already discussed — unproblematic.

In line II, the second graph û is graph-typologically indistinct and can only tentatively be identified as a u-rune, û. Within the corpus of South Germanic inscriptions, the graph-type û usually consists of a stave and either a falling straight branch \ or a curved one û which reaches the baseline or, more rarely, a falling branch with a sharp angle, where the lower part is vertical and descends to the baseline, û (see Waldispühl 2013, 88). In graph no. 2, the branch has a sharp angle but is not drawn all the way down to the baseline. Its possible identification as an example of some other graph-type class, such as R r or P w, is, however, even less convincing. Such an r-form would be unique in the South Germanic material, although a similar form occurs infrequently in Scandinavia (e.g. in the bracteate inscription KJ 119, i.e. IK 58 Fyn I horaz; see Antonsen 1978, 294f.; cf. 2002, 64–66) and in the fragmentary futhark inscription on the KJ 7 Aquincum brooch.

The reading of line III is even more problematic. The first sign (graph no. 1) was read as a reversed rune (→) by Kapteyn (1934, 302), but since Arntz and Zeiss (1939, 170) the most common reading has been (→)(→) I (see Nedoma’s reading [2004, 298] and Graf 2010, 146, who follows Nedoma). Only Looijenga (2003, 235) identified an (→)(→), which also accords with my reading. I clearly see two branches at the top left of the stave. A further problem is found with graph no. 4. Due to several indistinct areas, no conclusive identification is possible. The graph shows similarities to the graph-types E e, M m and D d. In the lower part of the graph, both of the staves seem to be elongated, a fact that rather speaks against identification as M. Furthermore, I consider M to be less probable than M since the rising branch to the right seems to be intentionally drawn down close to the left stave. Favouring the reading M m would mean, however, that the other branch must be regarded as having been drawn too short.

I follow Nedoma’s view (2004, 298) that a reliable linguistic interpretation can only be found for line I. On the basis of my epigraphic evaluation, which clearly revealed that graphs 8 and 9 do not show the same features as graphs 1–7, my new interpretation of line I is based only on the first seven graphs: frifrid. This text might be taken as an adjective frīfrīd < Germanic *frīda- ‘beautiful, fair, pretty; satisfied’ (Orel 2003, 115) with

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21 In table 17 in Waldispühl 2013, 88, the last graph-type for the u-rune û should be Ũ. The U is a typographical error.
a reduplicating first syllable functioning as an intensifier, resulting in a possible meaning 'very beautiful, very pretty'. The Germanic adjective *friða- is a verbal derivate with the suffix *-da/þa- (< Indo-European *-to- ) from Indo-European *prī- 'to love' (Krahe and Meid 1969, 3: 142; Heidermanns 1993, 75, 214 f.). The following records are found in the Germanic languages: OHG frið-līch 'comfortable' (Karg-Gasterstädt, Frings et al. 1971, 1272; see Kluge and Seebold 2011, 318, s.v. Friedhof), Old Norse friðr ‘fair, beautiful; peaceful, secure’ (de Vries 1961, 143; see Bjorvand and Lindeman 2007, 306, s.v. frid) and in the Old English compound noun frið-hengestas acc. pl. 'stately horses' (Holthausen 1974, 116). The form frīfrīd is pre-Old High German, not (yet) showing the sound-shift pre-OHG d > OHG t. The adjective can be nom. sg. in all three genders (masc., fem., neut.) or acc. sg. (neut.) and therefore refer to anything. A reference to the artefact itself or perhaps to the person to whom it was dedicated seems to me most plausible from the context.

This new interpretation is, however, not altogether unproblematic. It does not explain the function of the last two graphs, nos. 8 and 9. These could be taken as scribbles, although this is not an entirely satisfactory explanation. Also, the linguistic interpretation has uncertainties, as reduplication with adjectives is hardly known and adjectives in general are rare in runic inscriptions. No certain parallels can be found.

If one accepts the tentative reading M|DU, line II could render the 2nd pers. sg. pronoun Germanic *þu 'you'. Line III on the other hand does not give any meaning unless several emendations are made. The non-runic "comb-like" sign (no. 6) is another problem. According to Graf (2010, 152), this sign cannot be decoded as a symbol, but might be significant from a magic-pragmatic perspective.

From the epigraphic analysis, which clearly showed that the carvings are not to be taken as one cohesive composition, I conclude that the carvings of line I, II and III are the products of several independent processes, probably carried out by more than one person at different times. The carving profile indicates that all the strokes may have been carved with a similar tool, but in contrast to the inscription in the first line, the carver(s) of the other inscription(s) did not use a supporting instrument (such as a ruler)

22 Reduplication is not well known in the Germanic languages, however, and there is no equivalent form to frīfrīd in the older Germanic languages. Comparable examples, where reduplication has an intensifying function, are OHG wiwint 'whirlwind' and selbselbo 'the very same' (see Henzen 1965, 258 f.).

23 In the corpus of South Germanic inscriptions, we find only one other adjective: leub 'nice, kind'.
and applied less pressure. On epigraphic data alone, I cannot establish a chronology of the inscriptions I–III. Neither placement nor alignment from top left to bottom right provides conclusive evidence as no directly comparable examples are to be found in the South Germanic corpus. My assumption that line I frifrid might represent the first inscription and all the other carvings secondary ones is based on a gradient of accuracy with which the writing was executed.

As mentioned above, apart from line I graphs nos. 1‒7, the inscriptions cannot be interpreted linguistically. Nevertheless, from the perspective of graph-typology, some graphs show distinct runic features. Since they differ from the runes in the first line, I do not consider them to be copies or random scribbles. The person(s) who wrote them had some knowledge of the futhark but probably only of its visual features, i.e. the graphic form of the written signs. Understanding of the linguistic reference, i.e. the sound values of the writing system, had possibly been lost or at least not learned. This could explain why no linguistic meaning can be established for the sequences below the pin-holder. The inscriptions on the disc brooch thus display several levels of technical writing ability and of knowledge of graph-typology (the distinct shape of the runic characters) and graphemes (the linguistic value of the characters).

The inscribed object was probably involved in different practices where the concept of writing played some role. But this concept might have varied from practice to practice. Brooches were artefacts used as pins to hold clothing together, but they also functioned as prestige objects indicating social rank (Martin 1997, 351 f.; 2004, 166, 171, 191‒93; Peters 2011, 28 f., 62 f.). The silver disc brooch from Bülach has almandine inlays on the front, and judging by scratches on both front and back, it was in use for a number of years. During this period, the inscribed object might have changed hands at least once. As a consequence, we have to consider the possibility that the reverse (writing) surface of the brooch changed in the course of its use and that it did not always exist in the form in which it has been handed down to us. Being a prestigious object, the brooch may have been passed down or sold to another person (or persons) who lived

There are a few inscriptions showing two or more lines arranged parallel to each other (cf. the bow fibula from Neudingen-Baar [II] and the buckle from Pforzen [I]). The lines in these inscriptions, however, have epigraphic correspondences and belong together. The objects which show several epigraphically non-corresponding inscriptions do not have them placed parallel to each other (cf. the bow fibula from Beuchte and the [larger] bow fibula of Nordendorf [I]). For a detailed account on the layout of South Germanic runic inscriptions, see Waldispühl 2013, 216‒21.
in other places. The fact that this fibula type is found predominantly in the region of Worms/Niederrhein (Windler 2006, 11), and thus was possibly manufactured there, and was found in a grave in an Alemannic context, supports this assumption.

For the engraving processes, the following scenario might be assumed: The object was initially inscribed *frifrid* by a skilled carver who could either apply runo-graphemic knowledge or copied the text from a template written by a literate person. Here, writing was quite likely functionalised or at least intended as a means of linguistic communication. We do not have any clear indications as to which social actions the inscribed object was embedded in. As not only the brooch itself but also the writing shows signs of wear, the inscribed brooch probably functioned as a fixing pin. Thus the first inscription did not drastically influence the object’s use, but the writing might have personalised it for the user, possibly as an indicator of the donor. Afterwards, the item with the inscription *frifrid* changed owners, and the other carvings were produced in this new context. Here, knowledge of the writing system was not as widespread as in the original context. Writing, or at least the secondary carvings, did not function as a means of linguistic communication but performed other functions. In this context, it was not the script’s linguistic meaning but rather its graphic appearance which was important. The concept of writing in this later context was probably not that of a means of linguistic communication, the runes instead serving as “pictures” and performing non-verbal functions. Graf (2010, 150–53) assumes that the main goal of these secondary carvings was the performance of the inscribing process itself which served as a “schreibmagische Vehikel” (‘transmitter of writing magic’) and might have been part of an “arcane” or “cult” practice. However, simpler and socially pragmatic functions can be considered as well. In the context of the secondary inscriptions, the competently executed first inscription must have caught attention and invited imitation. One has to consider that in possible situations where the back of the brooch was examined, more than one person could be involved. Oral communication about the object and its inscription might have triggered the addition of further runic graphs and rune-like signs such as the “comb-like” symbol in a mere imitational sense. The people involved knew or assumed that (runic) writing on a brooch had symbolic meaning, for example that of personalising the object. The writing’s visual characteristics were sufficient to perform this function, so the graphs did not necessarily have to convey a lexical meaning. Neither were distinct runic graphs of crucial importance; formal similarities to runic writing served the purpose in the communicative context.
Conclusion: Speculations about the notion of a “literate” epigraphic culture

Runic writing in the period of the older futhark is limited to epigraphic practices and was used rather sparsely. As a consequence, writing covered only a few domains of social interaction. South Germanic runic practices do not fulfil Scholz’s criteria for a “Schriftkultur” (‘literate culture’; 1994, 555), as there is only very limited evidence of literary use. However, to suppose literary practices are a prerequisite for considering a past culture literate is in my opinion anachronistic. We have to bear in mind that previous literate cultures can have developed functions that are not part of modern literate practice. In more recent studies of literacy, a literate culture is instead seen in a broader sociocultural context (see the introduction above). Epigraphic objects were embedded in social actions in which not only the artefact and its writing but also orally communicating actors played a role.

As illustrated by the two examples discussed here, the writing practices and possible actions that inscribed objects were involved in could differ considerably, even within a rather limited range of uses. The writing on the sax from Steindorf is likely to have been composed as an element of an “image” together with the ornamentation. It was a conscious act to combine writing with other visual elements and in addition to emphasise the visual characteristics of writing by doubling the strokes. This indicates both reflective planning and professional execution. Whereas the Steindorf sax bears a technically elaborate and cohesive inscription, the carvings on the Bülach disc brooch form a conglomerate of engraved elements written at various times in various contexts and displaying different concepts of writing.

The practical functions of the artefact initially led to different uses of writing as such properties played a particularly important role for and in the production of writing. The Steindorf sax was probably professionally inscribed because the object already had a representative function as a weapon. The intention behind this engraving could have been to make the sax stand out or even to underscore its special power in a ceremony. Alternatively, the reverse is also possible, namely that writing influenced the practical use of the object, or at least temporarily shifted attention away from the common utilitarian use to a “new” and more conspicuous use as a script-bearer. The Bülach disc brooch might have been handed down with its initial runic inscription to another person. In this new context, the writing could have attracted attention and been supplemented by further, secondary carvings.
Writing was involved in various actions which not only exploited the symbolic potential of the writing system as representative of language, but also put its visual, “pictorial” characteristics to use. Similar conclusions have been drawn in the case of late Viking Age inscriptions on runestones (Bianchi 2010, 227). To fulfil some function in the “mediated discourse” writing was embedded in, the linguistic meaning was not always constitutive. Rather, the use and function of writing was conventionalised in connection with the particular object type. In discourse, this function was recognised even without linguistic decoding of the script. The large number of non-lexical inscriptions and script imitations can be understood in this context: It was common knowledge that writing on a fibula, for instance, signified “property of some person”, “present from/to some person” or the like and probably enhanced the value of the object. The precise social meanings of the inscriptions cannot be certainly reconstructed, and these may also have varied. To convey meaning, however, visual characteristics were sufficient. Therefore, both linguistic and visual communication must be considered as crucial components of literate epigraphic cultures.25

Bibliography


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